

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF

NORTH-EAST INDIA



COL VED PRAKASH

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Noctes: Closest to the Plains People

The extant literature on the tribes in the Tirap (undivided) distinct like the Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa—is rather meagre as compared to what is available on the tribes in other parts of Arunachal. But the Noctes have generally been well-known since the days of the Ahom Kings as they maintained closer contacts with the plains. The contact was not only for the purposes of trade, but it also involved “meeting of minds on matters social, religious and cultural”. They had probably closest ties with the plains. Some scholars opine that to this date, certain sections of the tribe practise a form of Vaishnavism they had imbibed from the Vaishnava ‘satras’ of Assam during their not infrequent visits there. Elwin (1958) records one of their myths, reflecting the intimate connection the Noctes had with the plains:

“The Noctes and Assamese were born of the same parents, but subsequently they forgot the fact. Their hills had salt springs. One day, three Noctes filled a boat with salt, and reached the plains by river. There they gave salt to the Assamese and in return got red, blue and yellow cloth.... Progressively, the Assamese got possession of the salt in the world and as a result, the Noctes who once owned it, had to go and buy it from the Assamese.”

The legend not only tells something on the process of myth-making among the simple and unlettered people, but it may have a certain factual basis. The myth might as well be reflective of some truth about the socially and economically advanced plains people not only initially exploiting the natural resource of the hill people (which the latter had developed as an indigenous industry), but also expropriating it for their exclusive profit subsequently—at least, in some cases.¹⁰

Name and Origin

The Buranjis had numerous references to this tribe whose groups were named after the places they inhabited; viz Mohongia, Jobokia, Namsangia, Jaipuria, Borduria, etc. The “Nocte” in their language (noc = village, te = people) stands for “Village people”. Another version says it means “hill people of eastern region”. But to the Assamese, they were “people with cut noses” (noc = nak = nose; kate = cut; so they were ‘nak-kate’). To some, they were

known by an equally pejorative appellation, ie, Abori Nagas (Abori = Savage; Naga = Nanga = naked).

Bulk of the Noctes are settled in the south-western part of Changlang district and adjoining areas of Tirap district. Their territory is roughly bounded by the Tirap River in the east, Tisa River in the west, the Patkois in the south, and plains of Assam in the north.

They counted 19,349 in 1961; 24,292 in 1971 (the females slightly outnumbering men); and 25,987 in 1981. The sub-tribe-wise break-down of the 1981 population was as below:

Tutchu Nocte	22,892	Ponther Nocte	47
Lizu Nocte	3,048	Total	25,987

Interestingly, these sub-tribal names did not figure in the older accounts.

There are several versions of their origin—all major villages having their own. One legend speaks of the union between the Sky God and Spirit of the Earth producing a very pretty daughter, who gave birth to Nocte. The Ahoms in turn are the descendants of Nocte.

Migration and Anthropometry

Likewise, there are numerous stories about their migration, all impelled by search for cultivable land. There are three versions¹¹, all vague and tentative, about their original abode and subsequent migration.

1. *Borduria Version.* It comes from Wangnium Lowang, the Borduria Chief in 1960s. "The first Raja of Noctes descended from heaven by an iron ladder. Starting from an unknown place, he reached the plains; passing through Namrup,... Dilli..., Saljo River..., and finally settled at Namsang (then named Thineeyan)."
2. *Laptang Version.* Their ancestors came from Hukong Valley of Burma, Beguiling the people from Laptang; their king, fearing people's wrath, fled to Khonsa with wife and son, hiding successively at Ninu and Banfera. He was restored to Laptang by the Ahom King. The former's descendants, after a quarrel, separately ruled over Namsang, Laptang and Borduria.

3. *Namsang Version*. Coming originally from Hakum Thing, the Noctes spread to Laptang, Borduria, Kaimai and other villages. But the Khonsa people claim to be the original (real) Noctes.

Presently inhabiting the areas south-west of the Tangsas, they are settled in the 58 villages, the major ones being Borduria, Namsang, Laju, Kapu, Noksa, Dodum, Doidam, Chinkoi, Thunisa, Kolayaon, Kothung and Soha.

The Noctes are Mongoloid "with an indicative epicanthic fold, well-built, and short-statured (average heights 157 cms). They are of dark complexion when compared with their neighbours and of less muscular development.

PEOPLE AND SOCIETY

The Nocte society is patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal.

Social Divisions and Clans

They have no castes but the society is divided in two classes, based on the institution of chief. Each chief had control over a number of villages, which paid tribute to him. The chiefs and their descendants formed one class, Lowangjat; and all the rest, the commoners, formed Pansjat (to some, it was Sanajat). The chief may appoint some commoners to minor posts in the Council of Elders. But the persons belonging to the higher class, Lowangjat, had several inherent privileges, lording over the commoners as a matter of right. The division into two classes does not make any obvious difference, so far as any outward appearance, dress and way of life are concerned. But the differences come to the surface during ceremonial observances and social functions. The members of the two classes do not sit together, or in the same row at such gatherings. The marriage between the classes is prohibited; but here again an exception is made, indicative of the superior status of the chief, who can take a commoner for his wife, though his first one must come from the higher class.

Each of the two classes consists of several clans or lineage groups, 'ku' or 'ru', with various names and members in each class. Among the Noctes of the Laju group, the Chiefs' class is 'Kepi' and the commoners belong to 'Tangmo'. There are eight Kepi clans (Wangdang, Wangsa, Sapong, Mophuk, etc.) and eight Tangmo clans (Hodung, Rumsa, Khosa, Kompa, etc.). A striking feature of

Nocte society was the physical division of the village into 'chums'. All clans within a particular chum have a common name. For example, the clans of Mongsang chum are collectively called, 'Bangsia'.

All this belongs to the past. Presently, their society stands divided into various khels or groups like Namsangia, Bardwaria,¹² (or Borduaria), Panidwaria¹³ (Pani duaria), Laptong, Kamai, Topigangi, etc. The differences between the chief's and non-chiefly classes seem to have disappeared somewhere along the way, even if the clan names are clung to with a vengeance in some cases, perhaps indicative of the identity assertion for the sake of ethnic revivalism.

Each of these groups are further divided into chums or sub-groups. Discussed here is only one group, Bardwaria, with four sub-divisions or chums, viz Lothang chum, Kheti chum, Mongsang chum and Mati chum. Each chum has more than one clan, each reputedly originating from a common ancestor in the long past. Marriage was not permitted between certain clans, and sometimes even between certain chums, as they were believed to have a common ancestor in the long forgotten past. In the instant case, marriage was forbidden between the Kheti and Lothang chums. The Lothang chum has 5 clans; Kheti, 4; Mongsang, 3; and Mati, 8. Some of the Mati clans are Mate ku, Ramba ku, Lokhu ku, Dadong ku, Heng-khe-ku, etc. Inter-marriage between Mate ku and Lokhu ku are permitted because these two clans are originally said to have hailed from different places; and in course of their migration, were forced to live together under the same chum by some unexplained circumstance. It is to be noted that the clans constituting the Mati chum are deemed low, and the other three place themselves at higher pedestal.¹⁴ The Noctes never had a class of bonded slaves among them.

The clans are exogamous; sexual intercourse between the clans is considered as incest and punished traditionally. But the tribe is endogamous. There is a taboo on marriage between close relatives. A chief cannot take a commoner as his first wife.

The family is the smallest social unit, comprising of the parents and unmarried children. The married sons stay in their own houses but for the eldest who continues to stay with his parents even when married; looks after them in old age and subsequently inherits his

property. The father, and in his absence, the elder son, helps his married sons to set up separate houses. The married sons could stay in the parental house with their wives if there is adequate accommodation for them till they attain parenthood. The father is the head of family and generally takes all decisions concerning it. "The opinion of the sons may be considered but the female members have no voice in the affairs of the family." The status of women seems to be low in the Nocte society. They do not inherit any property, bar what they get at their marriage, eg ornaments and personal accoutrements. "They have little personal liberty."

Head-hunting

The practice was common among several war-like tribes, and the tattooing of specific designs connected with it, loudly acclaimed the head-hunter, who strutted around as a hero. The head-hunting was embedded in history, reason and harsh realities of life. Initially, it was sequestered, stark existence in the wild, accentuated by the harshest of topography, almost barren land, and near absence of resources for barest existence. The life was guided by simple principle of "every one for himself". Out of sheer necessity, the groups tried to subjugate their neighbours, giving rise to the inter-tribal and inter-village blood feuds. The existence of the salt springs (mines) in the Nocte area was another specific cause for the blood feuds in this tribe; and the claims and counter-claims on their ownership gave rise to the head-hunting expeditions. But a major cause for this practice, common to all the tribes, was their belief in the magical powers of the human head, particularly in reference to the fertility cult. Some earlier authors ascribed the practice to their (tribal's) lust for the gore and the macabre, which seem to be misplaced.

There is a legend about the origin of the practice during the time when humans and animals lived together, sharing ample space. After a long time, the men outnumbered women and consequently arose a conflict over possessing them. One day a man, Patei, was killed by another in a quarrel over a woman. Patei's brother, then very young, grew into a robust youth, when he was bitten by a bee (nyalang) in the jungle. When he was in acute pain as a result, he was reminded of the pain his brother must have experienced when he was killed. In a fit of frenzy, he killed the killer of his brother,

giving birth to a blood feud between two families, either trying to take revenge on the other. This is how it all started!

The common method of head-hunting raids was in the form of a surprise attack by one village against another. They declared open hostility or challenge to war. The accepted procedure was to send a challenge through a messenger, who carried two bamboo sticks, tied together, to the village to be challenged. One stick was cut to a fine point at one end, the second left blunt at either end, and the latter was meant to convey the intent of the challenger to take heads, meaning a challenge to war. If the challenge was accepted, the challenged would cut off the pointed end of the stick and return both the sticks, blunt now, to the challenger. If the challenged village was for peace, it would return the sticks as they were, or might cut the blunt stick to a fine point before returning both. The latter gesture would naturally mean submission.

The victors during their return journey from an actual raid indulged in dancing, singing, much shouting and firing guns all along the way. At their village, they beat the log drum at the morung to announce their victory. On their arrival, they made a victory round of the village, singing, dancing, and dragging the enemy heads on the ground. Thereafter, they gathered at a place for rituals to exorcise the spirit of the dead persons, during which the priest sprinkled the mixture of the powdered rice and egg on these heads. The heads were next hung from a tree. The ritual was not over yet. When the harvest was brought in, the head-hunters got themselves tattooed for a festival, Khotang, celebrated with great pomp and merriment. A grand feast was arranged, each family making liberal contributions, including a pig. The victims' heads were boiled, cleansed, and then stacked at one place. A share of the feast was then ceremonially offered to the skulls, with the victors dancing about them. At the end of it, they were deposited at their final resting place in the morung.

During the harvest festivals in the ensuing years, the priests would make the food offerings to the heads. These ceremonies indicate their belief in the fertility cult attached to the human heads which ensures a good harvest.

It also be noted that in case of a defeat, the returning head-hunters would slink into the village and reach their houses rather quietly, even shamefacedly.

Nocte Houses and Villages

Their house style is usual change pattern, built on the stilts. As a variation, they make use of the huge blocks of wood and wooden pillars, occasionally with carved designs, as the framework of the house. The 'toko' leaves easily available in the jungle, are used for thatching. Yet again, in the manner of so many other tribes, the eaves come so low on the either side that the walls are scarcely visible. Rectangular in shape, the house has two main parts: first, a large front room with a hearth in the middle, also serving as a parlour; second, an inner room for the women. A small part of the front is enclosed for the head of the family. If it is a large family with a number of wives, inner room is partitioned into small cubicles, with a hearth in the middle for each wife. The rear part of the house is used for keeping the household articles. Its extreme end has a small enclosure, serving as latrine-cum-urinal combined. Some houses have small rooms for unmarried girls. There is only one door, serving as front entrance. Elwin found that "the chiefs had very large and spacious houses—probably the largest in whole of Arunachal".

They live in "scattered communities in the villages of reasonable sizes, each with 20 to 80 houses". A feature of the Nocte village is that it is broadly divided into sub-divisions, called 'chums' or 'radens'. In the olden days, members of a particular clan occupied a chum, lending it their name. From the last many decades, the chums are not co-extensive with single clans. Each chum in a village had its own morung, for boys and girls. Free mixing between the boys and girls was allowed, and the attachments formed during this period usually led to marriages, generally with the parental consent.

Dress: Noctes

The original dress of the Noctes used to be very simple and similar to those of the Wanchos and Konyaks. It consisted of numerous cane belts round the waist, and a loincloth with the rear end hanging, looking a close relative of 'langot'. They wore rings of cane, bamboo, and reed around the legs and arms. The women wear the skirts, in black or white, hanging from the waist to the knees, covering the loins. Upper part of the body is covered by a wrapper (shawl), during the winter only.

They shave off the front part of their head, leaving a thick tuft of hair at the back, gathered in a knot over the nape—much in the

manner of South Indian Brahmins of a particular persuasion. Nocte widows, unwilling to marry, cut and keep their hair short.¹⁵

The men and women are fond of ornaments and body decorations. The women wear earrings, bead necklaces, finger rings, metal bangles, armlets, and headgears made of beads, canes and bamboo slips. The ceremonial dress of the Noctes was rather gorgeous: head-dress decorated with the tusks of wild boar, feathers of horn-bills, and flowers; a hair pin of bone or bamboo, with a tuft of goat's hair dyed in red and black, used to tie the hair knot at the back, and the earplugs and flowers adorn the ears. They also wear necklaces of coloured beads, leggings of cane and beads. Besides the ivory armlets, wrist-band of plaited wicker-work decorated with cowrie shells and headgear made of conch shells also form part of their dress and ornaments. The Nocte Chiefs wear bead necklaces, earplugs and pompous headgears.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

Morung

The number of morungs in a village depend upon its size, the chums in it, and population of young eligible boys/girls. "Many villages have just one morung each; some like Borduria have four; and a village like Laju has 22 morungs." Constructed like a village house, a morung had one large room, a hall with a hearth in the middle; but had no partitions. One side of the hall has a log (canoe) drum, 20 ft long, with 2 ft diameter, called 'than'. It was a war drum in the olden days, announcing the coming danger of an attack. But later it was used to proclaim a brave deed like killing of a big game (a tiger), or occasionally to warn about an outbreak of fire. The human heads collected during the head-hunting raids, are displayed here. The morung is built on community basis, and its completion calls for a boisterous feast.

The youngmen and old men too sit around the hearth and gossip, while working with the cane and bamboo. The morung has usual sleeping platforms for its inmates. Though no age limit is fixed for admission into it, but it is generally at adulthood. The young hopeful has to perform a ceremony, 'pamikha', at the Chalow festival, where he presents a pig/fowls and rice beer to the youngmen and is declared a 'pami' (young bachelor).

Village Council (Ngong khum or Ngothun)

Their council of elders is an important body, presided over by the village chief. It took decisions on the wars against their enemies, and timings of those murderous head-hunting expeditions. The council has general (ordinary) members, called 'noktang' or 'kampa' and several officials under the chief to help him run the Council. The officials are led by Ngoba, a VIP of the village, who is a minister to the Chief. He acts as a master of ceremonies at all the rituals and festivals. Then there was 'ramba', PRO of the Council, who keeps in touch with the common man, informs the members about its sessions, and acts as an emissary of chief when sent on a political mission to a neighbouring chief. The general members are elderly veterans, well-versed with the customs and usage of the Community.

The Council pronounces on all cognizable crimes committed within its jurisdiction, as per the customary laws. The scale of punishment was dictated by the seriousness of the crime. An offender indiscreet enough to have an affair with the chief's wife, was cut down to pieces. If a person was guilty of burning down the entire village, he was dealt with summarily, tied down to a post and speared to death by the villagers, without waiting for the verdict of the council. In most other cases, the general criterion of punishment was payment of compensation, its scale depending upon the gravity of the crime. Even wilful murder could be settled through the principle, though it would invite very heavy compensation, including the expenses on the funeral rites and funeral feasts. A person guilty of adultery with a married woman would pay (in the 1950s) one pig, one bangle, thirty rupees in cash, and a tola of opium. The theft of paddy from a granary was a more serious offence, requiring payment of one buffalo, one pig, one bangle, besides one tola of opium for the members of the council.

In the olden days when Borduarua and Namsang were two dominating villages, under their powerful chiefs, all the Nocte villages, depending upon their location, were under the jurisdiction of either of the two chiefs. If a village council under its own chief could not resolve an issue, it was ultimately referred to one of these two powerful chiefs having jurisdiction over the village.

JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE

Birth

Though aware of the connection between the sexual intercourse and procreation, they still believed that a woman would conceive only if their god, Jauban, was pleased with her. A sterile woman was obviously unlucky since she was deprived of that god's blessings. A pregnant woman carried on with her normal work at house and in fields, till the 8th month. Certain prohibitions are observed during the pregnancy. She abstains from partaking of venison, certain types of fish and vegetables, all fruits, drinks, narcotics and any kind of food that tastes bitter. Her husband also was under certain taboos. He should not kill an animal or a snake, and cannot sell any household articles during her pregnancy. An expert woman, called 'nabinu' or 'dakrum', helps with the delivery, during which no male member, even the husband, should be present in the room. The nabinu makes the woman hold the post in the standing position, with her legs apart, putting sufficient pressure on herself. After delivery, the umbilical cord is cut off with a sharp bamboo splinter. Generally, the placenta, wrapped in leaves, is hung on a tree behind the house.

"They have a curious, even cruel, custom of killing the twins at birth." Nor do they permit a deformed child to live. Both the happenings are deemed to be unnatural and harbingers of misfortune to the community. In certain villagers, high mortality rate was ascribed to this custom, called 'jonpon'. On the third/fourth day, the baby undergoes the ordeal of having her ear lobes pierced in a ceremony, 'nabamba'. The hair on the head is shaved off and the baby given a name. Usually, the child is named after someone in the ancestral line. Another custom is to replace the old hearth with a new one, which is then lighted. The village is entertained to a feast, rounding off the ceremonies.

A week after this ceremony, the mother takes the baby to her parents' house. It is the privilege of the maternal grandparents to put the first rice in the baby's mouth. Maternal uncles too share this prerogative. For enjoying this privilege, they have to host a feast. Sometimes, elderly women and young girls take the baby to the fields to perform certain rituals there.

Marriage

Being a patrilocal society, inter-village marriages are rare, but the chiefs are a general exception who marry one wife from another village. The Noctes, like most others, are an endogamous tribe and the violation of the rule is deemed to presage a danger to the community, natural or supernatural.

The incidence of monogamous marriage far exceeded polygamous variety for the simple majority of people, as only the chiefs and the rich could afford the luxury. Customarily, the chiefs had two wives, the elder one called the Wangsa-dong and the younger one, Wangsa-nadi. The motive behind the polygyny, more accurately, polygyny, seemed to be, in most cases at least, the advantage of having more hands for the agricultural work. In the case of chiefs, it was more a matter of status! The cross-cousin marriages are preferred. The marriage with the maternal uncle's daughter, that is MBD, is the most favoured one, and in fact, from the day one, she is regarded as a potential wife of her father's sister's son, that is FSS. The same way, mother's brother's son, MBS, is the prospective husband for his father's sister's daughter, FSD.

A person may remarry if the first wife is dead or barren; in the latter case, he can take a second wife only after divorcing the first with the approval of the elders. He may marry a maiden, but generally a widower is given a widow, though levirate and sororate marriages are preferred. If the parents are not accommodative, the young lovers may elope and get married, with the Council of Elders smoothening the rough edges subsequently.

Death

In their belief, the soul matter, called '*mang*' or '*jakhang*', after death repairs to '*balum*', a place in the sky. It might appear in the shape of a kite on the day of disposal of the body. So when a kite does fly over the house, the relatives of the deceased pour water on the ground for his soul. In the case of an unnatural death, the soul turns into an evil spirit. Depending upon the area, they practise three methods to dispose the body. Kolam, Kothung, and their neighbours cremate the body. The charred bones placed in an effigy are disposed of on a bamboo platform after a feast hosted for the village, on the 6th day of the death. On the occasion, food items and other articles like a hat, gun, utensils, etc. are offered at the site

of disposal, with the words: "Take these things for those who died earlier." At Soha, Laju, Doidam, and neighbours, they practise burial, with slight variations. At Soha, they adopt burial in case of a natural death. They cut a lock of hair before burial and keep it in a bamboo tube near the grave. At the annual post-death festival, *Rang Sang*, (an equivalent of the Hindu Shradha ceremony), they express their grief over the relic of the hair. The third method of disposal, exposure of the body on the open platform is still in vogue in some villages, though it is on the wane. It is similar to the one prevailing among certain tribes of South-East Asia, Konyak Nagas, and the American (Red) Indians. The funeral procession proceeds to the village cemetery, and blank rounds are fired en route and during the disposal ceremonies. The body wrapped in a piece of white, topped by a piece of red cloth, is placed on the platform (*Liang*).

In case of an unnatural death, the body is disposed of outside the village boundary, either cremated as in Soha, or left tied on a big tree. No offerings are made, nor villagers visit the place thereafter, considering, as they do, that such a death is caused by the curse of the gods. At Soha, they kill a chicken to signify disposal, uttering: "You died because of your bad luck. You need not look at us or come towards us. You go to your own place."¹⁶

Religion

The Noctes believe in the existence of a Supreme Being—Jongban, Tesong and Jaubam, to different groups—and attribute dual, good as well evil, character to the deity, conferring joy and grief, as per his whims. Some know him as the Sky god (evil) and Earth deity (good), rolled into one.

Like other animistic tribes, Noctes believe in numerous spirits of both variety, with the evil ones outnumbering the benevolent ones. One spirit is very dear to them, a kind of 'Residential Deity', popularly called 'House Spirit', protecting the house and its inmates from all evil spirits. Every time a Nocte takes zu, he pours a little on the ground for this spirit. The spirits are named after their dwelling places or the diseases they cause.

The Noctes came under the influence of Hinduism through Vaishnava movement in Assam. Presently, its adherents are devotees of Chaliha Bareghar 'Satra' of Nazira, near Sibsagar. A good

number of Nocte pilgrims visit Nazira satra every year to offer prayers and make offerings. In line with Vaishnavite tenets, "the Noctes do not take beef and they crop their hair Satriya fashion". One version about its spread in Arunachal area is that it was under the influence of Bali Satra, near Naharkotiya, that Vaishnavism was carried to the Nocte area by one Naga Narottam, some 1300 years ago during the Ahom Rule. It is believed Naga Narottam was the name assigned by the Brahmins to Lotha Khunbao, the then Nocte Chief.

Festivals and Dances

The Loku ('lo' from 'lofe' = to drive out and 'ku' from 'Rangku' = season) is their main week-long festival after the harvest. Celebrating an agricultural event, it is meant "to ring out the old season and ring in the new". The dates of celebration are not uniform, as some villages observe it after harvesting the finger millet in July-August period while others do so after October-November harvesting of Ahu paddy. The celebrations are held village-wise, as also on the community basis—the latter often at the district headquarters. The priest decides the dates after taking an augury on an egg, and the first day is devoted to a big feast at a place outside the village, for which pigs and buffaloes are slaughtered. After dancing and singing to their heart's content, and quaffing tubefuls of beer and consuming basketfuls of rice over the broad leaves, they return to the village, dancing en route, only to continue the fun at the Chief's house that day and night. Second day, a bonfire is lighted at night and they dance and sing around it, accompanied by the drums and 'gogona', (Jew's harp). The people visit and dance at each other's houses. The Loku songs tell an account of the battles fought in their history, and of their traditional laws. Third day onwards, celebrations are morung-wise. On the last days, entire village performs dancing at the Chief's house. The next day, the entire male folk go for a communal hunt, which symbolically represents driving away all evil.

They have a large number of other religious ceremonies and festivals, connected with their agricultural cycle, involving various sacrifices to propitiate different spirits.

Their two principal dances are *kuwa buong*, a festival dance, and *sang buong*, the war dance; in the former, the girls can join in, but not in the latter. A legend says Lotha Khunbao, who descended

from heaven to become their first Chief, was the one who taught to the Noctes the art of singing and dancing. The Chief held a pivotal position in this autocratic society; so the construction of new house for him called for a dance (*hum honbuong*), one of the few dances sans songs, as did his death (*mang buong*). There are numerous other dances for different occasions and events.

ECONOMY

Agriculture

The jhum cultivation has not as yet been substantially replaced by its wet kin though they are taking sincere strides towards it. Rice is their staple food, and they grow its numerous varieties under different names, including the early- and late-ripening varieties, harvested in September and November, respectively. The other important cereals grown are maize, millet and pulses, all being rain-fed crops. Their subsidiary crops are sweet potato, tapioca, arum, etc. They also grow temperate fruits (jackfruit and small peaches). Banana plants grow in wild. Namsang and Soha areas grow '*pan*'. Their agricultural tools were of an elementary nature till the recent years. Of late, better tools like spades, felling axes, hand-hoes, trowels, etc. have been introduced.

Some areas are now engaged in tea cultivation, and of late, mustard is also being grown. They also grow opium in small quantities.

Cottage Industry

Their women are good at spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Their men produce a number of cane and bamboo goods: hats, armlets, leggings, jugs, trays, tea cups, containers, mats and baskets. They are especially known for *jhapa*, a basket with a lid (beautiful and handy, at the same time); effective bamboo rain shields; ivory armlets, glass bead necklaces; and artistic and well-carved dolls, human heads, and smoking pipes. Some villages like Laju, Daidum, and Kheti were well-known for producing earthen-ware vessels, in great demand in their neighbouring areas. They turn out fishing nets, using fibres obtained from the local shrub, Riha (The process involved is similar to the one for making jute fibre). They had an indigenous salt-mining industry, and tradition of limestone quarrying and of limestone burning as well.

Hunting, Fishing and Animal Husbandry

These are important sources of supplementary food and additional income. Each village had its own designated hunting grounds in the nearby fallow lands and forests. Illegal hunting in others' preserves could lead to serious inter-village feuds, and particularly in earlier times, to head-hunting raids. The hunting is normally done by individuals, singly or in small groups of 3 to 6. But they go on a Community hunt twice a year. Firstly, after the Tobi festival when the Chief got the head of the hunted animal; and then, after the Kapkhut festival, when it went to Ngoba, his number 2 in the Council. Their weapons of hunt were daos, spears, guns and hunting dogs. The game is divided among the hunters, including separate shares for their dogs.

The areas for fishing are also staked out. The main fishing avenues are the rivers and some larger water bodies (dams, ponds, etc.). The catch is divided equitably.

The animal husbandry is an important profession. They rear cows, goats, pigs, dogs, cats and poultry. The first two are for commerce as also for home consumption. The dog is used for hunting; its meat consumed by the family; and finally, it serves as a sacrificial animal during certain festivals. The chickens, fowls, eggs, and rats provide meat for their meals; and they are also used for making sacrificial offerings as also for taking augury.

Salt Mining

Salt was one of the indispensable commodities for which the Plains people totally depended upon the Noctes and some other Naga tribes. The salt was manufactured during the winter months in the salt mines located in the hills to the north of Borhat in Sibsagar district. The person engaged in the salt making was called '*lone puria*' (=salt-maker). The salt-water collected from the mines (springs) in bamboo *chungas* was boiled over the fire. The water evaporated, leaving the salt concentrates behind. 100-150 '*chungas*' worth of water yielded 20-30 '*seers*' of salt. "A total of 20 salt mines were located between Borhat and Namsang.... The maximum quantity—largest for the entire area—of salt was manufactured in the Tobing-jan mines, near Namsang." The official rules prescribed for the manufacture/supply of salt are summarised here:

A leading man was given lease for the supply of the salt. He was responsible for supplying fuel for boiling of the salt-water. He had

100 salt-makers under his charge; each of them made one maund (40 *seers*) of salt, of which two *seers* went to the supplier as his due. A share is reserved for the king. The rest is divided among the salt-makers, who take their stocks to the plains to be bartered for rice, coarse cloth, dried fish, etc.

NOCTE-ASSAMESE RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It should be of interest to see the subject from either side of the line. What follows is an extract from a detailed account on the subject given by the then Chief of Borduria (1960s): "Once there was a Raja at Sala, Ashon Wanglin Lowang, clever and knowing witchcraft. He was very unpopular, but the Hangkhai family was the only one to like him. Head of this family, Hangkhaiwa, informed the Raja of conspiracies against him and advised him to seek help from Ahom Raja to subdue his disloyal conspirators. He met Ahom Raja at Khonsa, who advised the Sala (Borduria) villages to be loyal to their Raja. On return to Sala, the villagers took the oath of loyalty to their Raja, and carved on a stone a sign of an unbreakable truce of friendship and love."

The Assamese scholars cite this anecdote as an example of age-old relationship between the Noctes and Assamese. But the outsiders see these claims as exaggerated, based more on self-serving reasons, wistfulness, and emotional yearnings, rather than objective facts. Still, given all this, the Jury must hear the Assamese out, when they claim that occasional spats between the Noctes and plains people notwithstanding, "a degree of formal, even intimate contact, at social, cultural, and commercial planes was inevitable", not only because of their geography but also because of demands of Realpolitik, and enlightened self-interests of the two parties. The Assamese elite feel elated if the Noctes claim, as some of them indeed do, that they have descended from the Panch Pandava family. Besides, they see certain kinship and amity between the Noctes and Assam people in the context of the former's administrative, cultural, and religious practices and beliefs—briefly mentioned below.

Administration

The institution of Nocte Village Council, its Political Executive, seems to have been strongly influenced by the Ahom system. A number of persons are required to serve by turn the Chief's

household and fields for a certain number of days in a month; a replica of pikes serving the king and the aristocrats. "The Nocte etiquette before aristocracy and the elders is almost similar to the Ahom etiquette; but nowhere it is cringing or servile."

Culture

They celebrate numerous festivals, generally centred round agricultural events, with dancing and singing and feasting over beer, rice, meat and fish, in their traditional colourful dresses. "The Nocte life and culture appears to be an ideal example of the cultures of the hills and plains." While they have their language and preserved all their traditions—festivals and dances, morungs, display of skills, change houses, food habits, dress, etc.—they also perform the Bihu dances, sing Bihu songs, and more importantly, dress their hair in the traditional Assamese Pah-kota style.

Religion

Noctes are Vaishnavas under Bare Ghar Satra (near Nazira) originally founded by Shri Ram Ata, a Vaishnava saint of Kal Sanghati. Legend has it that Lakha (Khunbao, Nocte king) wanted to trace the preceptor of his previous birth. He floated a basket of gold and another of silver down the Dihing, and followed them along the bank, with his men. The baskets stopped near Bali Ghar Satra where Ram Ata was staying. Ram Ata ceremonially took the baskets into Satra. The king requested Ata for 'saran' (initiation), who after testing his sincerity, initiated him and his men. From that day Lakha was known as Narottam (=best among the men) and became a devout follower of his preceptor. The two were reputedly intimate even in death, as they died on the same day and their pyres, placed side by side, were lit simultaneously. The story of this holy union in life and death is still fondly remembered amongst the Noctes and Assamese.

The Noctes remember that the Satra used to present the old bangles and earrings to the Chiefs of Borduria.

Mahapurushia Vaishnavism has been too catholic to put any restrictions on its followers to the extent that the Noctes and other tribal adherents have always been free to continue following their traditional faith. Consequently, their religion is an admixture of two streams—traditional and Vaishnavite. It is believed that if Noctes do not take beef, it is not because of any religious diktat but

possibly due to their close contacts with their Vaishnava brethren of the Assam plains. So, the Assamese scholars perhaps, have a point, after all.