

# The Traditional Customs of *Wathop* Worship in the Tripuri Community of Tripura

Nerisha Debbarma<sup>\*1</sup>, Usha Rani Tripura<sup>2</sup>, Rusan Debbarma<sup>3</sup> and Risha Debbarma<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kokborok Translator, Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Gandhighat, Agartala - 799 001, Tripura, India

<sup>2-3</sup> Guest Lecture, Department of Kokborok, Bir Bikram Memorial College, Pratapgarh, Agartala - 799 004, Tripura, India

<sup>4</sup> Department of Kokborok, Tripura University, Agartala - 799 022, Tripura, India

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## Abstract

This study examines the significant cultural and spiritual significance of nature worship within the Tipra (Tripuri) community of Tripura India, focusing on the central role of bamboo in religious rituals. For generations, the Tipra people have maintained a polytheistic, animistic belief system where natural elements including hills, rivers, and trees are revered as divine manifestations. Central to this spiritual framework is the *Wathop* (or Lampra *Wathop*), a sacred symbolic altar crafted specifically from the *wathwi* variety of bamboo. The *Wathop* serves as a vital intermediary between the community and the divine, utilized in rituals spanning the human lifecycle from birth and weddings (Kailai Panda) to purification rites following death. Beyond individual milestones, the ritual is essential for communal welfare, performed twice annually and during festivals like Ker Puja to repel negative energy and ensure agricultural prosperity. The execution of these sacred ceremonies is the exclusive responsibility of the Ochai (priest), who acts as a spiritual guide and healer, assisted by the Baruwa in assembling the ritual items. By examining these practices, this work shows the enduring legacy of bamboo-based worship as a cornerstone of Tipra identity and its role in maintaining a harmonious relationship with the natural world.

**Key words:** Tipra culture, *Wathop*, Bamboo worship, Ochai, Lampra *Wathop*, Tripuri traditions

The *Wathop* since time immemorial, the Tipra community has upheld a deep spiritual conviction in the divine. To seek protection from misfortune and ensure the prosperity of both the family and the village, various rituals are performed. The most significant of these is the *Wathop*. Whether observed monthly or annually, it is essential for milestones such as welcoming a newborn child or safeguarding the community. A unique aspect of this tradition is the exclusive use of *Wathwi* bamboo, known as the "King of Bamboo" (*Wa Raja*). According to ancient lore, when the supreme deity Saichungpha created the world and sought a leader for the plant kingdom, other bamboo species chose functional roles: *Wandal* for construction, *Wamilik* for baskets, and *Watolok* for fans. Only *Wathwi* was used for the spiritual responsibility of leadership. However, the Tipra people believe that rituals performed without *Wathwi* are incomplete [1]. Indigenous communities across the world have sustained intricate belief systems that intertwine spirituality, nature, and social cohesion. Among such communities, the Tipra (Tripuri) community of Northeast India exhibits a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in spiritual faith and ritual practices. Central to their worldview is the belief in divine forces that govern human well-being, environmental harmony, and communal prosperity. To seek protection from misfortune and to ensure the welfare of both the household and the village, the Tipra community performs a series of ritualistic observances, among which *Wathop* occupies a place of

paramount importance [2]. The *Wathop* ritual is an essential ceremonial practice conducted either on a monthly or annual basis, depending on the purpose and sociocultural context. It is invariably performed during significant life events such as the birth of a child, as well as during periods perceived to require spiritual safeguarding of the family or the wider community. Beyond its religious dimension, *Wathop* functions as a social institution that reinforces collective identity, ancestral continuity, and intergenerational knowledge transmission within the Tipra society [3].

A distinctive and indispensable component of the *Wathop* ritual is the exclusive use of *Wathwi* bamboo, revered by the Tipra people as the "King of Bamboo" (*Wa Raja*). Unlike other bamboo species that serve utilitarian purposes—such as *Wandal* for house construction, *Wamilik* for basketry, and *Watolok* for fan-making *Wathwi* is reserved solely for spiritual and ritualistic functions [4]. This selective usage underscores the symbolic hierarchy attributed to plant species within Tipra cosmology; wherein material utility is secondary to spiritual responsibility [5].

According to ancient oral traditions, when the supreme deity Saichungpha created the world and sought a leader for the plant kingdom, various bamboo species chose functional roles aligned with human needs. *Wathwi*, however, assumed the sacred responsibility of leadership, thereby acquiring divine sanction and ritual purity [6]. This mythological narrative

\*Correspondence to: Nerisha Debbarma, E-mail: sumantadebbarma83@gmail.com

continues to shape contemporary religious practices, as the Tipra community firmly believes that rituals conducted without *Wathwi* bamboo are incomplete and spiritually ineffective [7].

The continued observance of *Wathop* and the ritual sanctity of *Wathwi* bamboo reflect the community's profound relationship with nature, wherein ecological elements are imbued with spiritual meaning. In the context of rapid socio-cultural transformations and declining traditional knowledge systems, documenting and analysing such rituals becomes crucial for understanding indigenous belief systems, conservation ethics, and the cultural significance of plant species [8]. The present study aims to explore the cultural, spiritual, and ethnobotanical dimensions of the *Wathop* ritual, with particular emphasis on the symbolic and ritual importance of *Wathwi* bamboo within the Tipra community [9].

#### *The structure of Wathop*

The *Wathop* altar is not merely a physical structure but a symbolic representation of divine protection. It is crafted to heal the sick, bless newborns, and cleanse the village of evil. The construction requires specific materials: a traditional cutting knife (Da), *Wathwi* bamboo, sacred leaves (Lai), cotton thread, flowers, water, and sacrificial offerings like fowl and eggs. The altar typically consists of six bamboo pillars (Kongdok) for general family welfare. However, for specific life events like weddings, twelve pillars (Kongchinwi) may be used. These pillars are intricately shaved and decorated, always facing the East (Salthang), as it is forbidden to set the altar in any other direction. Surrounding the central *Wathop* are several subordinate deities and symbolic structures:

*Sangroma & Twima*: Deities seated to the left and right.

*Dik*: Decorative bamboo flowers representing the attendants of the gods.

*Tharukma*: The traditional rules for crafting the *Tharukma* require the *Wathwi* bamboo to be prepared with a specific joint (bothor). For this jointed piece, the top section above the node is cut slightly shorter, while the bottom section (the base) is cut longer. The top part is then shaved into a decorative fringe (kiting). As for the bottom part, it's split or peeled near the joint so it can be firmly planted in the position to stand upright.

*Lahan*: Small bamboo vessels used to hold "holy water" (Twi Kwthar) for purification. In weddings, four *Lahan* are used to sprinkle water on the couple's heads.

*Khong*: A protective bamboo lattice used to "trap" or ward off evil spirits, also commonly seen during the Ker ceremony.

The present study has been undertaken with the aim of systematically documenting and analysing the religious and cultural dimensions of the *Wathop* worship practiced by the Tipra community. In view of the ritual's deep spiritual significance and its role in sustaining indigenous belief systems, the study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To study the Process of *Wathop* Worship.
2. To examine the Role and Responsibilities of the Ochai (Priest).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology to document and interpret the *Wathop* ritual

tradition of the Tipra community of Tripura, recognizing it as a living religious system deeply embedded in social organization, life-cycle transitions, and indigenous cosmology. Primary data were generated through participant observation of household, village, and life-event *Wathop* rituals; in-depth interviews with Ochais, Baruwas, elders, and ritual practitioners; and the documentation of oral histories, ritual chants, symbolic structures, and bamboo craftsmanship practices associated with *Wathwi*. These data were supplemented by secondary sources such as ethnographic literature, archival records, and scholarly studies on Tripuri culture and indigenous religious traditions. Purposive sampling was used to identify knowledgeable cultural custodians and practitioners, ensuring authenticity and depth of ritual interpretation. Data were thematically analyzed through interpretive and symbolic frameworks to examine ritual structure, priestly authority, material symbolism, and social functions of *Wathop* across birth, marriage, death, and communal welfare contexts. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and respect for restricted knowledge, were strictly followed, while triangulation of observation, interviews, and documentary sources ensured credibility, validity, and cultural accuracy of findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### *The ritual process of Wathop (Wathop Rijakmani Raida)*

In Tipra society, religious rites are deeply integrated with social traditions. Since ancient times, the *Wathop* ritual has been performed to ensure family well-being, celebrate births, sanctify weddings (Kailai Panda), and fulfil post-funeral obligations [10]. Among the various forms of worship, *Wathop* holds a distinct and essential place.

#### *Key ritual process*

*The sacred bamboo*: The ritual exclusively uses *Wathwi* bamboo. No other species is permitted. The bamboo is harvested from the forest specifically for the ceremony.

*The priest and assistant*: The ceremony is conducted by the Ochai (priest), assisted by a Baruwa (or Jugaliya). A layperson cannot perform these rites; the family must formally invite the Ochai days in advance with an offering of traditional rice beer (Chuwarak).

*Location and timing*: The ritual is typically performed at dawn in the house courtyard (Nokla).

*Materials*: Essential items include Champa banana leaves, flowers, sun-dried rice (Mairum), incense, and a pot of holy water (Lota). The altar components *Wathop*, *Lahan*, *Tharukma*, *Dik*, and *Khong* are carved by the Ochai or Baruwa and tied with bamboo fiber (Waruk).

*The altar setup*: The deities must face the East (Salthang). A sacred hand-woven cloth (Risa or Rituku) is placed on the altar.

*Sacrificial offerings*: Fowl (Tok) and eggs (Toktwi) are sacrificed. In ancient traditions, even ginger-water was used. The Ochai performs the ritual on an empty stomach after a ceremonial bath for purification.

*Holy water (Twi Kwthar)*: Sacred water is placed in the *Lahan* (bamboo vessel) with Tulsi leaves. This water is used to sprinkle and bless the home for prosperity [11]. In weddings, it is poured over the heads of the bride and groom.

*Concluding rites:* After the ceremony, the Ochai is served the sacrificial meat and eggs. The Baruwa welcomes the Ochai into the house with great respect, offering rice beer, while the Ochai provides spiritual guidance and blessings to the assistant [12].

#### *Wathop in social and communal context*

The Tipra community of Tripura has practiced various forms of deity worship since ancient times, among which *Wathop* is one of the most significant. Since the dawn of creation, this ritual has been a sacred pillar of faith, deeply intertwined with the culture and traditions (Hukumu-Mukumu) of the Tripuri people. Historically, it is believed that the worship of *Wathop* originated through the divine word of the great nature of God to bring blessings and prosperity. From birth to death, every auspicious task including household purification, Huk (shifting cultivation), and village welfare is initiated through the *Wathop* ritual [13].

The relationship between Tipra culture and *Wathop* is inseparable one revolves around the other. This tradition exists to ensure the well-being of the home and the community and to ward off evil. For generations, *Wathop* has been regarded as a truthful and holy practice. It is performed monthly to ensure agricultural abundance (rice and cotton) and to protect family members from spiritual "obstacles" (Khem or Phara) that might hinder their life path [14].

#### *Specifically, Wathop is performed to*

- Purify the home and drive away illness or misfortune.
- Sanctify a newborn child through a dedicated ritual.
- Bless bride and groom during wedding ceremonies by pouring holy water (Twi Kwthar).
- To this day, *Wathop* remains a symbol of high spiritual status and a primary method for removing life's obstacles. The various categories of *Wathop* rituals performed in society include:
- Nukhungni Hamari *Wathop* (Family Prosperity)
- Kami Kerjak Phuru *Wathop* (Village Protection/Ker Festival)
- Cherai Kwthar Achai Phuru *Wathop* (Childbirth Purification)
- Kailai Panda *Wathop* (Wedding Ceremony)
- Thwi Phuru *Wathop* (Funeral/Death Rites)



Fig 1 *Wathop* for family well-being

#### *Wathop for family well-being*

Every year, within the Tipra community of Tripura, *Wathop* is performed in every household for the sake of family well-being and prosperity. The ceremony is conducted in honour of the family head, and it also includes the invocation of the names of the spouse, children, and all relatives. It is

believed that throughout life, various spiritual obstacles (khem) may arise; therefore, *Wathop* is performed in the name of the family members to clear these misfortunes (phara). This ritual is observed to ensure the abundance of rice and cotton for the family's sustenance, to ward off dangers and calamities, and to live a peaceful life [15].

During the early morning of the new moon, *Wathop* is performed once a month for family well-being, and once a year, a larger ritual is conducted to secure the household for the entire year. In this year-end ritual, besides *Wathop*, the deities of the Nature of God are also worshipped. This ceremony is performed in the early morning in the courtyard of the house owner by the Ochai (priest) and the Baruwa (assistant). Rice, cotton, water, and flowers are offered, and the worship is carried out with four eggs or four fowls. After the ritual is completed, the consecrated water from the *Wathop* is sprinkled around the house [16].

#### *Wathop during the village ker ceremony*

The Ker ceremony is one of the most essential parts of the Tipra community's expanded traditions and culture. According to the words of the elders, the Ker ceremony is a symbol of auspiciousness and purification. In the hilly regions, to protect the village and ensure the welfare of the people, a village head or Ojama is appointed on the day of the festival. The village head is the one who speaks on behalf of the people's joys and sorrows and works for the collective well-being. Once a year, during the months of Asin-Kartik, the Ker ceremony is performed in the courtyard of the village head after observing the auspicious agricultural season [17].

As a sign of seeking universal well-being, a *Wathop* is established and worshipped during the village Ker. To perform the *Wathop* during the Ker, four eggs and four fowls specifically two roosters and two hens are required, along with rice, cotton, flowers, a water pot (Lota), and water. However, on that day, rituals are performed at the river or pond involving the sacrifice of roosters and hens, while another *Wathop* is consecrated. The holy water from this *Wathop* is then sprinkled in the village head house to bring purity and blessings to the home and the entire village. Because of the visible blessings and welfare brought by the *Wathop* deity, it is worshipped for the protection of the entire village and its inhabitants [18].

#### *Wathop for newborn child (Cherai Kwthar Achai Phuru Wathop)*

Abul Sumani is the ritual performed to purify a newborn child. It is also known as Sal Mwkhang Phunukmung (Showing the Sun's Face). This is because, on the day of Abul Sumani, the newborn is brought out of the house for the first time to be shown to the sun. On the seventh day (an odd-numbered day), a *Wathop* must be established and worshipped in the early morning for this purification. The ritual requires four eggs, along with flowers, sun-dried rice, and incense. In some cases, eggs are offered at the river or at the village river (Gati) during the ceremony. The deities invoked during this *Wathop* include Akhata, Bikhata, Twibuk Kolokhi Raja, and Sangorongma. Some also refer to this as the Twisangorongma ritual. In many Tipra traditions, the *Wathop* is indispensable; without it, the house where the birth occurred (Masmwra) is not considered purified. Even after the umbilical cord falls off, the mother and child remain in this state of impurity until the ritual. Therefore, on the day of Abul Sumani, the holy water from the *Wathop* must be sprinkled in the birth room and throughout other rooms of the house. However, it is forbidden to sprinkle this water in the room dedicated to the household deity, Noksuma. Aside from that, the water must be sprinkled in the other three corners

of the house. Following the *Wathop*, there is a traditional custom for the mother (Masmwra) to go to the river to bathe and cleanse herself. She must use traditional soaps like Swkwi-Bakhwla (soapnut) and Horuwa to wash thoroughly. This is done because it is believed that such a ritual bath and worship

protect the child and mother from evil spirits, Dakini, and Jugini (witches/malevolent entities). The Tipra community holds a strong belief that these spirits can harm or cause illness, and the *Wathop* is performed specifically to ward off these evil influences [19].

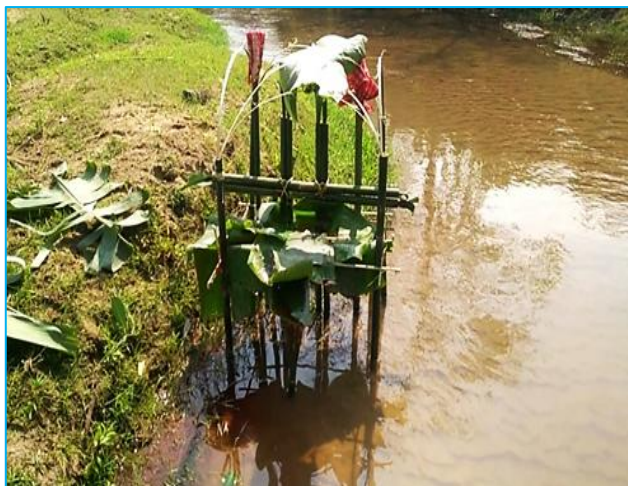


Fig 2 Ker ceremony



Fig 1 *Wathop* for newborn children

#### *Wathop in wedding ceremonies (Kailai Pandao Wathop)*

When a person grows up and reaches the appropriate age, marriage becomes a necessity. In the Tipra community of Tripura, marriage is regarded as a sacred truth. Just as every community in the world has its own unique customs, the Tipra people observe their marriage rites through the holy tradition of worshipping the *Wathop*. Any auspicious task begins with the establishment of a *Wathop*; likewise, the sacred bond of marriage is initiated with this ritual.

In a wedding ceremony, two *Wathop* altars must be constructed - one in the name of the groom (Chamari Kwta) and one in the name of the bride (Hamjwk Kwta). The ritual items offered at these altars include cotton, durva grass, sun-dried rice, and flowers. Specifically, three eggs are required for the groom's *Wathop* and three eggs for the brides. The worship is performed to pray for a bright and prosperous future for the couple.

The holy water from these *Wathop* altars is used for the ceremonial bathing of the bride and groom. The Ochai (priest) is the first to pour this water over them, followed by the parents. This act of pouring water symbolizes receiving blessings from elders and ancestors. The water used in this rite is also referred to as "Divine Water" (Mwtaini Twi), believed to descend directly from the deities to sanctify the union [20].

#### *Wathop after death (Thwimani Ulo Wathop)*

In the Tipra community of Tripura, funeral rites are typically performed on the third day after death. There is also a custom of observing rites on the seventh day. If a mother or father passes away, the sons observe three days and nights of ritual purity, consuming only vegetarian food (Neramsi). On the third day, the community is invited for a feast, and food is offered to the deceased (Maikhwalai). Some choose to perform these ceremonies on the seventh night and seventh day. Daughters of the deceased also observe three days of vegetarianism, perform the *Wathop* ritual, and offer food. Before the *Wathop* is performed on the final morning, the family visits the cremation ground (Simalwng) to collect the remains or ashes (Osti) and brings them home. However, these specific rituals are not performed for those who die at a very young age (before reaching the age of maturity).

On the day of the funeral rites, a *Wathop* must be established in the early morning. It is not just the immediate family who performs this; the father's lineage and extended relatives (Halok Sampalai) also observe vegetarianism and establish individual *Wathop* altars. The holy water consecrated through the Ochai's chants must be sprinkled throughout the house to cleanse it of the "birth/death impurity" (Abul). Other funeral tasks can only proceed after the *Wathop* is completed; without it, no other work can be done. For those who die an untimely or unnatural death (such as suicide or poisoning), different rules apply. In such cases, the family observes one night of vegetarianism, and the following morning, a *Wathop* is established and food is offered before proceeding with other rites. The essential items for this ritual include sun-dried rice, cotton, and an offering of either four eggs or four fowls. The community maintains the ancient belief that the house only becomes pure (Kwthar) once the holy water from the *Wathop* has been sprinkled [21].

#### *The role and responsibilities of the Ochai (Priest)*

The Tipra people worship many household deities to manage their well-being and ward off misfortune. The guidance of the Ochai is crucial in all these rituals. The Ochai plays a vital role throughout the life of a Tipra person, from birth until death, performing the necessary ceremonies for the family's welfare. Because of this essential function, the community

cannot imagine life without the Ochai. It is therefore vital that we preserve the tradition and law (Hukumu) of the Ochai.

#### *The Ochai's role and status*

The first Ochai who established these traditions on earth was named Hangra, also known as the chief Ochai (Ochai Okwra) or the great Ochai (Ochaiyung). The elders believe that the Ochai retrieves souls from the deceased and brings blessings from the supreme deities.

In traditional times, the Ochai worked with an assistant (Baruwa) or a server (Jugaliya). The Ochai's wife often served as the Jugaliya. While these roles have slightly changed in modern times, the position of the Ochai remains essential. Even if the chants are not as perfectly recited as in the past, the ritual is considered incomplete without the Ochai's presence and adherence to the traditional rules [22]. The Ochai's function is comparable to that of a Purohit (Hindu priest); their work is very similar, though the Ochai's responsibilities and knowledge base (Yaphang Yarwng) are considered more expansive in the Tipra tradition. Ochais dedicate themselves to working for the well-being of humanity and seeking blessings from the deities.

#### *Wathop as the central rite*

The Tipra people of Tripura perform numerous rituals to remove negativity and ensure a peaceful home life, including the worship of *Wathop* (Lampra), Twi Sangrongma, Mwtai Kotor (Mahadev), and the village boundary deities (Hangkor Suwamung). However, in nearly all these instances, especially in ceremonies from birth until the conclusion of funeral rites, the *Wathop* is used.

The *Wathop* is considered the foremost deity of the Tipra people. It is said to be the "father of all deities" and the child of the great god of the Tipra land. *Wathop* cannot be separated from Tipra religious life. Performing the *Wathop* requires adherence to strict rules (Raida), which only the Ochai knows and can execute correctly. The Ochai's knowledge of these chants (Komthai) and procedures is why they are indispensable; the Ochai and the *Wathop* ritual are intertwined.

#### *The Ochai's specific duties regarding the Wathop include*

- Knowing the exact method for cutting and carving the sacred bamboo.
- Knowing where to place the flowers and offerings.

While the physical act of carving the bamboo and placing the offerings is the job of the Baruwa, the spiritual leadership requires the Ochai's presence. When a family requires a ritual, the Ochai must be formally called to the location.

#### *Inviting the priest (Ochai Batimani)*

In Tipra society, before performing any ritual, one must first formally invite the Ochai. This usually happens at least one day before the ceremony at the priest's home. Traditionally, the invitation is accompanied by rice beer (Chuwarak), though in modern times, some may offer money instead. On the day of the ritual, the Ochai must perform a ceremonial bath to ensure he is spiritually pure before stepping out to conduct the rites. It is a firm community belief that if the priest is not purified, the deities will not accept the worship [23].

#### *Assistants to the priest (Ochaino Chubainai)*

During the ritual, the Ochai is supported by two key figures:

*Baruwa*: The primary assistant responsible for physical preparations. This includes carving the sacred bamboo,

constructing the *Wathop* altar, setting up the bamboo poles, and arranging the banana leaves (Lai).

*Jugaliya*: A server whose role is to assist in the flow of the ceremony, ensuring that the offerings are presented beautifully and that the ritual space remains orderly and "listening-worthy" (khwnathothok) for the gods.

#### *The Ochai's ritual duties for Wathop*

Once the Baruwa has prepared the bamboo altar and arranged the leaves, flowers, and incense, the Ochai begins the formal worship. His duties follow a precise order:

#### *Offering of rice (Mairum Bokmani)*

First, the Ochai places small portions of sun-dried rice (Mairum) upon the banana leaves in front of the *Wathop* and all accompanying deities. This serves as a symbolic meal offering to the gods.

#### *Purification with holy water (Twi Sarchamani)*

To sanctify the space, the Ochai sprinkles water using Tulsi leaves. Only after this purification does the priest begin reciting sacred mantras or chants (Komthai). Following the chants, the sacrifice of fowls or the offering of eggs commences.

#### *Divination with leaves (Patkarmani)*

The Ochai performs a divination rite called Pat twice—once at the start and once at the conclusion.

*Initial pat*: To see if the deities have arrived and are willing to accept the worship.

*Final pat*: To confirm the deities are satisfied and have granted permission for the ritual to end.

This is done using Jackfruit leaves (Thaipung Bwlai) or specially prepared banana leaves. The leaves must be perfect, without any insect holes or damage. If the "Pat" falls unfavourably, the Ochai may repeat it up to three times. If it still fails, it suggests an error in the offerings or that the deities are displeased, requiring the leaves to be replaced or the ritual to be corrected [24].

#### *Examining the omen (Sema Naimung)*

After the ritual, the Ochai performs Sema Naimung to determine if the worship was successful or if any flaws remain. This is done by carefully examining the sacrificed items specifically the quality of the eggs or the internal organs and entrails of the sacrificed fowl or goat. To perform this examination, the Ochai requires a traditional blade (Da), a water pot (Lota), banana leaves, and rice beer (Chuwak).

#### *Ritual tasting (Khukmoson)*

Khukmoson is a ceremonial gathering for eating and drinking. The Ochai roasts or prepares the sacrificed eggs or meat. Before eating, the priest takes three small portions of the prepared food and throws them aside as a symbolic gesture to cast away evil. After this, the remaining food is shared among the family members and the guests present at the ritual.

#### *Water purification (Twikarjakmani)*

The act of Twi Kar is performed to wash away the family's sins and misfortunes while inviting prosperity in agriculture (maibar-khumabar). The Ochai recites sacred chants (Komthai) and sprinkles water to ensure that no evil enters the

household. A small bamboo tube or vessel (Bwtwk) is used during this purification.

#### *The Ochai as a traditional healer*

The Ochai is not only a priest but also a master of forest medicine. They possess deep knowledge of herbs, roots, and barks used to create traditional remedies (Bithi). Beyond rituals, the Ochai provides:

*Talismans (Tabis/Koboj):* Sacred threads or amulets inscribed with mantras to protect against malevolent spirits (Kaya Maya).

*Spiritual diagnosis:* They identify unseen spiritual causes of illnesses that cannot be cured by money or clothes alone.

*Community support:* In times of severe illness where no other help is available, people turn to the Ochai. Historically, before modern doctors were accessible, the Ochai was the "eye of the people," providing hope and healing through herbal medicine and spiritual guidance.

The Ochai remains a vital figure for the Tipra people, especially in remote areas where they act as the primary protectors of both spiritual and physical health.

#### *Public faith and beliefs (Luku Puitu)*

Since the dawn of creation, the Tipra people have placed their absolute faith in the *Wathop*. This belief remains a living tradition today. Within the pantheon of Tripuri deities, Lampra *Wathop* is considered the supreme authority; regardless of which other deity is being worshipped, a *Wathop* must always be established first. The term "Lampra" is derived from two words: "Lam" (path) and "Pra" (junction/crossing), signifying the "Deity of the Crossroads" who oversees all life paths.

#### *Key life events and collective faith*

*Childbirth and purification (Abul Sumani):* Faith in the *Wathop* is central to welcoming a new life. When a child is born, the household is considered spiritually impure (Abul). On the day of purification, known as Abul Sumani or Sal Mwkhang Phunukmung, a *Wathop* is established to honor the deities Akhata and Bikhata. The holy water from the bamboo vessel (Lahan) is sprinkled throughout the house and on the mother and child to cleanse them. This practice has continued unchanged since ancient times.

*Marriage (Kailai Mung):* Marriage is viewed as a sacred transition. During the ceremony, the bride and groom stand before the Lampra *Wathop*. The Ochai (priest) first pours the holy water from the *Wathop* over their heads to ensure a prosperous future, followed by parents and relatives. This "Divine Water" is believed to carry the blessings of the ancestors.

*Death rites (Thwimani):* Upon a death, the family remains in a state of impurity until the third-day ritual (Horsni). Only after the Lampra *Wathop* is established and worshipped is the house considered purified (Kwthar). This allows the soul to be honored and the family to return to their social duties.

*Household and village welfare:* Families traditionally worship the *Wathop* twice a year at the beginning and end of the year to protect against misfortune. Additionally, a village-wide *Wathop* is often established at the Chokdiri's (village

head) courtyard to pray for the collective health and agricultural success of the entire community.

#### *Hohom-dodom: The spirit of communal celebration*

The term "Hohom-dodom" refers to the vibrant atmosphere of gathering together in harmony, joy, and celebration. It describes a designated time and place where people assemble to share food and drink, sing, and dance. Essentially, it signifies the celebration of auspicious moments, or "good times," when the community unites to express collective happiness.

Every human life experiences a mix of joy and sorrow. The Tipra people believe in overcoming difficulties by embracing and celebrating joyful occasions. This communal spirit manifests during festivals (Ter), religious rituals, weddings, birthday celebrations, and other significant life milestones where people gather in large numbers.

#### *Hohom-Dodom in the context of Wathop*

The *Wathop* ritual acts as a catalyst for this communal joy. Since a family cannot perform these rites alone, they invite the Ochai and Baruwa, along with relatives and neighbors. Once the formal prayers are concluded, the atmosphere shifts.

*Feasting:* After the Sema Naimung (ritual examination), the Ochai and Baruwa are served first, followed by all guests.

*Celebration:* In rituals like weddings (Kailai Panda), childbirth purification, or annual family prayers, the completion of the rite is followed by singing and dancing.

*Purpose:* Even in somber rituals like those following a death, the establishment of the *Wathop* brings a sense of relief and hope for future blessings. The community gathers to ensure that "good may follow the bad," turning a period of mourning into a supportive communal gathering.

However, *Wathop* rituals are not just solitary acts of worship; they are social events that foster Hohom-dodom, reinforcing the bonds of the Tipra community through shared celebration and faith in a prosperous future.

#### *Findings*

*Spiritual exclusivity:* The *Wathop* is strictly reserved for auspicious purposes. It is a symbol of "the good" and is never associated with negative or harmful practices.

*Centrality of the Ochai:* The ritual is entirely dependent on the Ochai (priest). As the sole custodian of the sacred chants and carving techniques, the Ochai ensures the continuity of the Tipra spiritual legacy.

*Enduring faith:* Despite the passage of time and the influence of modernity, the core belief in the *Wathop* remains unshaken. While some ritualistic nuances have evolved, the community's fundamental reliance on this "King of Bamboo" for spiritual cleansing and protection remains a vibrant part of Tripuri life.

## CONCLUSION

The Tipra (Tripuri) communities of Tripura religious identity is inextricably linked to the worship of deities, a tradition that has endured since the dawn of creation. The study confirms that the *Wathop* remains the most vital spiritual pillar for the community, serving as a shield against misfortune and a vessel for inviting prosperity into the household and village.

The study examines that the *Wathop* is not merely a ritualistic object but a sacred life companion for the Tipra people of Tripura. Its presence is mandatory during the three most significant transitions of human life: birth (purification), marriage (union), and death (transition). Beyond these milestones, it acts as the primary medium for Nukhung Hamari

(family well-being) and Kami Hamkwrai (village welfare). However, the *Wathop* stands as a testament to the Tipra people's deep connection with nature and their ancestors, representing a heritage that continues to define their social and spiritual existence.

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