

An Anthropological Exploration Of The Rituals Associated With A Sacred Grain

Dr. Monimugdha Bhuyan

Research Assistant Department of Anthropology Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh – 786004, Assam

How to cite this article: Dr. Monimugdha Bhuyan (2024). An Anthropological Exploration Of The Rituals Associated With A Sacred Grain. Library Progress International, 44(4), 701-706

Abstract

Grains, as staples of human sustenance have often transcended their material value to become symbols of cultural identity, spirituality and ritual practice. Among the grains, rice (*Oryza sp.*) stands out as a sacred grain deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of numerous societies. The rituals surrounding rice highlight its sacred significance as more than merely a source of food. Across diverse cultures, it embodies life, serves as a bridge to the divine and represents identity and continuity. The Assamese Hindus of Assam are an agriculturist community with rice cultivation holding a place of special importance. They perform various rites and rituals throughout the stages of rice production, from seed sowing to harvesting and even in storing them in the granary. This paper explores the deep cultural and spiritual significance of different rituals performed throughout the stages of paddy cultivation highlighting rice not only as a staple food but also a symbol of prosperity, spirituality and social cohesion.

Keywords: Ritual, Rice Culture, Assamese Hindus, Rice Rituals, Sacred Grain

Introduction

Rituals are structured and repetitive actions or practices imbued with symbolic meaning, performed in a specific socio-cultural or religious context. They are often carried out according to established traditions or norms and serve to express, reinforce, or transform the values, beliefs, and social relationships within a community. Edmund Leach (1968) defined rituals as culturally defined behaviour that can be regarded as a form of social communication. Rituals play a vital role in every society by fostering social unity, preserving cultural heritage, and giving structure and meaning to life. It brings people together, creating a shared sense of belonging and strengthening bonds within families and communities. By passing down cultural values and traditions, rituals bridge the gap between past and present, ensuring continuity across generations. It also marks key life transitions, providing emotional support and a framework for navigating change.

On a spiritual level, rituals are believed to facilitate connection with the divine or sacred, while on a social level, they promote unity, cooperation and collective action. However, in all case rituals are not considered achieving a practical or tangible result. Instead, they are often seen as symbolic or ceremonial practices, rather than means to an end in a practical sense. According to Gilbert Lewis (1980), rituals represent a category of standardized behaviour where the link between the actions taken and their intended outcomes is not inherently logical, often appearing irrational or non-rational.

Rice: The sacred grain

Rice (*Oryza sp.*) is considered as a sacred grain in many cultures due to its profound connection with life, nourishment and spirituality. It symbolizes fertility, prosperity and abundance and plays a central role in rituals, festivals and ceremonies. Rice is not only the staple food for many cultures across the world but also regarded as a valuable commodity with deep cultural and social significance. Historical texts reveal that rice was a versatile food of significant social importance, a value it retains to this day (Smith, 2006). Revered in numerous cultures, it embodies prosperity and abundance, often associated with successful harvests and communal feasts. The practice of rice cultivation has profoundly influenced the landscapes, traditions, and identities of countless communities worldwide (Gomez, 2011). Beyond its nutritional value, rice carries sacred connotations, being offered in rituals to honour deities and celebrate life's milestones.

It fosters a sense of unity, as its cultivation and consumption bring communities together, emphasizing collaboration and shared effort. The purity of rice, with its simple, unassuming grains, reflects its sacredness and enduring role as a cornerstone of human civilization. In many Southeast Asian countries, rice is more than just a staple food; it forms the foundation of agricultural life, profoundly influencing their society, economy, politics, and cultural ideologies. Rice holds a significant place in Japanese culture, deeply intertwined with the nation's identity (Ohunki-Tierney, 1993). In India, rice is revered as a sacred grain, celebrated since ancient times and frequently mentioned in the Vedas. It is often offered as a blessing and regarded as a symbol of nourishment, embodying the essence of food itself.

Rice is the dominant crop for all communities in Northeast India, cultivated across both the hills and plains of this remote region. This crop is not just a source of sustenance but is deeply intertwined with every aspect of their way of life, shaping cultural, social, and economic practices. While most hill tribes in Northeast India grow rice through *jhum* or shifting cultivation, there are exceptions, such as the Angamis of Nagaland and the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, who practice terrace farming. In recent times, however, many of these tribes have shifted toward permanent rice cultivation by the influence of the neighbouring communities that have long embraced this method. Again, many of these tribes engage in both *jhum* and permanent farming, depending on the terrain available in their environment. For instance, tribes that migrated from the hills to the plains for various reasons have adopted permanent cultivation, yet if hilly areas are nearby, they continue to practice shifting agriculture on a smaller scale (Bhuyan, 2021).

It is important to note that the rituals and festivals of these communities are deeply intertwined with rice cultivation. For the rice producers through *jhum* cultivation, these traditions are closely tied to the *jhum* cycle, spanning the entire cultivation process and extending into the post-harvest period. Interestingly, even after transitioning to permanent farming methods, they have not developed any rituals specifically associated with this new form of agriculture. A notable example is the Mishing tribe, originally a shifting agricultural community practicing *jhum* cultivation. They migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh to the plains of Assam, where they embraced permanent farming, abandoning their traditional *jhum* practices. The Mishings start their rice cultivation after celebrating the Ali-Aye-Ligang festival, during which various rituals are performed, including the ceremonial sowing of rice seeds and offerings to ancestors and deities to seek blessings for prosperity. Similarly, some Garos of Meghalaya, Karbis and Dimasas of Assam have moved from the hills to the plains, adopting permanent cultivation as their primary agricultural method. Among the Garos, the *jhum* cultivation cycle begins with a ritual known as Agalmaka, where they honour the spirit of *a'ba* (associated with *jhum* cultivation) on newly cleared and burnt plots by sacrificing a fowl. This cycle culminates in Wangala, their grandest post-harvest festival (Mazumdar, 1980).

Methodology

The data for this study was collected from different homogeneous Assamese Hindu villages of Lakhimpur District, Assam. Primary data for this qualitative research has been collected through fieldwork with the application of observation, interview and case study methods. Both structured and unstructured interviews were taken from the selected informants having knowledge in the area of this research. Additionally for secondary data, relevant books and journals were consulted during the preparation of the paper.

The Locale

Assam is located in the northeastern corner of India and serves as a melting pot of diverse races and tribes. Covering an area of approximately 78,438 square kilometres, it is the 16th largest state in the country by land area. According to the 2011 census, Assam has a population of 31,205,576, comprising 15,939,443 males and 15,266,133 females. The state represents about 2.4% of India's total geographical area and is home to 2.6% of the country's population. Out of this population, 86% reside in rural areas, while 14% live in urban regions (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2014). Agriculture is the primary livelihood for the majority communities of Assam. The state has a net cultivated area of 28.11 lakh hectares, accounting for approximately 87.4% of its total arable land. Assam's favourable soil, topography, rainfall, and climate make it ideal for paddy cultivation, which dominates 89% of the net cropped area (Economic Survey - Assam, 2014).

The present study was conducted among the Assamese caste Hindus of Lakhimpur District, located in the northeastern corner of Assam. The district covers an area of 2,277 square kilometers, of which 2,240.85 square kilometers are rural and 36.15 square kilometers are urban. It is bordered to the north by the Siang and Papumpare districts of Arunachal Pradesh, to the east by Dhemaji district and the Subansiri River, to the south by the river island district of Majuli, and to the west by the Biswanath district. According to the 2011 Census Report, the district has a population of 1,042,137, with 529,674 males and 512,643 females (District Census Handbook – Lakhimpur, 2014).

The Assamese Hindus or the Assamese Caste Hindus represent a diverse caste-based population group native to the northeastern Indian state of Assam. This community encompasses various castes and sub-castes, each contributing to the region's rich cultural heritage and social structure. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, Assamese Hindus are distinguished by their unique blend of cultural practices, religious beliefs and linguistic identity. They profess a simple form of Hinduism

known as Vaishnavism, where worshipping of idol is not found. Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, forms the backbone of the Assamese Hindus' livelihood and plays a central role in shaping their way of life. Rice cultivation not only sustains their economy but also influences various aspects of their cultural and social practices, deeply integrating into their daily routines and traditions.

The Assamese Hindus observe numerous rites and rituals at each stage of rice production, from sowing to harvesting. Specific rituals are performed on auspicious days, reflecting the community's deep reverence for the land and the divine forces that ensure a bountiful harvest. Rice holds deep cultural and ritualistic significance for the Assamese Hindus, not only during its cultivation but also after the harvest. Various ceremonies mark the post-harvest period, such as ritual of granary winding, and the ritual marking the first consumption of the season's crop. Additionally, rice plays an essential role as a sacred element in numerous other rituals including weddings, birth ceremonies funeral rites and many others. However, this paper focuses exclusively on the rituals and practices associated with the cultivation stage of rice including a post-harvest ritual of granary winding. Some of these rituals are as follows:

Rice Sowing Ritual

In the month of April, the Assamese Hindus begin preparing their seed beds for sowing paddy. These seed beds are created on a specific elevated land, known as *faringati*. The land for seed bed preparation must receive ample sunlight, as rice thrives in bright light and warm temperatures. The land for seed bed is ploughed two or three times, depending on the soil condition, using simple ploughs pulled by a pair of bullocks. To enhance soil fertility, cow dung is thoroughly mixed into the land that acts as a natural manure. The rice seeds used for sowing are wisely selected and kept separately from the previous year's harvest. Best grown paddy from healthy plants is usually considered for it, which are threshed by stomping with feet, as bullocks are not used for threshing seeds meant for sowing. Before sowing, the rice seeds are soaked in water for three to four days. They are placed in a special bamboo basket (*tom*), which is then submerged in a pond by attaching it to a pole on the pond's bank with a *tamal* (a bamboo strip). After soaking, the seeds are kept in a bamboo basket (*kharahi*) for another three to four days until small shoots begin to sprout. Once the shoots appear, farmers select an auspicious day to sow the sprouted rice in the seed bed.

The Assamese Hindus perform a ritual called *Guti Sicha* on the first day of sowing rice seeds. During this ritual, the farmer fills a bamboo basket (*kharahi*) with sprouted seeds and heads to the agricultural field in the early morning. Before sowing the seeds, the farmer takes a handful of rice seeds and recites the name of the Almighty, praying for a bountiful harvest. While sowing the seeds the hand of the farmer should be kept towards the upper direction. It is believed that if the hands are kept towards the upper direction while sowing rice seeds, then the rice seedling will also grow higher. If the hands are placed towards downward direction, it is believed that the rice seedlings will not grow towards upper direction, i.e., the rice plants will not grow properly. Additionally, on this first day of sowing, it is considered taboo for the farmer to sleep during the day. It is believed that if the farmer sleeps after sowing, the seeds will not grow well and will fall to the ground. After completing the day's labour, the farmer traditionally eats rice with curry made from taro (*kachu*), which is considered highly nutritious. This meal helps restore strength after the physically demanding work of sowing.

Transplanting Ritual

About forty-five days after sowing, the rice seedlings become ready for transplantation. Before transplantation, the agricultural land is ploughed thoroughly. During the month of Ahar (Mid-June to Mid-July) rice seedlings are usually transplanted. The seedlings are uprooted from the seedbed and carried to the field in bunches. The first transplantation of rice seedlings is done after performance of a transplantation ritual known as *Goch Lowa*. It is typically performed on few specific days determined by an astrologer which is also available in the Assamese Calendar. On such a day selected for first rice seed transplantation the farmers observe certain rituals.

The farmer begins the day by taking an early bath and proceeds to his paddy field by taking certain things. A pair of areca nuts (*tamol*) and betel vine leaves (*pan*) are kept on the apex of a plantain leaf (*agali kalpat*) and are placed towards the northeast corner of the agricultural field. Along with the areca nuts and betel leaves, the farmer also brings a taro plant, a water hyacinth plant (*meteka*), a *heloch* plant (*Ludwigia adscendens*) and a bamboo branch to the field. The branches of these plants are planted alongside the first transplanted rice seedlings as they believe that these fruits, leaves, and twigs are symbols of fertility. This symbolic ritual is rooted in deep underlying beliefs. There is a belief among the Assamese Hindus that the earth is female and the sky is male and the rain falling from the sky fertilizes the earth, enabling her to produce crops. The areca nuts represent males, while the betel vine leaves symbolize females. Placing the areca nuts on the betel leaves symbolizes the union of male and female, which is believed to result in a good crop. The fast-growing taro plant is thought to make the rice plants grow quickly and to protect the crop from black magic and the evil eye. Water hyacinth, a rapidly growing plant, is also planted to enhance the soil's fertility and ensure a bountiful harvest. The *heloch* plant, known for producing abundant fruits, is believed to ensure that the rice crops grow plentifully.

First Harvesting Ritual

During the month of Aghon (mid-November to mid-December), the agricultural fields of Assam turn golden as the paddy grains mature. Farmers carefully observe their fields and select a plot where the paddy is fully ripened. A particular day is determined based on the Assamese almanac for the performing the first harvesting ritual, known as Ag Lowa. This ritual of first harvesting can be performed by either male or female family members, though it is traditionally carried out by the heads of the family. Even if the land is cultivated by a tenant on a sharecropping basis or by hired agricultural workers, the landowner ensures that they personally perform the first harvest ritual. On the designated day, all the family members visit their paddy fields and household head invoke the name of Lord Krishna with reverence and cuts the first bunch of paddies using a sickle (*kanchi*). Once this harvesting ritual is completed, other family members, tenants or hired workers continue with the rest of the harvesting. The *dangaris* harvested on the first day are often carried home the same day, though sometimes they are left in the field to be transferred later.

While harvesting, five to six rice plants are tied together using paddy stalks into a bunch called *muthi*. After harvesting a specific area, the *muthis* are grouped into larger bundles, called *dangari*, typically consisting of thirty to forty *muthis*. These *dangaris* are tied with bamboo strings (*tamal*) and transported to the farmer's home. After bringing the harvested paddy home, it is not immediately stored in the granary (*bharal*). Instead, it is temporarily kept under a shed to protect it from rain. Only after performing a specific ritual known as the Granary Winding Ritual (discussed later), the paddy is transferred into the granary for storage.

Last Harvesting Ritual

The Assamese Hindus observe a specific ritual on the last day of harvesting. Just as the season's first paddy is ceremonially reaped by the head of the family, the final crop is also harvested by the same person. There is no gender restriction for this activity. On the last day of harvesting, a small portion of the rice plants is left in the paddy field for a final ritual, marking the end of the harvest season with a sense of reverence and gratitude. On that day, the area near the remaining rice plants in the paddy field is carefully cleaned. The head of the family begins the ritual by invoking the name of the Almighty and harvesting three rice plants together, which are then tied into a small bundle (*muthi*) using the rice stalks. All the paddy reserved for the final harvesting ritual is reaped and tied into three separate bundles. These bundles are then placed on a plantain leaf along with a pair of areca nut and betel vine leaf. A coin usually of rupee one is also added to it which symbolize price (*mulya*) that is present as a token of gratitude to Mother Earth for generously providing the harvest. The person then reverently bows, placing the plantain leaf on the field and offers prayers to the Almighty in gratitude for the abundant harvest. There is a symbolic meaning of these three rice bundles. These three small bundles of rice, representing the final harvest of the season, are referred to as *Lakhimi*, symbolizing the goddess Lakshmi. In Hindu belief, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity and among the Assamese Hindus too goddess Lakshmi, popularly known among them as *Lakhimi*, is regarded as a form of Annapurna - the deity of food and nourishment. Annapurna embodies the fullness and abundance of rice (with *anna* meaning rice or food and *purna* meaning full or complete). They believe rice as one of the abodes of goddess Lakshmi and on the last day of harvesting, the farmers pray to goddess Lakshmi for forgiveness, believing that she has been present in their fields in the form of rice, enduring the rain, heat, wind and storms throughout the growing season. A small amount of rice plants is kept unharvested which are tied together with a bamboo pole. This bamboo pole helps support the rice and keeps it from falling to the ground. The ritual is based on the belief that, just as birds and animals have protected the crop throughout the season, a small portion is left for them as a gesture of gratitude.

Afterward, the head of the family wraps the three small bunches of paddies, representing the season's final crop, in the apex of a plantain leaf. It is then wrapped in a new *gamocha* (a handwoven Assamese towel) and placed on the head of a person, who carries it home with both hands. This ritual of bringing the season's last crop from the paddy field to the home is called *Lakhimi ana*, meaning 'to carry Goddess Lakshmi' (from the field) to the household. Typically, a young boy or girl from the family is chosen to carry the last crop to the home, although an adult male is also allowed to perform the task. While carrying *Lakhimi*, there is a ritual that the person must not speak or look back. It is believed that if the person talks or turns around during the journey, the goddess will return to her heavenly home instead of entering the farmer's house. Although villagers may ask various questions to the person carrying *Lakhimi*, they must remain silent from the agricultural field to their residence.

Granary Winding Ritual

After bringing *Lakhimi* home, it is not immediately placed in the granary (*bharal*). Instead, it is kept elsewhere for a few days, often on a branch of a tree in the household garden. The *Lakhimi*, i.e., the three bunches of the last harvest paddy, are placed in the granary only after all the paddy harvested during the year has been threshed. This ritual of placing the *Lakhimi* in the granary is known as *Lakhimi Samara* (winding of *Lakhimi*) or *Bharal Samara* (granary winding). When the agricultural activities for the season come to an end, a specific day is chosen for *Lakhimi Samara*. The selection of this day follows a unique tradition which is based on the weekday on which the previous head of the family, i.e., their

father or grandfather, passed away. For instance, if the head of a family died on a Tuesday, the *Lakhimi Samara* for that family must always take place on a Tuesday. This ritual is typically performed before the month of Puh (mid-December to mid-January) and, in rare cases, may be observed in the month of Magh (mid-January to mid-February).

On the designated day selected for performing granary winding ritual, the courtyard in front of the granary (*bharal*) is cleaned in the morning using a mixture of mud, cow dung and water. The granary of the Assamese Hindus is typically a raised pile house built on a platform of four to six feet above the ground. The raised platform keeps the paddy dry and protect it from rats and other pests. The granaries are usually constructed with flattened bamboo walls and thatched roofs. In the evening the actual ritual is performed. The head of the family opens the door of their granary and keep it opened open until the *Lakhimi* is placed inside. A small wooden stool (*pira*) is placed in the courtyard directly in front of the granary door. The head of the family then brings the *Lakhimi*, previously kept hanging on a branch of a household tree, and places it atop a plantain leaf spread over the stool.

Elderly women of the family participate in the ceremony by placing a *ghati* (a water pot made of bell metal) filled with water on the *pira*. This water is later used to cook rice for the evening meal. They also place a pair of areca nuts, a betel vine leaf and a coin near the *Lakhimi* as a symbolic offering for the harvested paddy. The women then fan the *Lakhimi* with a *bichani* (hand fan) and light an earthen lamp in front of the granary. A bamboo basket (*kharahi*) is used to offer *mah-prasad*—a ritualistic offering that includes soaked grams, black gram, coconut, banana and other items—in the name of Goddess Lakshmi. Then all the family members bow down before the granary and pray goddess Lakshmi uttering “You once endured the scorching sun and relentless rain in the paddy fields, but now you can rest peacefully and happily in the comfort of the granary”. After that, a male member of the family enters the granary while a female member carefully takes the *Lakhimi* from the *pira* with both hands and hands it over to him. The man places the *Lakhimi* inside the granary and closes the door. The granary remains sealed for a month from the day of the granary winding ritual, as it is considered taboo to open it during this period. Additionally, during the month of Magh (mid-January to mid-February), it is forbidden to open the granary.

Conclusion

Rice cultivation holds a central place in the cultural identity of the Assamese Hindus, who observe numerous rituals intricately tied to its growth and harvest. These traditions highlight the profound significance of rice in their way of life. These practices underscore the significance of rice as more than just a staple food, as for them rice is a symbol of prosperity, spirituality and social cohesion. Over time, these customs and traditions have evolved into a complex cultural framework, encompassing diverse beliefs, taboos and rituals closely tied to rice and its cultivation. Goddess Lakshmi, revered as the deity of wealth, holds a central place in this cultural narrative. The extent of land dedicated to paddy cultivation is often regarded as a vital indicator of a household’s wealth and status in Assamese society. Furthermore, rice is believed to be one of the sacred abodes of Goddess Lakshmi, elevating it to a sacred entity. This belief drives various rituals performed at different stages of paddy cultivation, from sowing seeds to harvesting and storing the grains in the granary.

These rituals associated with rice cultivation of the Assamese Hindus are not only acts of devotion but also serve to strengthen social bonds. They bring together families and relatives, fostering a sense of unity and brotherhood within the community. The collective participation in these ceremonies reinforces shared values and cultural heritage. The traditions surrounding rice offer a window into the social fabric of Assamese society, showcasing its reliance on agriculture and its deep spiritual connection to nature. In essence, rice is not just a crop but the cornerstone of Assamese culture and identity, anchoring the community in both prosperity and shared cultural practices.

References

1. Bhuyan, M. (2021). *Rice culture among the Assamese Hindus in a rural context of Assam: An anthropological insight* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Assam Don Bosco University.
2. Directorate of Census Operations Assam. (2014). *District Census Handbook – Lakhimpur*. Guwahati: Ministry of Home Affairs.
3. Directorate of Economics and Statistics. (2015). *Statistical Handbook of Assam - 2014*. Guwahati: Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam.
4. Directorate of Economics and Statistics. (2015). *Economic Survey Assam 2014-15*. Guwahati: Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam.
5. Majumdar, D. N. (1980). *A study of culture change in two Garo villages of Meghalaya*. Guwahati: Registrar, Gauhati University.
6. Leach, E. (1968). Ritual. In D. L. Sills (Ed.), *The international encyclopaedia of the social sciences* (Vol. 13, p. 526). New York: Macmillan.
7. Lewis, G. (1980). *Day of shining red: An essay on understanding ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8. Smith, M. L. (2006). The archaeology of food preference. *American Anthropologist*, 108(3), 480–493.
9. Gomez, K. A. (2001). *Rice: The grain of culture*. In *The Siam Society Lecture Series*. Bangkok: The Siam Society.
10. Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1993). *Rice as self: Japanese identities through time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

.....