



*Encyclopaedic Ethnography*  
*of the*  
**HIMALAYAN TRIBES**

**Volume 1**

*Edited by*  
**N.S. Bisht • T.S. Bankoti**

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the rarest. The gene frequencies of the 'A', 'B' and 'O' groups are 0.2184, 0.1271 and 0.6545, respectively. According to Guha (1973) the community tends to have a dolicho-cephalic head type. In serogenetic studies, gene A (22 per cent) preponderates over gene B (13 per cent) and around 15 per cent of the individuals are found to be colour-blind.

**History of Origin and Development:** The term Nocte denotes a people living in an organised community. The term Nocte is the combination of two words 'noc' which means 'village', and 'te' which means 'people'. They believe in the existence of their creator Jauban, and trace their origin from a remote ancestor, khanbao. They migrated from the south across the Patkoi hills and settled down in the Khonsa, Namsang and Laju circles.

The people of the adjacent plain areas call them Naga. According to Elwin (1958) the reference to Nagas or Abors in old reports is concerned with the people of varied origins who are now classified as Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa. The Namsangias and Bordorias are now called Nocte. They have also been mentioned in the old administrative reports as Namsangia, Bordoria, Panidoria and Kolagongia.

The people of this community were often projected in the old reports as head-hunters. They have a number of legends about their mythological origin. In one of the legends they trace their descent from a remote ancestor named Khunbao who was a chief. According to Elwin (1958) a marriage took place between the daughter of the sky god and a spirit on the earth. The first man born was Nocte, and his descendants according to the local tradition were the Ahoms. They migrated from Burma across the Patkai hills. The reason for the migration was to find land suitable for cultivation.

**Social Life:** The most striking feature of the Nocte society is the sub-division of its villages into *sums*. Each village has a number of *sums*, the number depending on the size of the village and the number of the migrants in it. Generally every *sum* has its own *morung* or *paa* (bachelor's dormitory) where the young boys sleep at night. These days most of the *morungs* have been converted into a place of recreation and avenue for general meetings.

Dormitories for girls have also lost their importance. A hierarchy is maintained among the social divisions during the observance of rituals, marriages, social functions, feasts and festivals. The village chief occupies a prominent position in the Nocte society.

**Kinship:** The Noctes are divided into three distinct social classes, namely, *lowang* (which consists of the chief and his descendants), *channa* (the commoners) and *mikhiak* (the lower status group). But Dutta (1978) has mentioned only the first two categories. Each of these classes consists of a number of *ku* or *ru* (clan) which are exogamous.

Each class consists of some exogamous clans: *Lowangku*, *Medamku*, *Pongteku*, *Rutumku*, *Wangsamku*, *Homsa*, *Ku*, *Le-te-ku*, *To-Su-Ku*, *Kheta-Ku*, *Tang-Dong*, *Mo-Wangku*, *Mong-Sang*, *Mema-Ku*, *Mate Ku*, *Ramba ku*, *Heng Khe Ku*, *Lamba-Ku*, *Lokhu-Ku*. They use clan names as surnames. Their class division is reflected in their settlement pattern. In each village, there is a separate enclosure for each class group.

**Marriage and Family:** Clan exogamy is followed strictly in regulating marriages. Marriage within a *sum* as well as between certain *sums* is not allowed. Marriage between the members of the different classes is also prohibited. However, the chief, who is allowed to have more than one wife, can marry a

Meat, fish and vegetables are boiled and eaten with local spices. Some of those living in the urban areas use edible oil available at the fair price shops as a cooking medium. The Noctes also consume jackfruit and pineapples. They grow tobacco and betel leaves for personal consumption.

*Kham* (local beer) is the favourite drink. *Jomin* (distilled liquor) is generally offered to the guests or consumed on special occasions. Tea is popular with the young and old alike. They are fond of chewing *sali* (a kind of jungle creeper). The consumption of milk and milk products is on the rise.

**Rites and Rituals:** Pregnant women have to observe certain food restrictions. Besides, they should neither kill any creature nor touch a deceased's body. Twins and deformed children are not allowed to survive. Their presence is believed to bring misfortune to the whole community.

**Birth:** On the third day the baby's ears are pierced by an experienced lady of the clan. The naming ceremony is performed when the child is a month old. The name is given by the priest at night.

**Marriage:** The marriage ceremony takes place after the formal acceptance of the gifts which include betel nuts, *sali* and local beer. The ceremony takes place in the bride's house, after which the bride is taken to the groom's house.

**Death:** The deceased's body is washed by the clan members who give offerings to the dead. When a commoner dies, the body is kept in the house nearly for three days. In the case of a chief, there used to be a custom of keeping the body in the house for nearly a month. The body is kept on a bamboo platform. The deceased's personal belongings are also kept near the grave. If somebody dies

in an accident, the body must be cremated on the same day. On the funeral day the villagers observe *gena* (restriction), when they do not go out of the village for any work.

**Socio-political Administration:** The village council (*nongawan*) maintains law and order in the village. The council constitutes of a dozen village elders and is headed by the chief of the village. It functions in the same manner as the *kebang* does in the Adi communities. The members of the council are responsible for maintaining law and order in the village. They resolve all kinds of village problems, land disputes, theft cases, adultery, elopement and divorce complications. The council meets in the chief's *morung*.

No physical punishment is given to the offenders. A fine may be imposed in terms of cash or kind or sometimes both, depending on the nature of the offence. Adultery is considered a serious offence. Since the introduction of the *Gram Panchayat*, the *gaon bura* has taken over the function of adjudicating all kinds of village disputes in consultation with the members of the village council. The function of the modern statutory council (the *Panchayat*) is to look after the development work in the village.

**Economic Activities:** Agricultural land and forests are the two major economic resources. *Jhum* cultivation is common, but some of them have adopted wet cultivation as well. Paddy, maize and millet are the main crops. Land is owned by the clan. The people supplement their economy by animal husbandry, hunting and fishing.

They visit the weekly markets at Margherita and Naharkatiya in Assam, where they sell their vegetables, poultry, bamboo mats, firewood and betel leaves. Some of them are engaged as road and building contractors,

besides working in private and government jobs. Some earn their livelihood simply by renting their shops to the non-tribal businessmen.

According to the 1981 census, 54.14 per cent of the Nocte are workers (52.15 per cent males and 56.20 per cent females). Of them, 88.63 per cent are cultivators, 1.06 per cent are engaged in hunting, fishing, etc., 6.02 per cent are engaged in construction work, and the remaining 4.29 per cent are engaged in other occupations.

**Religion and Culture:** The Noctes have a strong belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits. The sacred specialist is known as *taimba*. All accidents, illnesses, epidemics and premature deaths are attributed to the actions of the malevolent spirits. The evil spirits can be appeased by the sacrifice of animals like fowls and pigs. The sacrifice is carried out on the recommendation of the sacred specialist. Some of them have adopted Vaishnavism also. Some of them have embraced Christianity. Loku and Chalo are their major traditional festivals.

The 1981 census records 66.82 per cent of the Nocte as followers of Hinduism, 6.81 per cent as Christians, 0.11 per cent as Buddhists, one person as a Muslim and 14.79 per cent as followers of 'other religions'. The remaining 11.46 per cent have not stated their religion. A comparison of the 1971 and the 1981 census returns suggests that there is an increase in the population of Hindus, from 39.70 per cent in 1971 to 66.82 per cent in 1981. Christians increased from 0.03 per cent to 6.81 per cent during this period, and the persons who follow 'other religions', which includes their indigenous religion, declined from 60.20 per cent in 1971 to 14.79 per cent in 1981.

These days they have a greater fascination towards Christianity and some have even converted. In Khonsa there is a *rangsam hum* (prayer hall) which they visit during the festivals. They celebrate a number of *lokus* (festivals) such as *Ranglo* and *Chalo*. These days the *Ranglo* festival is celebrated on a community basis in the month of July or August.

The Nocte are good craftsmen and weavers and produce good wood carvings, textile designs and bead work. They are expert in bamboo-work and cane-work. They make beautiful baskets and pottery. Their traditional dresses have many attractive designs. They have a repository of oral traditions in the form of folk dances, songs and tales. On the eve of the festivals group songs are sung and log drums beaten.

**Inter-community Relationship:** The community has been involved in trading right from the beginning. Earlier the main item of trade was salt which was obtained from the deposits in the villages. The Noctes had trade relations with the British administrators and the neighbouring Wanchos, Tangsas and the plains people of Assam. Bordoria was the biggest marketing centre for salt which was exchanged for commodities like opium, baskets, mats, bamboo tubes and many other local products.

Today the community has shopkeepers, industrialists and hotel and cinema owners. They purchase the essential commodities from the Marwari, Haryanwi, Bihari, Bengali, Assamese and Nepali communities. They are now dependent on the market for utensils, clothing, sugar and many other things of daily use. A few cases of marriage relations with the Wanchos, Tangsas and Adis have been

reported. The educational and medical facilities, employment opportunities in government services and modern marketing systems have helped them develop relations with the people of different communities.

**Modernisation:** Modern education is gaining favour with the community as the social system changes and different development programmes are undertaken. Educational institutions till the higher secondary level are there both for boys and girls. The Noctes have produced a few graduates only. Adult education centres are also operating in some of their villages. According to the 1981 census, they have attained a literacy rate of 18.14 per cent, the male and female literacy rates being 27.31 per cent and 8.65 per cent, respectively.

Modern medical facilities are available to them in the Khonsa town through a medical hospital. In some villages this facility is provided by the local doctor. Post and telegraph facilities are available to those living in and around the Khonsa township. Most of the villages are connected with motorable roads. The Nocte area is well connected by road with Tinsukia and Dibrugarh, and also with the neighbouring Wancho and Tangsa territories.

Most of the Nocte villages receive drinking water through pipes and electric facilities. They have a favourable attitude towards family planning and some of the women have undergone sterilisation. The Integrated Rural Development Programme has helped a few of the Noctes. Some even own radios, tape recorders and televisions, but the majority are poor. Though they are not in favour of using fertilizers and insecticides, a few farmers have started using them in their kitchen gardens. They are a politically conscious community

and take part in elections and other political activities. The control of the chief on his subjects has reduced because of the changing situation. However, the strong influence of Christianity has generated an interest among the political leaders and educated people towards a revival of their culture.

S.I. Ahmad

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## Nyokum

### ANIMIST COMMUNITY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

**Physical Features:** The Nyishis are the single largest tribe of Arunachal Pradesh,