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## ***Whispers to the Sky: Invoking the Rain God in the Hoodoom Puja of Koch-Rajbangshis of Western Assam***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The folk life of the Koch-Rajbangshi community of Assam serves as an archive of their inherited values, traditions, and spiritual worldviews. Deeply grounded in agrarian practices and nature-worship, their folk life reflects a combination of Vedic customs and indigenous beliefs. One of the most remarkable and culturally important rituals performed by this community is the Hoodoom Puja, a rain-invoking occasion primarily organised and observed by women. Imbedded in their ecological consciousness, this ritual showcases the community's deep spiritual relationship with nature, particularly in times of drought when the land is dried up and rain becomes essential for farming and survival.

The Hoodoom Puja is typically performed from mid-April to mid-September and is observed at midnight on Tuesdays or Saturdays in isolated agricultural fields. A focal aspect of the ritual is the planting of the hoodoom khuti, a banana trunk cut and placed by a woman who has given birth to only one living child. The ritual adheres to strict norms, including fasting, the collection of symbolic items such as spider webs, soil from a prostitute's doorstep, water from seven households, and ritual tools like the nangolor juwoli. No male participation is permissible, and the priestess and participants remain naked, symbolizing nature's original, uncovered form. The rain is believed to cause due to the communion between the masculine sky (Barun, the rain god) and the feminine earth, evoked through singing, dancing, and invocations.

The ritual is more than a prayer for rain; it is a sacred performance of ecological harmony, femininity, and fertility. The Hoodoom Puja thus represents an enduring cultural expression of the Koch-Rajbangshis' veneration for natural forces, gendered symbolism, and collective memory. It stands as a testament to indigenous belief systems where nature, divinity, and community exist in seamless unity.

## **Keywords**

Koch-Rajbangshi, Hoodoom Puja, Rain Ritual, Rain God, Indigenous Beliefs, Folk Culture

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# Whispers to the Sky: Invoking the Rain God in the Hoodoom Puja of the Koch-Rajbangshis of Western Assam

Surajit Ray

**Abstract**— The folk life of the Koch-Rajbanshi community of Assam serves as an archive of their inherited values, traditions, and spiritual worldviews. Deeply grounded in agrarian practices and nature-worship, their folk life reflects a combination of Vedic customs and indigenous beliefs. One of the most remarkable and culturally important rituals performed by this community is the Hoodoom Puja, a rain-invoking occasion primarily organised and observed by women. Imbedded in their ecological consciousness, this ritual showcases the community's deep spiritual relationship with nature, particularly in times of drought when the land is dried up and rain becomes essential for farming and survival.

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**Keywords:** *Koch-Rajbangshi, Hoodoom Puja, Rain Ritual, Rain God, Indigenous Beliefs, Folk Culture.*

## XVII. INTRODUCTION

The folk life of a community is a living archive of its inherited values, customs, traditions, and worldviews. Folk culture is a defining indicator of the heritage of an ethnic community. The collective identity of an ethnic group is shaped by the fusion of its customs, traditions, and cultural practices. The Koch-Rajbangshi is one of such indigenous communities of Assam that has preserved its indigenous cultural practices over the centuries. Just as the beautiful land of Assam is traversed and made fertile by the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, so also the socio-cultural landscape of Assam is sustained and enriched by the vibrant presence of diverse

ethnic communities (Kalita, 2013). The colourful folk festivals and rituals of the Koch-Rajbangshis have shaped the art and culture of this community. Folklores and mythologies related to rain and harvest of this agrarian community have shaped their worldviews that have culturally been presented in the forms of festivals and rituals in the Koch-Rajbangshi society over the centuries (Ray, 2020). These festivals and rituals reflect elements of both Vedic traditions as well as indigenous tribal features. Although the community adheres to many Vedic rites, customs, and practices, tribal influences remain prominently visible in the majority of their festivities.

The Koch-Rajbangshis maintain a belief in nature deities, such as the deities of river, forest, rain, fire, snakes, water and even of rocks (Ray, 2013). Singing and dancing are integral components in the worship of the deities. As in many agrarian cultures, rain occupies a vital place in the socio-cultural life of the Koch-Rajbangshi community, whose livelihood predominantly depends on agriculture. The arrival of rain not only ensures agricultural productivity but also holds symbolic and ritualistic significance.

## XVIII. THE BACKDROP

The Koch-Rajbangshi is the largest trans-border community in South Asia. It is now one of the major ethnic communities in Northeast India with its distinct and ancient cultural heritage. The origin of the Koch-Rajbangshis can be traced to the Mongoloid tribes migrating from the Himalayan region. Scholars have put forward their various theories with regard to the origin of this community. In one of the accounts given by Ambikacharan Choudhury (2011), the people of this community are believed to have migrated from a province called 'Bod' situated to the north of the Himalayas. The province is composed of the regions such as Kos-Bod, La-Bod, Hor-Bod, and Ti-Bod. The meaning of the word 'Bod' in Sanskrit is 'Borsha', which refers to a spear (polearm) traditionally used in warfare and hunting. This indicates that the people of this region, who use this weapon, are understood to be indigenous and courageous in warfare. The term 'Koch' is believed to have come from the word 'Kos-Bod'. It is reasonable to believe this account because of the fact that, the people of the Koch-Rajbangshi community of the region of Bijni in the undivided district of Goalpara, Assam, are still seen to worship 'Borsha' as a sacred religious symbol which is planted on an altar keeping the pointed end of the polearm up.

The history of the Koch Kingdom dates back to Biswa Singha (1515-1540), who was the virtual founder of the Koch

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kingdom of Assam and North Bengal (Kamata-Kamrupa). Citing Ambikacharan Choudhury, J.P. Rajkhowa (2020) states, “During the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Visu, son of Hariya Mandal, a Bodo-Kachari leader, rose to power after subjugating the local chiefs e.g. Bhuyans of Khuntaghat, Bijni, Karnapur, Pandu, Bausi, Barnagar, Karaibari, Chaygaon, Rani, Luki, Athiabari and a few other local landholders” (Rajkhowa, 2020, p. 54). Consolidating his authority over these principalities, Bishu proclaimed himself the sovereign of Cooch Behar and Kamrupa.

However, in accordance with the Hindu tradition, he performed the coronation rites and assumed the regal title, Biswa Singha. His first capital was established at Chikangram (modern Chikanabari in the Khuntaghat pargana of Goalpara district). Subsequently, after defeating Nasiruddin Hussain Shah, the Sultan of Gauda, Biswa Singha shifted his capital to Kamatapur in Cooch Behar, thereby laying the foundation of a new era of political ascendancy in the region. As far as the boundary of the Koch kingdom is concerned, it stretched from the Kortowa to the Barnadi, including the modern districts of Rangpur (now in Bangladesh), Cooch Behar (North Bengal), and the undivided districts of Goalpara and Kamrup of Assam.

After the death of Biswa Singha, his son, Naranarayana became the king and continued to rule for about fifty years with the help of his younger brother Shukladhwaja, known as Chilarai, as his General of the military. It is to be mentioned here that both Maharaja Naranarayana and his brother Shukladhwaja were educated and trained at Kashi and Varanasi, and were well-versed not only in Sanskrit, Grammar, Literature but also in Law, Astrology, etc. A skilled war strategist, Shukladhwaja got his name Chilarai because of his fast movement in the battlefield just like a Chila (Eagle). It is he who adopted Guerrilla warfare successfully and therefore he is known as the pioneer of Guerrilla Warfare (Ray, 2022).

Bir Chilarai played an important role in giving safety and security to Srimanta Sankardeva in their kingdom, who is the socio-cultural and spiritual Guru of the people of Assam. Sankardeva was one of the major royal poets in the court of Naranarayana and Chilarai. With the support from the Maharaja, Sankardeva established the *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*. It is worth mentioning that under the patronage of Chilarai, the famous ‘Vrindabani Vastra’ was prepared. In addition, the royal brothers initiated the reconstruction works of the Kamakhya Temple. Chilarai’s engineer brother, Gohain Kamal, constructed the 380-mile-long highway from Koch Behar to Narayanpur (Lakhimpur) in 1546 AD, which is today known as Gohain Kamal Ali. According to J.P. Rajkhowa (2020), the cultural renaissance that emerged in the Kamrupa-Kamata in the sixteenth century stands as a tangible testament to the exceptional qualities of the two great royal personalities. The Assamese language, literature, and culture

reached their zenith during the reign of these two royal brothers.

Since the time of the Koch Kingdom, the people of the Koch-Rajbangshi community have been ethnically rooted in various regions, including Assam, Meghalaya, North Bengal, Tripura, and Bihar in India, as well as in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. In Assam, they are predominantly settled in the western part, especially in the erstwhile undivided Goalpara district, where they have made significant contributions to the rich and diverse cultural mosaic of the state. The people of this community are therefore the bearers of the folk traditions of this region since times immemorial.

Keeping in view the multi-dimensional aspects of this community from socio-cultural perspectives, the present article makes a humble effort to study one socio-cultural dimension, i.e., Hoodoom Puja of the Koch-Rajbangshi community living in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam, displaying its animistic approach to gratifying the god of rain for the well-being of the greater society. The article further endeavours to present the belief system of the Koch-Rajbangshis that everything in nature, like animals, plants, birds, rocks, and even the weather, has a spirit or soul. It is a belief that objects of nature are alive and can influence the world, just like humans.

#### XIX. OBJECTIVES

The Koch-Rajbangshi community maintains a distinct socio-cultural identity with its multi-dimensional aspects. The present article makes a study of the socio-cultural aspects of the Hoodoom Puja with the following objectives:

1. To study the socio-cultural life of the Koch-Rajbangshis of the undivided district of Goalpara, Assam, in connection with the Hoodoom Puja
2. To study the belief systems of the community underlying its organic relationships with the nature
3. To study the ecological dimension of the Hoodoom Puja

#### **Significance of the Study**

The study of the Hoodoom Puja of the Koch-Rajbangshis carries a great socio-cultural and academic value, as it highlights an indigenous ritual of rain-invocation performed by womenfolk of Lower Assam. Rooted in agrarian life, the practice reflects ecological wisdom, gender roles, and community solidarity. By examining its songs, symbolism, and rituals, the study not only makes an attempt to preserve a vanishing traditional practice but also contributes to the enrichment of India’s traditional knowledge systems. The present study assumes significance for understanding the interplay between nature, belief systems, and folk spirituality, ensuring that the cultural memory of the Koch-Rajbangshis endures for future generations.

## XX. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a qualitative approach that combines literary sources, field interaction, and lived experiences. Relevant data and information were collected from books and online journals dealing with the cultural and ritual practices of the Koch-Rajbangshi community. Besides, primary insights were collected through informal discussions with village elders, who provided valuable oral accounts and interpretations of the Hoodoom Puja. The study also draws upon the author's personal observations and practical experiences, as the rituals were witnessed during preparations made by his mother and other womenfolk. This triangulation of sources ensures authenticity and cultural depth.

## XXI. DISCUSSIONS

### A. Understanding Hoodoom Puja:

In times of drought, when all eyes turn to the sky, the Koch-Rajbangshi people turn to an ancient ritual - Hoodoom Puja, a sacred call for rain. This puja stands as a vivid expression of their traditional belief system. Rooted in agrarian and rural life, this ritual reflects the intricate interplay between faith and nature. By exploring the cultural significance of the Hoodoom Puja, one gains a deeper understanding of the Koch-Rajbangshi ethos and the enduring spirit of their folk traditions.

The Hoodoom Puja is basically a women-centric and agriculture-based ritual (Ray, 2013). As Dwipshikha Roy (2021) maintains, this puja is typically organised between mid-April and mid-September. It underlines the ethnic belief systems and ecological rituals among the women of the Koch-Rajbangshi community. One of the aspects of this puja (worship) is the love for nature in which natural elements, including banana trees and birds are worshipped as embodiments of gods. From the mystical point of view, this puja can be regarded as an offering to *Barun*, the god of rain. According to Surajit Ray (2022), the Hoodoom Puja can be seen as a prayer or invocation to the sky that represents masculinity and its counterpart, the earth represents the receptive, feminine aspect of universal energy, for their union or connection resulting in showers of rain that leads to fertility of farming lands.

It is believed that the word 'Hoodoom' is derived from the name of a rare kind of a bird called 'Hoodoo'. According to the folklore of the Koch-Rajbangshis, if a pair of hoodoo birds of both sexes sit on a tree face-to-face and discuss rain then rainfall occurs (Ray, 2013). It is believed that a pair of hoodoo birds talk as follows:

*"Hoodoo (male): Sundari sundari bujlu? (Have you understood, my dear?)*

*Hoodoo (female): Ki? (What has happened?)*

*Hoodoo (male): Dewa megh korse jhori asibey. (The sky is cloudy; it's going to rain.)*

*Hoodoo (female): Bujlung bujlung. (O yes, I have got)"*  
(Ray, 2013, p. 378)

The bird 'hoodoo' plays an important role in the folklore of the Koch-Rajbangshi community, and therefore, the people catch the wild hoodoo bird and ties it to the hoodoom khuti (a post of banana trunk) and worship it as a representative of Hoodoom Deo, the rain god. Since this bird is now very rare, the banana plant is worshipped as a symbol of the god.

As to why this puja is performed, the Koch-Rajbangshis believe that when farmers have to wait for a longer period of time for rains for their parched farming lands and to increase their fertility, the women of the Koch-Rajbangshi community generally make arrangements of the Hoodoom Puja, in a darkest midnight, on Tuesdays or Saturdays, at an isolated place away from their homes, with a view to invoking the deity, *Barun* (Roy, 2021). It is notable that no priest is required in this ritual. Males, young or old, are strictly prohibited from taking part in this puja. On the day of the puja, everyone observes a fast and keeps a small dagger in hand as a symbolic protection against spirits or any harm that might come from men during the puja at night.

### B. Mythological Underpinnings:

The Hoodoom Puja is not unique to the Koch-Rajbangshi community in terms of invoking the rain god. Rituals related to this folk culture are celebrated across the world. *Megharanir kula nomowa brat* and *Basundhara brat* (forms of fasting), for example, are observed in Bangladesh while praying to the god of rain (Roy, 2021). Cultural rituals related to rain are based on ancient mythologies across the globe. In various cultures, specific deities are associated with rainfall, fertility, and agricultural abundance.

In Greek mythology, *Zeus* is associated with thunder and rain. *Hyades*, a sisterhood of water nymphs, carries the rainwater to earth at *Zeus*'s command. In Philippine mythology, *Pamulak Manobo*, the supreme deity and creator of the land, sea, and the first humans, throws water from the sky, causing rain, while his spits are the showers. It is he who controls good harvest, rain, wind, life and death. Similarly, *Adad* is a Mesopotamian god equated with *Zeus* or *Indra*.

As far as India is concerned, as per the Vedic mythology, the god *Indra* is usually depicted as the bringer of rain and storms. *Indra* rides an elephant named *Airavata* and it carries all the rain in its seven trunks. It sprinkles water to the clouds and *Indra* hits thunder into the clouds, and only then does rain occur. In the western part of Assam, the women folk of the Koch-Rajbangshi community perform the Hoodoom Puja invoking the rain god for fertility of the parched agricultural lands.

The Hoodoom Puja has a mythological background as well. According to Jeetjyoti Patgiri, as cited in Pramud Bora (2022, p. 137), the origin of Hoodoom puja is related to the god *Indra*.

According to the Vedas and Puranic scriptures, Indra is recognized as the god of rain. One of his primary vehicles is the cloud, and it is through his will that thunder and lightning occur. As per the popular legend associated with the origin of the Hoodoom Puja, *Basumati* (mother Earth) conceived as a result of her union with the god Indra. She has always been a symbol of suffering and endurance. She has had to silently bear all forms of injustice. Even in her state of pregnancy, her suffering knew no relief. She kept on wandering in distress, desperately searching for a shelter where she could give birth to her child. Yet, no one came forward to offer her any shelter, compassion, or sympathy. Finally, one plant of *athiya kol* (*Musa balbisiana*), a wild species of banana, extended a helping hand to her. It was beneath this very plant that she gave birth to her child, who was named 'Hoodoom'.

According to the mythology, there was a time when the entire earth was under a devastating drought. People suffered a lot, yearning for even a single drop of water. The dried-up fields split open under the continuous heat. In such a grim situation, *Basumati* was unable to bathe her new-born, thus leaving both mother and child in a condition of ritual impurity. In her helplessness, *Basumati* turned to *Indra* in an earnest prayer. Satisfied by her devotion, *Indra* granted her prayer. Showers of rain began to fall, cleansing the earth. *Basumati* and Hoodoom were thus cleaned and purified. As a mark of gratitude, the mother Earth blessed that the plant of *athiya kol* would hold a sacred place in all human festivals, rituals, and religious ceremonies. Hence, a plant of the *athiya kol* plays an important role in the Hoodoom Puja.

#### **C. Pre-Hoodoom Puja Rituals:**

Before the Hoodoom Puja commences, the village women, led by the women who sing the hoodoom songs, form a group and visit house to house asking for offerings. For this purpose, households are selected in advance and informed beforehand so that they get ready to receive the hoodoom group. The woman, who is to wear the look of the deity of hoodoom during the puja, must go along with the group, completely unclothed. Therefore, this practice is performed only at night.

The woman, who walks ahead of the group, produces sounds with her sticks to signal the approach of the hoodoom group. This alerts the informed household about their arrival. On hearing the signal, the male members of the household go inside while the women of the household come out to the courtyard. The women of the hoodoom group carry with them baskets and brooms, and use them to sweep the courtyard of the household and collect the waste materials. These collected waste items are considered essential for the puja. After collecting the waste, the women sing ritual songs and dance attributed to the deity of hoodoom inside the courtyard of the household. These apart, in some places, it is found that seven unmarried girls visit seven houses collecting water in their

pitchers that are used in the Hoodoom Puja (Promud Bora, 2022).

#### **D. Performing Hoodoom Puja:**

As discussed above, this puja is usually performed in a secluded part of the village, that is, basically in the middle of an agricultural field. A banana plant plays an important role in this puja. A hoodoom khuti (a post of banana trunk) is erected at the site of the ritual with utmost sincerity and honesty. Not all women are eligible to cut the banana plant and establish the hoodoom khuti at the site of the puja. According to Dwipshikha Roy (2021), the woman must be a mother who has given birth to only one child, without having lost any previous or subsequent child. She must cut the banana plant while naked, in the darkness of night, in a single breath. Seven days before the establishment of the hoodoom khuti, seven unmarried girls collect water from seven different households and store it for the ceremony. On the day of the ceremony, these girls wash the nangolor juwoli (a traditional farming tool), apply vermilion to it, and perform a symbolic act of ploughing, one playing the role of a ploughman and the others as a pair of bullocks, while sprinkling the stored water from the seven houses.

The items required for performing the Hoodoom Puja are numerous and symbolically important. They include a nest of the bird called *ghesul* (a particular species of bird), the head of a house crow, soil collected from the doorstep of a prostitute, ivory soil, water used for washing a traditional wooden rice pounder (dheki), water gathered from seven different households, pubic hair of prostitutes, spider webs, a banana plant, a dehusked coconut, a bunch of sixteen bananas, vermilion, an unglazed earthen pot, banana leaves, a variety of fruits and flowers, curd, milk, sugar, jaggery, white rice, tender banana leaves, mango twigs, a pair of clay lamps, incense sticks, and twelve kinds of crops, among other ritual elements (Ray, 2020).

The banana plant cut by the mother of a single child is implanted after ploughing the soil and worshipping Hoodoom, the rain god. The previously collected materials from different households for the ceremony are put into a hole on earth in which the *hoodoom khuti* is planted. Immediately, the women, who have living husbands, produce *uludhoni* (an auspicious oral sound produced by repeated movements of the tongue), and the head woman- priest becomes naked and implants the *hoodoom khuti* in the hole. Thereafter, she takes a bath upon a newly-made *kula* (winnowing fan) and bathes the *hoodoom khuti* with the water collected in the *kula*. The naked pot filled with water is put around the *hoodoom khuti* by placing betel-nut, twelve kinds of crops, etc. and finish the task of implanting the *hoodoom khuti* by lighting incense sticks and by giving *naivaidya* (offerings) on the altar (Roy, 2021). According to folklore, rainfall starts after the completion of

the plantation of the *hoodoom khuti*. However, if it does not rain within three days, the women continue the Hoodoom Puja regularly on every Tuesday and Saturday.

Dancing and singing are two vital aspects of this ritual. The women perform circular dances and sing around the *hoodoom khuti*. The songs sung during the Hoodoom Puja are typically sensual in nature, yet they do not involve any form of sexual abuse. During this worship, the priestess and other participating women remain unclothed and sing these passionate songs with intense emotion in an effort to invoke the rain god (Ray, 2024). The participating women in the puja sing the hoodoom songs as follows:

*Jagore Jagore Hoodoom ajikar rati  
Grihastiya kore puja diya dhup salon bati.  
Aakashate koro puja aakash kaoli  
Patalote koro puja ekkal lagali.  
Kala meghe dhola meghe dakiya aano jhori  
Aandhar koriya dewa aishie dabari.*  
(Bora, 2022, p.139)

(Translation: Awake, awake, O Hoodoom, in this sacred night. The householder prays with the auspicious offerings like incense sticks and earthen lamps. Puja is offered in the sky as well as in the underground. Let showers of rain descend from the black and white clouds in a mighty and sweeping way. Let the rain come heavily.) (Translated by the author himself).

The women feel neither shame nor hesitation about their nudity during the ritual. It is believed that the emotional intensity, passion, and power embedded in the language of their prayers and songs effectively move and please the rain god. In response to their heartfelt invocation, the god blesses them with rainfall, which in turn benefits the cultivators by nourishing their crops.

A common question that arises is why women perform this puja and why they remain unclothed during the ritual. Women are considered the bearers of life, just as the vast expanse of the world and nature exists in an uncovered, unadorned state. Women are seen as embodiments of nature, and nature itself is often imagined in feminine form. The earth is perceived as both woman and nature, while deities like *Indra* and *Barun* are regarded as her consorts. When the rain, symbolic of sperm, falls upon the earth, seen as a wife, it fertilizes her, leading to the growth of crops, fruits, and flowers. Therefore, to align with the raw, exposed state of nature, women too are required to be uncovered to represent this unity.

While women are confined by the rigid boundaries of domestic and social norms, in the company of other women and under the cover of night, they momentarily leave behind societal rules and expectations and organise and participate in such rituals. Their shared experiences allow for the release of their repressed emotions and desires. In substance, they go

beyond the boundaries of social decency and civility, returning to a more original, instinctive state of human existence.

## XXII. CONCLUSION

The Hoodoom Puja of the Koch-Rajbangshis is not only a ritualistic invocation for rain and showers, it is a lively cultural expression rooted in the close relationship between nature and the community. The ritual indicates the resilience, ecological awareness, and spiritual depth of a people of the community whose lives are inseparably tied to the rhythms of the mother earth. The insignificance of priests and the deliberate debarring of men fortify a powerful matriarchal dynamic that proclaims the agency of women within the spiritual ecology of the Koch-Rajbangshi society. Moreover, the ritual's symbolic semanticism with natural elements such as birds, trees, water, sky, and earth goes beyond the literal act of worship, underlining a cosmological understanding where the environment is not merely worshipped but is integrally woven into the very fabric of community identity and existence.

The Hoodoom Puja exhibits an ethnic traditional knowledge systems and ritual practices that can offer alternative ways of observing, relating to, and sustaining the nature. It embodies a worldview where nature is living, holy, and responsive, and where human beings are not separated from the forces of the natural world but synchronized with them. More than an agrarian prayer, the Hoodoom ritual is a testament to the enduring power of folklore, collective memory, and ecological consciousness. By invoking the rain god through songs, dances, and holy symbols, the Koch-Rajbangshi woman folks whisper not only to the sky, but also to history, their traditional and indigenous knowledge systems, ethnicity, and identity

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