



SHAMANISM, SACRIFICE AND THE SANCTITY OF BLOOD IN THE DONGRIA KOND CULTURE

MADHULIKA DASH
Research Scholar (Ph. D.)
Dept. of English,
Central University of Karnataka,
Kalaburagi 585367. KR (INDIA)

ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the culture of the Dongria sect of the Kond Tribe of Odisha. An attempt has been made to document and study their culture through their rituals and festivals especially the importance of Bejuni's (Female shamans) and Blood. The Dongria sub-sect of the Kond tribe of Orissa is one of the most ancient tribes of the world. The word 'Konda' means hill or hill men and originates from Telugu. Their culture is not only rich and ancient but also distinct in its every aspect. Their language is 'kuvi' which is oral and their traditions and narratives are thus passed down orally through generations. Their documentation is not only a paramount but also a challenging task as it is also susceptible to changes due to its orality. Magic is an important aspect of their autonomous religion as a number of ritualistic sacrifices are conducted to meet various community and personal gains. Therefore to comprehend their rituals understanding the significance of a 'Bejuni' (female shaman) is principle. She is arguably a living God as during the rituals she is believed to be in a trance wherein the God whom she is married to resides in her. She along with other Bejuni's makes all the sacrifices wherein blood is another important element used to appease both the deities and the furies alike for the individual and community good of their tribe. Evans –Pritchard in 'Social Anthropology' said tribal communities have just as long a history as our own, and while they are less developed than our own societies in certain respects they are often more developed in others. I have made a small effort to document this culture which people sadly are unaware of or chose not to record lest its pristine beauty and richness fade into oblivion due to external multifaceted factors.

Key words: Kond, Dongria, Culture, Community, Rituals, Festivals, magico-religious, Bejuni, Blood.



Odisha is home to sixty two different tribal communities and has the largest variety of tribes living in one state .The Kond or ‘Kandha’ as they are known are the largest Tribal community in Odisha. They have a strong and rich culture which pre-dates most others in India. Racially they are believed to be Proto-Australoid with mongoloid mixing but they are linguistically divided into two groups namely ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ which belongs to the Dravidian language group and has no script of its own. The word ‘Konda’ which means hill or hill men also seems to have originated from the Telugu language. The Dongria Kond which is one of the many sub-sects of the Kond tribe reside predominantly on the Niamgiri hills in Odisha covering close to a hundred and sixteen (116) villages.

The hills of Niamgiri are full of lush forests and perennial streams. It is abundant in greenery and extremely fertile. They have several myths/folklores on this plentitude. They also have large bauxite deposits underground and were in news for the fierce protests and resistance they put up against Vedanta which was attempting to mine the underlying bauxite, strip away their mountains and take away their land. This would have resulted in the land becoming barren, streams dying and invited a vast expanse of people putting pressure on the forests and its resources and would have resulted in the complete annihilation of the Dongria Kond land, its people and culture.

Cristina De Rossi, an anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London says the term "culture" is French in nomenclature which in turn comes from the Latin "colere," which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. "It shares its etymology with a number of other words related to actively fostering growth". In her article, ‘The Relationship of Language and Culture’ Claire Kramsch says “Nature refers to what is born and grows organically.” While “culture refers to what has been grown and groomed.” According to Stuart Hall it “is what distinguishes the human element in social life from what is simply biologically driven”. Culture can therefore be understood as all people’s knowledge systems such as beliefs, religion, practices, ideas, values, notions and concepts shared and passed on by a relatively large group of people through generations .This is a good start to endeavor to study Dongria Kond culture. This culture is ancient and religion and magic, family and kinship and laws form its base which has undergone very small changes in comparison to other tribes living in India due to their geographical isolation and fierce community based orientation. They believe that the mountain is their ancestor- king ‘Niamraja’¹ and it is due to his blessing that they have plentiful forests and imperishable streams. One of their beliefs also is that they are descendants of their Raja and children of the mountain. As they are from ‘Niam’ ‘giri’ which also means land of rules they are known for strictly following their rules since ancient times remaining unchanging through time.

¹ Niamraja: “God/ King of the mountain of the Dongria people. The Niamgiri Hills have been named after him.”

The Dongria Kondhs have an autonomous and polytheistic religion consisting of a pantheon of deities and furies that they appease with a marked set of rituals they perform throughout the year as festivals. Durkheim says:

“(A religious group) is not a simple group of ritual precautions which a man is held to take in certain circumstances; it is a system of diverse rites, festivals, and ceremonies which all have the characteristic that they reappear periodically. They fulfill the need which the believer feels of strengthening and affirming, at regular intervals of time, the bond which unites him to the sacred beings upon which he depends.”

These rituals of the Dongria community are a distinctive socio-cultural institution whereby they celebrate a number of festivals around the year during various seasons to honor and to please the land, for rains, good crops and for the removal of several community and personal obstacles. Rites of passage, marriage, rituals for conception and for protection from diseases are also performed. Rituals are also a way of “collective conscience” according to Durkheim which brings a community close which is apt in tribal society. Sharing is also an important aspect of their community and bountiful produce is always shared by means of thanking the Gods by festivals with sacrifices and community feasts. Emile Durkheim categorized magic and religion separately and about magic he writes: “Magic in tribal society is a set of rituals aimed at gaining a certain outcome on both individual and community levels.” Anthropological understanding of magic is to bend the supernatural for certain desired outcomes and therefore gives the believer certain amount of control. This is practiced by them in the form of Bejuni (female shaman) or Beju (male shaman) who is one of the most important magico- religious functionaries and conducts most of these festivals.

Bejuni² and Bejus’ are Shamans who are believed to have been blessed by the Gods/deities with trance abilities. There are numerous lore’s which speak about them being visited by particular deities in their sleep who instruct them to become their vessel. Bejunis’ (female shamans) enjoy an important place in most rituals and ceremonies. Women who go into a frenzied trance upon hearing music are considered to have this divine particle as they can get in touch with the Deities and Furies and save individuals and the community from their fury and know of ways to appease them. There are usually fifteen to twenty Bejunis’ per village. In a furious trance they are known to have bitten and spit off an offender’s body parts in vindication to the God’s presence inside them. They are allowed to marry but are also married divinely to their chief deity to become his/her vessel. They train under the ‘Pat-Bejuni’ (head shaman) and become Bejunis’. Only one of the many can become the next head depending on certain capacities she is meant to carry out. The village deity who is the

² Bejuni/Beju: Shamans who are possessed by specific Gods and can predict the future. Bejuni’s are female shamans and Beju’s are male shamans.

protector of the village 'Boulani devi' is the one who is most often approached by her for the welfare of the village.

A Bejuni seemingly has the ability to go into a trance like state wherein she is possessed by a deity/fury that through her communicates or directs individuals to carry out his/her wishes. She is believed to talk to the Gods in both her dreams and trance state and ask him questions to several answers she desires for both personal and community knowledge. Most festivals begin after Bejunis' go into dancing tizzy and fall into trance after which she asks the tribal community to carry out certain tasks. She and other shamans sacrifice according to the importance of the ritual and desire of the Deities or furies. Various buffaloes, goats, fowls, pigeons and eggs among other things are sacrificed. Blood in the Dongria community is of foremost importance. No ceremony is complete without the spilling of sacrificial blood.

The concept of sacrifice can be found in several other cultures. The first sacrifice according to the Old Testament was carried out by God when Eve and Adam sinned. He killed two animals to cover them with their skin after they grew ashamed of their nakedness upon eating the forbidden fruit. The Kond community was similarly infamous for their 'Meriah' or human sacrifice. They were known for bringing or purchasing children from outside their land to sacrifice to their Earth Goddess 'Dharini Pennu'. She is believed to thirst for blood and would unleash famine and disease unless her blood lust was satisfied. The British outlawed this practice and since then buffaloes and lately even goats are sacrificed for the Meriah festival. The Dongria kond have a famous proverb which speaks about the importance of blood. 'After a hunt or sacrifice the meat is consumed by humans so the blood which is life affirming and pure must be offered to the Earth, their mother Goddess lest she be angry. Blood is a kindler of life and who better to offer it to than their mother who is the life force of all things living'. Blood is also a form of purification and supplication which sanctifies the land and procures good luck during festivals. The ritual blood is sprinkled upon the Desiree for the desired outcome and protection. It seems that blood is the magical material needed to satisfy the Gods and sacrifices are always accompanied or pre-proceeded by dance and incantations or songs which is the spell needed for complete-ion of the ritual. The folklore about the Meriah³ sacrifice begins thus:

"In the beginning of time land was green and forests lush in the home of the Kandha people. They only worshipped their Earth goddess Darini Pennu. They offered her part of all their bounty and lived in peace and happiness. Darini Pennu soon got tired of the fruits and roots and wished to eat meat and taste blood. Eventually she refused all other offerings and wished for human blood.

³ The story about the Meriah (human) sacrifice has been documented and translated in Khambesi1 village on the Niamgiri hills in Orissa and is part of a successive PhD work.

The tribe members were taken aback. How could they sacrifice humans? Who would they sacrifice? They believed all people were brothers so how could they kill someone? Abashed they stopped making offerings to her and refused to offer her human sacrifice. The Goddess maddened with anger stopped the rains. The crops wilted so the people started eating roots. When she saw this she dried out the forest and killed the grass, scrubs and herbs. The kandha community then survived only on water. The Goddess further incensed dried everything and caused a long famine. Everyone grew sick with hunger. Their race started dying out eventually.

The people asked Darini Pennu for forgiveness but the Goddess was stubborn. She would not forgive without receiving her human sacrifice. Finally they agreed to offer her human sacrifice but asked her to bring the sacrifice to them. She brought a boy from the Lohari tribe called Singhabhoi to them. The Village shaman fed him every day. On a Sunday after bathing and feeding him he tied him to a post and sacrificed him. The Goddess finally appeased send them rain and the land grew alive again. They called this sacrifice Meriah. Darini Pennu was pleased thoroughly and blessed the land with greenery and surplus. This went on for many years before the British banned the system completely. Now buffaloes and goats are sacrificed instead.”

This folklore holds firm for all sects of the Kond tribe. The Meriah festival which is the biggest and longest festival of the Kond is celebrated on a gigantic scale annually. It is a testament to the significance of blood and sacrifice in the Kond community. Among the Dongria Kond it is known as the ‘Kadru Festival’. A year is spent in the preparation of this festival. Buffaloes, goats, fowl, coconuts, eye charcoal, vermilion, saris and alcohol are purchased. After the Bejuni sacrifices a chicken in front of a fire dance is performed every day until the final buffalo sacrifice. The buffalo is fed and bathed daily with turmeric. Before the day of sacrifice it is taken around the village and every household embraces the buffalo and expresses their sadness to it and it is going to die for their prosperity. The Bejuni also calls on the Village Goddess for community well being and year round fertility .She also asks for the protection of people, crops and the blessing and happy stay of ancestors in their resting place.

The final sacrifice which is conducted generally on a Thursday is not performed by a Bejuni but by the village head and medicine man/pujari/Disari. People from other neighboring Dongria clans are invited to carry out the sacrifice which involves hacking the buffalo to death. The village community does not perform this act as the buffalo is considered a member of the clan and can therefore not be killed by them. The act involves drawing as much blood as possible and the blood on the axes must be washed off in the village fields. The axe must at least be ceremonially washed at the village alter by the other clan members who are not allowed to take the blood home. The blood brings immense magical fertility and life force and is therefore not allowed to leave the village.

In conclusion it can be said that in Dongria Kond culture supernatural power, magic, Bejunis' and blood play a very important role in the rituals which is the basis of their magico-religious institution. Anthropologists such as Frazer and E.B Tylor separated magic from religion as Tylor did not believe in magic being a part of religion and Frazer called it 'Pseudo-Science' and thought of it as the first stage of religion. Modern Anthropologists disagree with it and believe in their coexistence. Tylor further speaks about the cultural belief in magic. He states how magic never seems to have been unsuccessful as when it fails the failure is attributed to the ritual or shaman having not worked. Also in Tribal communities natural things are more sought after and unnatural things are not thought of or asked for. Memories in such cases are also rather discriminatory. These rituals thus become sustained practices and festivals becoming an intimate part of their history and cultural institution which bind the community together and bring them closer. This culture must therefore be documented/ chronicled extensively and brought to the fore since it is primarily oral or we will soon lose or even worse forget in the haze of globalization, modernity and other influences its unsullied uniqueness.

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