



Indigenous Salt Production among the Nocte and Tutsa Tribes of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh

CHAWAK TANTE

PhD Scholar, Wanglit Mongchan, Assistant Professor, AITS, Rajiv Gandhi University

Abstract: The salt well or salt deposit was one of the most important natural resources found abundantly in Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh. The black salt was one of the most precious and scarce commodities in the medieval and colonial period in the history of North East India. It was once regarded as a kind of black gold that brought the attention of the outsiders like the Ahoms, Sonowal-Kacharis, Bodo-Kacharis, Rabhas, Makum and other neighboring tribes. This black salt was locally produced by the Noctes and Tutsas of Tirap district. It has played a significant role in socio-cultural, political and economic development of the tribes in the region. In fact, the production of black salt was an important economic activity and livelihood of the Noctes and Tutsas at one point of time. In this paper, the authors intend to unearth the indigenous knowledge of salt production among the Noctes and Tutsas of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh. The paper has four parts – the first part focuses on the myth about origin of salt, second the traditional process of salt preparation, third the taboos associated with it and fourth the significance and relevance of the black salt.

Keywords: Indigenous, salt, black salt, myth, taboos, mediaeval and colonial period, trade, Tutsa, Nocte

Received : 12 April 2021

Revised : 28 April 2021

Accepted : 5 May 2021

Published : 2 September 2021

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Tante, C. 2021. Indigenous Salt Production among the Nocte and Tutsa Tribes of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh *Skylines of Anthropology*, 1: 1, pp. 58-71

Introduction

Tirap district is one of the oldest districts located in the South Eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh. It shares a district border with Longding and Changlang, a state border with Assam and an international border with Myanmar. The name of the district is derived from the river Tirap which flows from South-West to North-East and takes a westerly turn and flows in the plains of the neighboring state Assam (Choudhury, 1980). The river has been the important

source of socio-cultural and economic development of the entire Tirap-Patkai region (Rao, 2010).

The district is predominantly inhabited by the Nocte and Tutsa tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They were once best known for their black salt in and beyond their region (Khetey, 2007). They were the leading salt producers of the region (Rao, 2010). They locally produced the black salt and marketed within and outside the district (Choudhury, 1980). The indigenous black salt was one of the most precious and scarce commodities in the medieval and the colonial period in the history of North East India. In fact, the black salt was once regarded as a kind of black gold that brought the attention of the outsiders like Ahoms, Sonowal-Kacharis, Bodo-Kacharis, Rabhas, Makum and other people from the region. The production and trading of black salt had brought development and prosperity to the people in the past (Rao, 2010). However, in due course of time, the production of black salt had gradually declined and finally stopped with the coming of white salt (Choudhury, 1980). It has now become a past activity.

Objectives of the study

The present paper endeavors to –

1. study the myth of origin of salt among the Nocte and Tutsa tribes
2. study the traditional method of salt production
3. study the taboos and other restrictions associated with salt production
4. study the significance and relevance of salt among the Nocte and Tutsa tribes

Methodology

The present study is an explorative and descriptive in nature. The authors, here, attempt to describe the myths about origin of salt among the Nocte and Tutsa tribes of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. The present study is based on the fieldwork conducted in 4 villages namely – Khela, Kolagaon, Pullong and Paniduria in Tirap district. The primary data, especially the myths of origin of salt were collected during one and half month of fieldwork conducted in the aforementioned villages. For collection of the primary data, both observation and interview methods were applied. The experts on oral tradition from each of the aforementioned villages were consulted and interviewed with the help of questionnaires. The questionnaires were prepared based on the subject under study. The remnant of salt wells and other relevant photographs were

taken with the help of still camera. Voice recorder was also used to record the data and other relevant information during fieldwork.

The myths of origin of salt are described as narrated by the informants. Some native or local terms are also used in this paper wherever it was necessary. These native words are used to make it more specific and contextual. The local terms are then translated into English (near equivalent term). The secondary data were collected in a form of books, articles, journals, etc, and were referred. Internet was extensively used for referential purpose.

Myth Associated with Origin of Salt

Like any other tribal community, both Nocte and Tutsa tribes also have numerous myths such as myth of origin of mankind, myth about how day and night came into being, how universe was formed and origin of salt. These myths are very important because they reflect the history of their culture and their worldview. Among them, the myth of origin of salt is often told among the Nocte and Tutsa communities. This particular myth talks about a woman who is believed to be the Queen of Salt or Goddess of Salt. The myth, however, varies a bit from village to village in terms of its narration.

In Khela village, the narration of the myth begins with a name called *Sumtangte*, where *Sum* means 'salt' and *tangte* means 'owner'; thus, the word means 'owner of the salt'. It is believed that the *Sumtangte* was the Goddess of Salt. She was also regarded as the Queen of Salt who came from *Ko* (referring to erstwhile Burma). She used to live with her son. She was a good cook and used to prepare tasty food for her son. The boy always had his meals with his friends and sometimes, they also exchanged and shared their food among themselves. One day, when they were having their food together, one of the friends told the boy that his food always taste good while their food do not. Few days had past and one of the friends decided to find out the secret of the recipe and so he quietly hid himself behind the door and watched his friend's mother who was preparing food at that time. He saw that his friend's mother was blowing her nose into the pot and mixing her mucus with the food. Seeing this, he felt like vomiting and ran back to his other friends. Later on, he told the boy everything about what he had seen. From thereon, they all stopped sharing food with the boy.

In the evening, the boy returned home and confronted with his mother. And in a fit of anger, he chased his mother away. His mother left home weeping. But before she left, she again blew her nose on a leaf and wrapped it, and then she kept it above the fireplace. She told her son to check it later on. After his

mother had left, the boy took out the thing which was kept above the fireplace by his mother and found a piece of salt wrapped in a leaf.

After few days, the boy saw some people coming from *Ko* (referring to erstwhile Burma) looking for the Queen of Salt. He, then, immediately realized that his mother was the Queen of Salt. So, he went out to search for his mother. On the way, he saw the wild banana plant and asked whether it had seen his mother passing by. The wild banana plant replied to him that he was too late to search for his mother because she had gone far, so much so that it had even got a new leaf which was cut by his mother. The boy, then, saw another plant called *Khwakkhe* and asked the same question. The plant replied to him that his mother has just passed through a while ago that even its leaves are still moving. The boy kept looking for his mother in the woods but he couldn't find her. The *Khwakkhe* plant lied to him. It is said that the places wherever her tears had fallen had become a pool of salt.

In Paniduria village, a similar myth was narrated but with slight variation. According to their version, the places wherever the tears of the mother had fallen and wherever she had spat and blown her mucus became a pool of salt. According to an elderly man named Jahang Hankhey (one of the last surviving salt makers of Paniduria village), the salt found in Pullong village was the saltiest in the region.

In Pullong village, the story goes like this. Once, there lived a boy with his mother. One day, the villagers had organized a social service called *Lamsaam* for clearing the path-way. The boy also joined with them. After the work, they all sat down for their lunch. They used to share their food with one another. The boy also shared his food. As they tasted each other's food, they found that the boy's food was very tasty and delicious. So, they asked the boy about the secret of the recipe while the boy himself had no idea about it. The boy also became curious and so one day he decided to find out the secret of the recipe. He hid himself behind the door and watched his mother cooking. He was shocked when he saw that his mother was blowing her nose, coughing and spitting and then mixing them with food. He came out of the door and thrashed his mother for mixing her mucus and cough with the food. Then, he left his mother at home and went out to see his friend. Later on, when he returned, he found that his mother was not there at home. He asked the neighbors and they told him that his mother has left home. They also told him that his mother has left something for him under the *Supdaap* (a layer of palm leaf used for roofing the house). He ran back home and found a piece of salt wrapped in a leaf under the *Supdaap*. Then, he went around looking for his mother following her footprints.

On his way, he saw the wild banana plant called *Nyapke* and asked whether it had seen his mother passing by. The wild banana plant replied that he was too late to search for his mother because she had gone far, so much so that it had even got a new leaf which was cut by his mother. The boy, then, came across another plant called *Khwakhi* (who is believed to be honest) and asked the same question. The plant replied that his mother has just passed through a while ago that even its leaves are still moving. He searched everywhere, but he couldn't find his mother. It is believed that the places where she blew her nose and spat turn into a pool of salt.

There is another short story about origin of salt as narrated by the informant of Pullong village. According to the narrator, long time ago, there lived an old couple who were the owner of the salt or the God and the Goddess of Salt. One day, at the time of migration, a group of people came across the old couple and asked them who they are. The couple then replied to them that they are the owners of the salt and are guarding the salt. They also told them that they are looking for the humans to settle there. At that time, the people have no knowledge about the salt. The couple showed them the salt well and asked them to settle there where they can produce salt and live their lives happily. The people agreed to what the old couple had told them and finally they all settled there. According to the informant named ToyangBangsia (the present Gaon Bura of the Pullong village), his family was chosen to be the *Chimte Kaku* (*Chim* means 'salt', *te* means 'owner' and *Kaku* means 'family'). His family is known to be the owner of the salt in their village. According to him, the people of Pullong were the first group of human to have had met the old couple.

According to the mythology of Changnyak people of Kolagaon village, long time ago, the *Sum Wangcha* (*Sum* means 'salt' and *Wangcha* means 'queen') who is believed to be the Queen or the Goddess of salt came from *Ko* (referring to the erstwhile Burma). She came passing through the places called Hukung and Mukung, and then came across the Tirat, Tihian and Tissarivers and finally reached the place called Barang Thing, where the Changnyak people had settled earlier. It is believed that she was an Ahom lady who came in search of her own people and was heading towards Assam to meet the Ahom people. She stayed with the Changnyak people for some time.

The *Sum Wangcha* used to live with her daughter-in-law and her grandson. One day, when the daughter-in-law went to fetch water, the old lady was cooking and mixing her mucus into the food. At that moment, the grandson saw what his grandmother was doing. Later on, when the daughter-in-law returned home, the boy told his mother everything about what he had seen.

Hearing this, the daughter-in-law got enraged so much that she immediately chased her mother-in-law away from home. The old lady left Barang Thing and headed towards Assam. In the meantime, some people had come from Ko to Barang Thing in search of the *Sum Wangcha*. When the daughter-in-law heard about the people who came searching for the Queen of Salt, she realized that it was her mother-in-law whom they were looking for. She felt guilty for her deeds and so, she immediately went out to look for her mother-in-law. On the way, she saw the plant called *Khwakria* and asked whether it had seen her mother-in-law passing by. The plant replied that her mother-in-law has just passed through a while ago that even its leaves are still moving. As she moved further, she then came across the birds called *Kongdak* and *Kaikok* who stopped her and asked where she was going. She replied to them that she was looking for her mother-in-law. At last, she came by the wild banana plant called *Nyapkhe* and asked whether it had seen her mother-in-law passing by. The wild banana plant replied that she was too late to search for her mother-in-law because she had gone far, so much so that it had even got a new leaf which was cut by her mother-in-law. She kept going and looking for her mother-in-law, but couldn't find her.

According to the mythology, when the *Sum Wangcha* was driven out of Barang Thing, she had faced lots of hardship. She was old and needy but nobody to look after her even when she fell ill. After many years, she then returned back to Barang Thing in poor health. She was greeted and welcomed warmly by the Changnyak people. She was fed well and treated nicely. They took good care of her. Comfortably, she lived there for some time. The *Sum Wangcha* was very pleased with the Chief of Kolagaon and his people for the love and respect shown to her. One day, she told the villagers about the salt deposits. She gave them three important salt wells namely: (i) Moran Sum (ii) Wakwon Sum and (iii) Phong Rak Sum. She also taught them how to make salt from salt well or salt spring. Furthermore, the *Sum Wangcha* gave another name to the Changnyak village as *Mohongnya*. Here, *Moh* means 'salt' (or Moran salt) and *Hongnya* means 'existence'; thus, they had a new name meaning 'existence of salt' or 'salt producing area' or 'salt producers'.

In due course of time, the health condition of the *Sum Wangcha* became worse and she could no longer go back to her native place. She took her last breathe at Barang Thing. Her body was buried with full respect in a traditional manner by the Changnyaks. After her death, the Changnyak people became one of the leading salt producers in the region.

Traditional Process of Salt Production

A traditional process of salt production is called *Sumkoakin Nocte*. The term is derived from two words – *sum* means ‘salt’ and *koak* means ‘to extract’; thus, it means ‘to extract salt’. It is a broad term used to refer to the whole process of salt preparation. In early days, salt production was an important economic activity among the Nocte and Tusta tribes of Tirap district. It was a laborious job which consumed lot of time and energy. It could take a week or more than a week to complete the whole process of salt preparation. The salt wells were owned by clan or village or community wise. Extraction of salt usually commenced in November, and continued till March or April before the rainy season starts (Saikia, 2019).

Before any work begins, the *Sumteor Jote* (i.e. the owner of the salt or salt spring) first performed the ceremonial ritual by touching the summit or the point of origin of the salt spring before anyone touches. The salt well called *Sumtham* (as in fig.1) was dug and protected the shaft by lining a wood or by installing a huge hollow trunk from large trees like *Khongkhan Bang*, *Ri Bang*, *Tukhey Bang*, *Saram Bang* and *Rukhap Bang*. A large wooden vessel called *Khwankho* (as in fig. 2) was prepared from huge log for storing the salt water from the salt well.



Figure 1: Concrete salt well

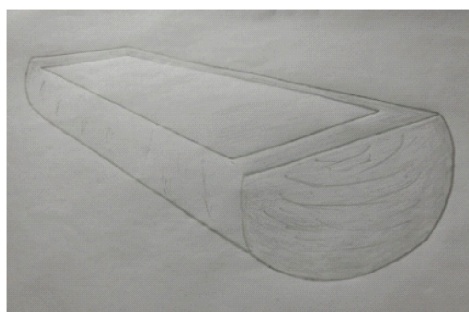


Figure 2: A Wooden vessel

A furnace-like structure called *Sumphong* (as in fig.3) was constructed with clay and stones to burn fire for heating the bamboo tubes filled with salt water. They also built one or two small huts with the help of bamboos, woods and palm leaf for camping and storing the baked salt and other food items till they finished their work. A large quantity of firewood (logs, woods, and bamboos) was collected from faraway places which they either carried them on their back or sometimes transported through the river route to the camp.

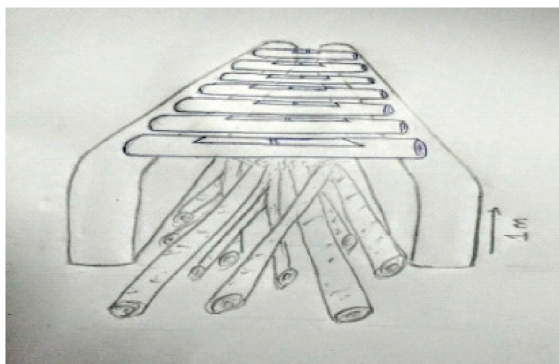


Figure 3: Sumphong

A specific size and length of bamboo tubes (with both ends closed with a node) called *Wahlang* (as in fig. 4) were cut and prepared from a particular type of a bamboo called *Taroin* (as in fig. 5) for boiling the salt water. And, in each of the bamboo tubes, a hole was made to fill the salt water inside it. The bamboo tubes were also coated with clay to protect them from burning. They used to exchange a dozen of *Wahlang* (roughly 12 pieces of bamboo tubes) for one *Sumkho* (i.e. equal to one bamboo tube of black salt). Besides bamboo tubes, a spoon like object called *Chhanlak* (as in fig. 6) and a funnel shaped basket called *Sangkaak* (as in fig. 7) were also prepared from bamboo.

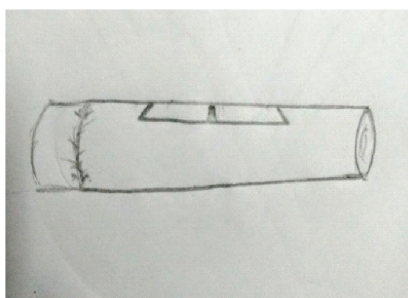


Figure 4: Wahlang

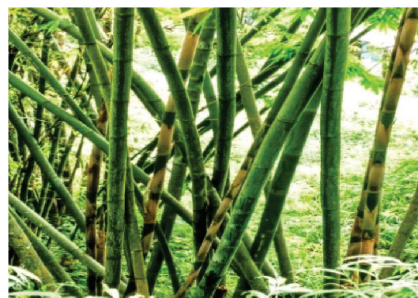


Figure 5: Taroin



Figure 6: Chhanlak



Figure 7: Sangkaak

In Khela village, on the day of *Sumsong* i.e., the first step of salt preparation, all the male members of the village first gathered at the Chief's house in the early morning and from there, they all proceed to the salt manufacturing area. They carried local rice beer, a pig, a hen and a rooster for sacrifice and offering to the Goddess. On reaching the spot, the *Sumte* first performed a ritual by chanting some words and offering a prayer to the *Sum Wangcha*. He then sacrificed a pig, a hen and a rooster to please the Goddess of salt and to sanctify the place. In Pullong village, they used two hens – a black and a red one for sacrifice. The *Sumte* or *Chimte* (owner of the salt) generally performed all the necessary rituals to please the Goddess and to prevent any adversities or untoward incidents that may befall upon the people during the course of salt preparation. Before they fetched the salt water from the salt well, they also prayed to the Goddess of salt.

In the meantime, a fire is lighted into the furnace. The salt water is fetched from the salt well with the help of a bucket of leaves or a small bamboo tube (bamboo *chunga*) and collected it into the wooden vessel. Then, the bamboo tubes were filled with salt water from the wooden vessel and placed them over the furnace horizontally and let them to boil and evaporate. Now, depending upon the size of the furnace, at a time, 30 to 60 bamboo tubes were boiled.

They used a bamboo spoon to stir, and to settle down the soft salt and to make it tight. From time to time, the bamboo tubes were refilled with salt water until the salt water get evaporated and turned into solid salt. Now, when the salt water had turned into solid salt, the bamboo tubes were carefully taken out of the furnace with the help of traditional bamboo tong called *Kaapko* (as in fig.8) and let them for some time to cool down. After that, the salts were extracted from the bamboo tubes by carefully splitting them. The salts were then wrapped in a leaf called *Nyaplindak* (as in fig. 9) and put them inside the traditional baskets called *Ding* (as in fig.10) and *Boan* (as in fig.11) ready to be taken home.



Figure 8: Kaapko



Figure 9: Nyaplindak



Figure 10: Ding



Figure 11: Boan

Before they left the salt manufacturing area, the overflowed salts from the ground were collected and wrapped in a palm leaf called *Lohdak* (as in fig.11) and then taken home to be used during next salt preparation. According to the informants of Paniduria village, during the next salt preparation, the old salt was used to mix with fresh salt water. During this process, the fresh salt water was poured over the old salt kept in *Sangkaak*. Now, the salt water which came out through a small outlet of *Sangkaak* (funnel) was then poured into the bamboo tubes containing the fresh salt water. They believed that when the old salt water is poured into the new one, the salt water gets solidified properly. They said that the black salt tastes better and smells good.



Figure 12: Lohdak, a palm leaf

The fresh salts were kept in a rack-like structure called *Khingsa* located above the fire place (or hearth) inside the house so that the salt remained solid with the heat of the fire. A bamboo container called *Walthoor Thopoh* (as in fig.13) and earthen pots called *Hahtik* or *Titpoh* (as in fig. 14) were used to keep and preserve the salts.



Figure 13: Wahtho or Thopoh



Figure 14: Hahtikor Tikpoh

Taboos and other Restrictions

As part of the tradition, the *Sumte* or *Jote* first touched the salt water or summit of the salt spring before anyone does. It is believed that the Goddess of salt only recognized the owner of the salt, thus, other than him no one was allowed to first touch the salt spring. And if they do, they would be cursed by the Goddess. Thus, others were strictly prohibited from touching it.

In Kolagoan village, the same clan members were not allowed to prepare the salt together. This was practiced in order to avoid any accident that may lead them to perish all. Thus, the different clan members used to prepare the salt.

During the course of salt preparation, they were not allowed to call each other by their respective names. They were only allowed to use some unknown names like *Akhue*, *Hanoand Jaro* or some signals to call each other. This was practiced just to protect themselves from the enemies and the evil spirits that may cause them harm.

No foreign languages were allowed during the course of salt preparation. They believed that the Goddess of salt only recognized the language used by the owner of the salt. Thus, in order to secure themselves from unseen disastrous events, they avoided speaking foreign languages. Besides this restriction, no other villages or villagers were also allowed to enter the *Phong* when the salt preparation was going on.

The women were strictly restricted from stepping into the salt manufacturing area to maintain the sanctity and purity of the place. Women were also not allowed to fetch the salt water because of the fear that their hairs might fall into the salt well and thus bringing misfortune to themselves. They were only allowed to carry the salt back home.

The salt manufacturing area was kept clean and hygienic because it was considered as sacred place. Thus, they were refrained from spitting and urinating in and around the area. They believed that such acts would dishonor

the Goddess and thereby bringing some forms of illness or diseases upon themselves (Khetey, 2007).

Uses and Importance of the Black Salt

In early days, the Noctes and Tutsas were leading salt producers of the region that even people from outside like *Ahoms*, *Sonowal-Kacharis*, *Bodo-Kacharis*, *Rabhas*, *Makum* and other hill tribes used to come and buy salt from them. Through salt trade, they had good connection and relation with outside people. The production of salt was the life-line and livelihood of the people.

The black salt was an important ingredient mostly used to season the food and to preserve the meat. It was used in every festive occasion like marriage, naming ceremony and other important festivals.

The black salt also was used for ritualistic purpose. It was used to sanctify the agricultural land before clearing the jungle and also before sowing of the seeds. A prayer was also offered to the Super Natural Being or Sky God called *Rang* seeking protection throughout the work. The ritual is called *Chhahra-taam* – a ritual practiced to protect the crops from the pests and insects.

Like other tribes, the Noctes and Tutsas also practiced hunting and fishing as part of their livelihood. Whenever, they hunted the wild animals, the black salt was used to sanctify the hunted meat. It is called *Sumphum*. They placed the salt in the mouth of the animal and then offered a prayer to the *Rang Joban* (sky god) to bless the meat and increase the number of animals.

Before the introduction of the modern medicines and medical facilities, the salt was also used as a medicine extensively to cure many illnesses like goiter, stomach ache and cough (Sarma, 2017). Moreover, a person with skin diseases was cured by bathing in the salt water.

Conclusion

The myth of origin of salt is very much similar across all Nocte and Tutsa villages. The existence of the salt wells and salt springs in Tirap district played a major role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the Nocte and Tutsa communities. In early days, due to the abundance of salt in this region, they had a good trade relation with the neighboring villages and also with the plains of Assam.

However, with the coming of the modernization, urbanization and the introduction of the white salt in the market at cheap rate, it resulted into discontinuity of the indigenous salt production in the district. Now, it is practiced barely in one or two villages (that too in meager quantity for self-

consumption) making it a great concern for the maintenance and preservation of the age-old tradition of salt production.

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APPENDIX
List of Informants

<i>Sl.No.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Place</i>
1.	Saley Lowang	80	Male	Khela village
2.	Minchong Bangsia	70	Male	Khela village
3.	Poanhang Socia	80	Male	Khela village
4.	Temin Socia	70	Male	Khela village
5.	Jahang Hankhey	80	Male	Paniduria village
6.	Methak Mema	54	Female	Paniduria village
7.	Wenyoak Lowang	60	Female	Paniduria village
8.	Tusen Mongchan	80	Female	Paniduria village
9.	Khapwang Mema	32	Male	Paniduria village
10.	Ranjwan Tante	42	Male	Kolagaon village
11.	Hangcha Tante	57	Male	Kolagaon village
12.	Dihang Kakho	70	Male	Kolagaon village
13.	LongtungTante	65	Male	Kolagaon village
14.	Tutrap Tante	52	Male	Kolagaon village
15.	SongnyanTante	42	Male	Kolagaon village
16.	Toyang Bangsia	60	Male	Pullong village
17.	Khoapong Khoyang	90	Male	Pullong village
18.	Chinglo Bangsia	58	Male	Pullong village
19.	Mongnya Bangsia	26	Female	Pullong village
20.	Sewang Bangsia	23	Male	Pullong village