

Sacred Worldviews of the Ho Tribe: Ritual and Religion in Mayurbhanj from Birth to Death

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Abstract—The present article examines the ritual and religious life of the Ho society of Mayurbhanj, focusing on their life-cycle rituals, communal practices, belief system, and changing religious traditions. The Ho worldview is deeply rooted in nature worship, ancestor veneration, and faith in supernatural beings such as Singbonga and various Bonga spirits. Rituals connected with birth, naming, marriage, death, burial, purification, and secondary burial play an important role in maintaining social order, kinship bonds, and cultural identity. The study also highlights the role of ritual specialists such as the Dehuri, Dewan, and village elders in preserving religious customs. Although modernization, education, healthcare facilities, and external religious influences have brought changes in ritual practices, the core values of Ho religion continue to survive. Thus, the ritual life of the Ho reflects both continuity and change in their indigenous cultural tradition.

Index Terms—Ho Tribe, Mayurbhanj, Ritual Practices, Religious Life, Singbonga, Bonga Spirits, Ancestor Worship, Life-cycle Rituals, Indigenous Culture.

I. Introduction

The Ho tribe is one of the important indigenous communities of eastern India, with a significant presence in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Their society is deeply rooted in traditional customs, nature-based beliefs, and collective cultural practices. The ritual and religious life of the Ho people reflects their close relationship with nature, ancestors, spirits, and the village community. For the Ho, religion is not separated from everyday life; rather, it is closely connected with birth, marriage, death, agriculture, festivals, health, and social order.

The religious worldview of the Ho is mainly animistic in nature. They believe that natural objects and forces such as forests, hills, rivers, fields, and the sun are connected with spiritual powers. Singbonga, often associated with the Sun, is regarded as the supreme deity, while several Bonga spirits are believed to influence human life, health, crops, fertility, and prosperity. Along with these deities and spirits, ancestor worship occupies a central place in Ho religious life. The spirits of the dead are believed to remain connected with the living and are respected through offerings, rituals, and commemorative ceremonies.

Rituals form the foundation of Ho socio-religious life. They are performed not only to worship deities but also to maintain harmony between human beings, nature, and the supernatural world. These rituals regulate social relationships, strengthen kinship bonds, and preserve cultural identity. From birth to death, every important stage of life is marked by specific rites and ceremonies. Birth rituals, naming ceremonies, marriage customs, death rites, burial practices, purification rituals, and secondary burial ceremonies all reveal the deep symbolic meaning attached to life and death in Ho society.

The life-cycle rituals of the Ho begin with birth, which is considered both sacred and ritually sensitive. The mother and newborn are protected through restrictions, isolation, fire, special diet, and purification practices. The naming ceremony, known as Nutum Tupunam, formally introduces the child into the family, clan, and ancestral lineage. Marriage is another important institution in Ho society, as it establishes relations between

families and clans. The practice of clan exogamy, bride price, communal feasting, music, and dance reflects the social and cultural importance of marriage among the Ho.

Death rituals also hold great significance in Ho society. Death is not understood as the complete end of life, but as a transition into the ancestral world. Burial, cremation in some cases, purification rites, the Umbul Ader ceremony, and the secondary burial ritual known as Diri Dul Sunum show the Ho belief in life after death and the continuing relationship between the living and the dead. These practices also help the family and community to restore social and spiritual balance after death.

Ritual specialists such as the Dehuri, Dewan, and village elders play an important role in Ho religious life. The Dehuri performs village-level rituals and offerings, while the Dewan acts as a healer and mediator with the spirit world. Elders preserve oral traditions, guide ritual procedures, and transmit cultural knowledge to younger generations. Through their roles, the religious and cultural continuity of Ho society is maintained.

In recent times, the ritual practices of the Ho have undergone certain changes due to modernization, education, healthcare facilities, economic pressures, and the influence of Hinduism and Christianity. Institutional childbirth, simplified marriage and death ceremonies, reduced animal sacrifices, and changing attitudes among younger generations indicate transformation in traditional practices. However, the core elements of Ho religious life—such as belief in Singbonga, Bonga spirits, ancestor worship, communal rituals, music, dance, and festivals—continue to survive. Thus, the ritual and religious life of the Ho society of Mayurbhanj represents both continuity and change, showing the resilience of their indigenous culture in the modern period.

II. Importance Ritual System in Ho

Rituals and religion occupy a central place in Ho society because they guide almost every aspect of individual and community life. For the Ho people, religion is not separate from daily activities; it is closely connected with birth, marriage, death, agriculture, health, festivals, and social relationships. Their belief in Singbonga, Bonga spirits, nature, and ancestors gives meaning to their customs and helps them maintain harmony with the natural and supernatural world.

Rituals are important because they mark the major stages of life. Birth rituals protect the mother and child, the naming ceremony gives social identity to the newborn, marriage rituals unite families and clans, and death rituals help the soul join the ancestral world. In this way, rituals provide order and meaning to human life.

Religion also strengthens social unity among the Ho. Most rituals are performed collectively with the participation of family members, relatives, clan members, and villagers. Offerings, feasting, music, dance, and community gatherings create a sense of belonging and cooperation. These practices help preserve kinship ties, clan identity, and traditional values.

Rituals also maintain moral and social discipline. The Ho believes that neglecting rituals may bring misfortune, illness, crop failure, or social disturbance. Therefore, ritual observance encourages people to respect elders, follow customs, and maintain balance in society. Thus, rituals and religion are the foundation of Ho cultural life. They preserve indigenous identity, connect the living with ancestors, strengthen community solidarity, and maintain harmony between human beings, nature, and spiritual forces.

III. Scope of the Article

This article studies the major aspects of ritual and religious life in Ho society of Mayurbhanj. It focuses on birth rituals, naming ceremonies, marriage customs, death rituals, burial practices, religious beliefs, deities, ritual specialists, and the changes taking place in traditional rituals under the influence of modernization, education, and external cultural contact.

IV. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the religious worldview of the Ho tribe of Mayurbhanj.

2. To study the importance of birth, marriage, and death rituals in Ho society.
3. To understand the role of deities such as Singbonga and various Bonga spirits in Ho religious life.
4. To analyse the role of ritual specialists such as the Dehuri, Dewan, and village elders.
5. To explore the relationship between rituals, social structure, kinship, and clan identity.
6. To identify the changes in Ho ritual practices due to modernization, education, healthcare, and external religious influences.
7. To highlight the continuity and change in the ritual and religious life of the Ho community.

V. Life-Cycle Rituals

Life-cycle rituals occupy an important place in Ho society because they mark the major stages of human life from birth to death. These rituals are not only religious practices but also social events through which an individual is accepted, recognized, and integrated into the family, clan, and community. Among the Ho, every important transition in life is connected with ritual observances, offerings, taboos, purification, and community participation. Birth, naming, marriage, and death rituals reflect the Ho belief in spiritual forces, ancestral blessings, and the need to maintain balance between human beings and the supernatural world.

VI. Birth Rituals

Birth is regarded as a sacred and auspicious event in Ho society. A child is considered a blessing from Singbonga and the ancestors. At the same time, childbirth is also viewed as a ritually sensitive period because both the mother and the newborn are believed to be vulnerable to evil spirits and harmful influences. Therefore, several customs, taboos, and purification practices are observed before and after childbirth.

Pregnancy Taboos and Restrictions

During pregnancy, the expectant mother follows certain restrictions for the safety of the unborn child. She is advised to avoid particular foods, especially those believed to have harmful effects. In some cases, she avoids twin fruits, overly sweet fruits, or food items considered unsuitable during pregnancy. She is also restricted from killing animals or insects, as such acts are believed to negatively affect the child. Participation in some rituals may also be limited during pregnancy. These taboos reflect the Ho belief that the behaviour of the parents can influence the health and future of the unborn child.

Childbirth Practices

Traditionally, childbirth among the Ho takes place at home under the care of an elderly experienced woman or traditional midwife. Indigenous knowledge plays an important role in assisting delivery and caring for the mother and child. After birth, the umbilical cord is cut with a new blade, and the placenta is usually buried near the house or in the backyard. This practice has symbolic importance, as improper disposal of the placenta is believed to attract harmful spirits or misfortune. Although modern healthcare facilities are now increasingly used, many traditional beliefs and practices connected with childbirth still continue in rural areas.

Postnatal Pollution and Purification

After childbirth, the mother and newborn observe a period of ritual impurity or pollution. During this time, the mother is kept in isolation in a separate corner of the house or a designated space. Contact with outsiders is restricted to protect both mother and child from evil spirits and infection. A special diet is given to the mother for recovery and strength, and traditional herbal preparations may also be used.

Religious activities in the household are usually suspended during this period. The family does not participate in major rituals or festivals until purification is completed. The period of impurity generally lasts from nine to twenty-one days, depending on local customs and the health of the mother and child. A fire is often kept burning near the mother and newborn, symbolizing warmth, protection, and purification. At the end of the pollution period, purification rituals are performed, after which the mother and child are reintegrated into normal social and religious life.

VII. Naming Ceremony: Nutum Tupunam

The naming ceremony, known as *Nutum Tupunam*, is one of the earliest and most meaningful life-cycle rituals among the Ho community. It marks the formal acceptance of the newborn child into the family, clan, and wider society. Before this ceremony, the child is not fully recognized as a social member of the lineage. Therefore, naming is not only a personal act of identification but also a social and religious process through which the child receives a place within Ho society.

In Ho tradition, the name of a child is closely connected with the family's ancestors, clan identity, and lineage. The ceremony is usually performed by an elder member of the family, sometimes with the guidance of the village priest. During the ritual, water, rice grains, and other simple sacred items are used. The names of ancestors may be invoked one by one, and the child is symbolically linked with the ancestral line. This reflects the belief that ancestors continue to guide and protect the living members of the family.

The *Nutum Tupunam* ceremony also connects the child with the clan, locally known as *Kili*. Through naming, the newborn becomes part of a specific kinship group and inherits its social identity, customs, and responsibilities. Relatives gather to bless the child, and offerings of food or rice beer may be made to ancestral spirits for the child's health, long life, and prosperity. Thus, *Nutum Tupunam* is not merely a naming ritual; it is a ceremony of social inclusion. It gives the child identity, connects the newborn with ancestors and lineage, and strengthens kinship bonds within Ho society.

VIII. Marriage Rituals

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions in Ho society. It is not only a union between a man and a woman but also a relationship between two families and clans. Through marriage, new kinship ties are created, social responsibilities are fixed, and the continuity of the lineage is maintained.

Clan Exogamy

Clan exogamy is a basic rule of Ho marriage. The Ho society is divided into different clans, known as *Kili*. Marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited because members of the same clan are believed to have descended from a common ancestor. Therefore, marriage must take place outside one's own clan. This rule helps to maintain social order and prevents close-blood relations.

Forms of Marriage

Several forms of marriage are found among the Ho. Arranged marriage is the most common and socially accepted form, where parents and elders negotiate the marriage. Love marriage is also accepted, especially when the families agree. Widow remarriage is permitted in Ho society, showing its practical and flexible nature. In earlier times, marriage by capture or elopement was also known, though it is now rare or mostly symbolic.

Bride Price or *Ganang*

Bride price, locally known as *Ganang*, is an important part of Ho marriage. It is given by the groom's family to the bride's family in the form of money, livestock, or goods. It is not considered the purchase of the bride; rather, it is a mark of respect and recognition of her value in the family and society. It also strengthens the relationship between the two families.

Marriage Ceremony, Feast, Dance, and Social Importance

The marriage ceremony is performed with rituals, offerings, music, dance, and feasting. The couple receives blessings from elders, ancestors, and deities. Important rituals may include tying of garments, application of vermilion, and offerings to spirits. The village dancing ground, or *Akhra*, becomes an important place of celebration where people sing and dance together.

Marriage has great social importance in Ho society. It strengthens clan relations, promotes cooperation between families, and ensures the continuation of tradition. The feast and dance make marriage a community event, reflecting unity, joy, and collective participation.

IX. Death Rituals

Death rituals occupy an important place in Ho society because death is not seen as the complete end of life. It is understood as a transition from the physical world to the spiritual world of ancestors. The Ho believe that the spirit of the deceased continues to exist and remains connected with the family and clan. If proper rituals are performed, the departed soul becomes a protective ancestral spirit. If neglected, it may become restless and bring misfortune to the household.

Concept of Death as Transition

Among the Ho, death is regarded as a passage from human life to the ancestral realm. The deceased is believed to continue life in another form. Therefore, funeral rites are performed to guide the soul safely to the world of ancestors. This belief shows the strong connection between the living and the dead in Ho religious thought.

Mourning Practices

After death, family members, relatives, and villagers gather to mourn the deceased. The body is placed respectfully, and people offer their last homage. Lamentation, remembrance, and collective grief are important parts of mourning. Personal belongings or symbolic objects may be placed near the body, as they are believed to help the soul in its journey to the next world.

Burial and Cremation Practices

Burial is the most common practice among the Ho. The dead body is bathed, anointed, wrapped, and taken to the burial ground, known as *Shasan*. The burial ground is usually located outside the village and may be connected with clan identity. In some cases, personal belongings such as clothes, utensils, tools, or ornaments are placed in the grave, reflecting belief in life after death. Cremation is also practiced in some cases, especially among families influenced by neighbouring Hindu customs or those with better economic conditions. After cremation, ashes or bone remains may be collected and buried. Thus, both burial and cremation show the Ho concern for the peaceful journey of the soul.

Purification after Death

Death is considered a source of ritual impurity. After the funeral, the family observes purification practices to restore normal social and religious life. Family members take bath, clean the house, and sometimes purify the surroundings with water and cow dung. Certain food restrictions may be followed for a few days. After the purification rituals, the family gradually returns to normal life and becomes eligible to participate in religious and social activities again.

X. Post-Funeral Rituals

Post-funeral rituals are important in Ho society because they complete the religious process after death. These rituals are performed to ensure the peaceful journey of the deceased soul and its proper place among the ancestors. They also help the family to overcome ritual impurity, restore social balance, and maintain the relationship between the living and the dead.

Umbul Ader Ceremony

The *Umbul Ader* ceremony is one of the most significant post-funeral rituals among the Ho. It is performed after a certain period following death and marks the integration of the deceased soul into the ancestral world. The Ho believe that unless this ritual is properly performed, the soul may remain restless and may not receive its rightful place among the ancestors.

During the ceremony, the family offers food, rice beer, and other ritual items to the deceased and ancestral spirits. In many cases, animal sacrifice such as chicken or goat may also be performed to satisfy the spirits and seek their blessings. These offerings symbolize respect, remembrance, and the continued bond between the living family members and the departed soul.

The ceremony is not only a religious act but also a social event. Relatives, clan members, neighbours, and villagers participate in the ritual. A communal feast is arranged, and people share food and drink together. This collective participation strengthens kinship ties and community solidarity. Thus, the *Umbul Ader* ceremony helps the deceased soul join the ancestral realm while also restoring harmony and unity among the living.

XI. Conclusion

The ritual and religious life of the Ho society of Mayurbhanj reflects the deep relationship between human beings, nature, ancestors, and supernatural powers. Rituals are not merely religious performances; they are an essential part of social and cultural life. From birth to death, every important stage of life is marked by customs, taboos, offerings, purification, feasting, music, and community participation. The Ho belief system is mainly based on nature worship, ancestor worship, and faith in Singbonga and various Bonga spirits. Life-cycle rituals such as birth, naming, marriage, death, and post-funerary ceremonies give social identity to individuals and strengthen their connection with family, clan, and lineage. Ritual specialists like the Dehuri, Dewan, and village elders play an important role in preserving these traditions and guiding the community in religious matters.

Although modernization, education, healthcare facilities, and external religious influences have brought changes in Ho ritual practices, the basic spirit of their indigenous religion still continues. Many rituals have become simpler, but their social and cultural importance remains strong. Thus, the rituals of the Ho tribe represent both continuity and change. They preserve the cultural identity of the community and maintain harmony between the living, the dead, nature, and the spiritual world.

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