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RWSABOM AND THE MAKING OF WOMANHOOD AMONG THE HRANGKHAWL OF TRIPURA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ethnographic study of Rwsabom, a pre-menarcheal initiation rite for girls among the Hrangkhawl community of Tripura in Northeast India. Although performed before biological menarche, the rite functions as a structured transition from 'childhood' to 'socially recognised youth', publicly affirming new expectations of modesty, respect, and communal responsibility and authorising participation in Rolom, the cooperative youth labour system. Drawing on observed contemporary performance(s), semi-structured interviews, elders' retrospective narratives, and relevant secondary sources, the paper documents the ritual sequence, the roles of key actors such as the paternal aunt (Ninu) and ritual specialist (Ochai), and the symbolic significance of key objects and acts, including Rwsa cloth, purification practices, traditional beer earthen pitchers referred to as Zu Kola, and the offering of cock (Ar Khong). Analytically, the study applies Van Gennep's rites of passage model and Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas to show how it produces gendered moral personhood through embodied discipline and social incorporation. The study also traces contemporary transformations under the influence of Christianity and changing socioeconomic conditions such as the replacement of older ritual authorities and the discontinuation of beer-related and sacrificial elements, highlighting how a rite may be reinterpreted as cultural heritage while continuing to perform the social work of status recognition. By focusing on an initiation rite that hasn't been well-documented, the article contributes to discussions of rites of passage, girlhood, and ritual change in Northeast India.

KEYWORDS: *Rwsabom, Initiation Rites, Rites Of Passage, Hrangkhawl, Tripura, Northeast India*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hrangkhawl community is found in different parts of the northeastern states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura (Bhattacharyya, 2017). They are mainly found in villages such as Tui Koi, Debthang, Rangamura, Kamalachera, Gangarai, Sonirai, Killa and Tuimairang in Tripura (Hrangkhawl, 2017). In Tripura, the Hrangkhawls are classified within the wider Halam group who claim their descent from the Mongoloid ancestry, and they are organised into 12 clans: Roipu, Khuongpel, Laikai, Tangkor (or Chuonbak), Dabder, Saituol, Sairang, Dawrza, Doromkha, Malalkha, Vaplom, and Lawkatangyas (Hrangkhol, 2012).

Life-cycle rituals are culturally accepted means by which individuals transition through significant phases of life (Meetei, 2022). Van Gennep (1960) described such transitions as rites of passage, arguing that status changes are typically enacted through staged movements from one's previous social identity to a new one. In Hrangkhawl society, ceremonial rituals signify crucial milestones such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death, hence preserving continuity in social membership and moral order. Among these rites, *Rwsabom* is widely regarded as the most significant ceremonial ritual for Hrangkhawl girls.

Rwsabom is a pre-menarcheal initiation rite that typically is performed between the ages of ten and twelve, before to the onset of menstruation. So, the rite does not celebrate menarche; instead, it gets the girl ready for the new norms of modesty, respectful behaviour and public accountability that come with it. The completion of the Rwsa Bom officially changes the girl's status from "girl" to "youth" and allows her to join *Rolom*, the youth labour group that is important for cooperation and production in the village.

The paper seeks to document the traditional ritual sequence of Rwsa Bom. Furthermore, it uses the rites-of-passage theory as given by Gennep and Turner to explain the symbolic meanings while also examine its adaptation under the influence of Christianity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON PUBERTY, COMING-OF-AGE AND INITIATION RITE

Puberty and coming-of-age rites show how societies structure biological changes as culturally significant transitions. These rites extend beyond biological processes, functioning as sociocultural practices that impart moral instruction, establish gendered

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expectations, and confer social recognition (Bell, 1997; Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2010). For girls, such rituals frequently integrate attention to bodily transformation with guidance in modesty, relational obligations, and responsibilities associated with adulthood.

Comparative studies show that coming-of-age rituals differ widely in timing and form. For instance, the Navajo Kinaaldá ceremony in North America includes several days of ritual bathing, food preparation, and long-distance running to prepare girls for womanhood (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Carey, 2010). The Zulu Umemulo rites in South Africa take place after a girl's first period and involve seclusion, purification, and a public celebration. During the ceremony, the girl wears traditional clothing and throws a spear to her father as a symbol (Mntambo 2020). In India, different regions also treat puberty as a social milestone. In Karnataka, the Bunt community holds the Karapathavani ritual to mark a girl's puberty, showing her maturity and readiness to become Madimal, a bride-like figure. She takes part in a cleansing ritual, serves food to guests, and receives blessings (Vanitha 2019). In Tamil Nadu, the Manjal Neerattu Vizha, or 'Turmeric Bathing Ceremony,' marks the last stage of a Tamil girl's coming-of-age and highlights women's role in the ritual (Clarke 2009). The Assamese Tuloni Biya, held at first menstruation, includes seclusion, ritual purity, gift-giving, and symbolic marriage. On the final day, women join the girl for communal washing and singing, and a banana tree is planted in her honour. This event once meant the girl was old enough to marry, usually around the time of puberty (Patar, 2019; Rana & Pandya, 2022).

In Northeast and Central India, tattooing has long been used to show maturity and social belonging. For example, the Oraon and Majhwar tribes in Madhya Pradesh tattoo girls when they reach their first menstruation. Similar traditions are found among the Halabas, Gonds, and Bagias, where tattoos on different body parts signal maturity. The Mikir tribe in Assam tattoos girls at puberty, and the Burmese and Nagas of Assam also use tattooing as a traditional, gendered ritual linked to fertility, endurance, and readiness for adult roles (Bhattacharyya 1960). Longchar (2020) discusses the Ao Naga puberty marking, Teptsü Atep, as a way of shaping identity. These tattoos are visible signs of biological change and lasting symbols of social identity, moral guidance, and ritual belonging.

Despite the wide range of studies, Rwsabom has not been studied much. This rite is unique because it takes place before a girl's first period but still marks the shift from childhood to youth and prepares girls for gender roles, including joining Rolom. Most overviews mention the rite only briefly (Hrangkhawl, 2017), leaving important questions about its structure, meaning, and changes over time. This study aims to fill these gaps with focused ethnographic research.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article examines Rwsa Bom using the frameworks of rites of passage, liminality, and symbolic embodiment. Van Gennep's (1960) three-part model: separation, liminality, and incorporation, provides the main structure for understanding how this rite moves a girl from childhood to a recognized youth status, with new roles and responsibilities. Van Gennep (1960) emphasized that a rite of passage is a ritual or ceremonial event marking an individual's transition between social positions. He highlighted the universality of social identity transformation through the three phases of separation, liminality, and incorporation. He explained that this transformation happens in three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. First, a person leaves their social group and identity, then goes through a stage where they have no clear identity, and finally joins a new group with a new identity.

Turner (1969) expanded the idea of liminality to highlight the emotional and social aspects of this change. Liminality is the in-between stage where a person is no longer who she was, but not yet who she will become. Turner described this phase as a time of uncertainty and change, when people are separated from their usual roles and are prepared for a new place in society. He saw rituals as social dramas that involve action and process, not just symbols. Turner also introduced the idea of communitas, a strong but temporary sense of equality and unity that often happens during liminal rituals. Unlike normal social hierarchies, communitas is a time of emotional closeness and shared identity. Turner called this stage "anti-structure," a brief break from social order that helps renew and strengthen the community (Messan Kodjo et al., 2020). The liminal phase ends when people are brought back into a stable social order. Turner's idea of communitas helps explain the strong social bonds formed during these moments, especially in rituals that bring a group closer together.

Even though it is simple, the Rwsa Bom ritual follows all parts of Van Gennep's rites of passage. It includes symbolic separation, like keeping the girl apart from children and menstruating women, a liminal stage with ritual clothing, signs of shyness, and a playful chase, and finally incorporation, where she receives blessings and joins Rolom. These actions show the girl's change in social status. At the same time, group activities like drinking, dancing, and giving gifts show Turner's idea of communitas, where people of different ages come together and feel united for a short time.

At the same time, rules about how to dress, who can take part, and how to behave in the ritual help shape ideas about gender and support moral discipline. Even though Christian influence has changed or shortened some parts of the ritual, the ceremony still plays an important role in recognising status and bringing the community together.

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4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore Rwsabom as a pre-menarcheal initiation rite, focusing on both its current practice and how it was performed in the past. Primary data were gathered through purposive and snowball sampling in several Hrangkhawl villages in Tripura. These included Sonarai, which local elders identified as the oldest settlement where some still remember pre-Christian ritual forms, along with Kamalacherra, Tui Koi, Rangamura, Killa, and Gangarai.

Three main sources were used to collect primary data. First, the team conducted semi-structured and key informant interviews with ritual specialists (Ochai), elders familiar with life-cycle rituals, parents, youth participants, and young women who have recently experienced Rwsa Bom. Second, the researchers observed contemporary Rwsa Bom practices during field visits, taking field notes during and after the events to record roles, actions, interactions, and the mood of important moments. Third, secondary materials such as books, journal articles, and unpublished theses helped provide context and support triangulation.

A central part of this study's method is distinguishing between two types of evidence: observed contemporary practice and reconstructed earlier practice. Because earlier (pre-Christian) forms of Rwsa Bom could not be directly observed, the traditional sequence and meanings are reconstructed from elders' stories, memories passed down through generations, and written records. These reconstructions are kept separate from current observations to avoid overstatement and to allow for careful comparison of what has changed and what has stayed the same.

The research team conducted interviews directly, without an interpreter, because one member is from the Hrangkhawl community and could speak the local language. When transcribing and writing, the team discussed culturally specific terms and ritual expressions such as Ninu, Ochai, Chawng sal, Zu Kola, and Rolom to ensure their meanings were accurately preserved in English.

The data were analyzed thematically, using both inductive and theory-based approaches. Inductively, the team identified recurring themes in interviews and fieldnotes, such as ritual sequence, purity rules, kin roles, bodily discipline, blessing and gift exchange, youth participation, and eligibility for labor. Deductively, the analysis was guided by the paper's theoretical framework, especially Van Gennep's rites of passage (separation, liminality, incorporation), Turner's ideas of liminality and communitas, and symbolic or purity-focused perspectives for interpreting ritual objects and bodily norms. Comparing responses and triangulating between observations, oral accounts, and secondary sources helped analyze both continuity and change in Rwsa Bom.

The study followed ethical guidelines by seeking informed consent, respecting participants' wishes about anonymity, and taking care when recording culturally sensitive ritual knowledge.

5. ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF RWSABOM

This section reconstructs the traditional sequence of Rwsa Bom based primarily on elders' narratives and available written sources. Differences observed in contemporary practice are discussed in Section 7.

5.1 Timing, Eligibility, and Social Expectations

In the Hrangkhawl community of Tripura, Rwsabom is a traditional initiation rite for girls before puberty. Every household is expected to hold this ritual for their daughters, usually before they reach menarche, often between ages ten and twelve, depending on the girl's maturity and behavior. The focus is on preparing girls for new social roles, rather than marking a biological change. The rite shows that a girl is ready for new responsibilities, can join youth activities, and is eligible to take part in Rolom, a system where young people help each other with jhum farming. Not performing Rwsabom is seen as breaking with tradition. If a family cannot afford to hold the rite alone, they may join with relatives or neighbors to do it together, with support from the wider community. This shows the community's strong value of helping one another.

5.2 Participation rules and purity norms

The Hrangkhawl community observes strict norms of ritual purity during the ceremony: women undergoing menstruation are traditionally prohibited from attending the ceremony, and even the *Ochai* (priest) is barred from officiating if his wife is menstruating at the time. Furthermore, children are also excluded, marking the rite as age-specific and reinforcing the boundary between childhood and youth. These restrictions frame the ritual space as morally serious and symbolically protected.

5.3 Ritual sequence and key roles

The ceremony usually begins in the early evening when the elders and the Ochai arrive. The Ochai starts the purification by carrying holy water and a traditional dao, or sword, and reciting Chawng sal, a ritual chant meant to ask for ancestral protection and guidance for the initiate.

A key part of the ritual is when the girl's paternal aunt, called Ninu, wraps the Rwsa cloth around the girl's chest. The girl might show shyness by hiding or resisting, while the aunt playfully chases and symbolically catches her before dressing her. Elders say

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this act publicly marks the girl's new status and means she is now expected to wear the Rwsa as a sign of modesty and proper behavior.

Next, the Ochai purifies the Zu, a traditional rice beer, by sprinkling holy water over three earthen pitchers: one large pitcher called Mat Kola and two smaller, identical ones called Si Kola. People in the community see the two matching pitchers as a symbol of bodily symmetry, especially relating to the girl's expected physical development. After this, the Ochai either takes the first drink or invites the oldest man to do so. Then, other elder men join in, followed by the women.

The girl bows to the elders to receive their blessings and is given small gifts or money as signs of goodwill and acceptance. Usually, there is a short cultural performance with one or two traditional songs and dances. After this, the elders share food and Zu before leaving.

Later at night, village youths come after finishing work in their jhum fields. They drink Zu, give blessings, and celebrate with singing, dancing, and flute music all night. At dawn, the host family gives a cock, called Ar Khong, as a traditional gift to guests who stayed overnight. The youths cook and eat the meal before going back to their daily work in the fields and labor groups.

5.4 Post-rite obligations and social incorporation

After the Rwsabom ceremony, the girl is officially recognized as part of the youth community. She must now wear the Rwsa in public and can take part in the Rolom, which shows she is joining the social, economic, and cultural life of Hrangkhawl society.

6. INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

6.1 Rites of Passage: Separation, Liminality, and Incorporation

Rwsa Bom follows Van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) three-part model of separation, transition, and incorporation. The ritual gradually moves the girl out of childhood, places her in a temporary, in-between stage, and finally welcomes her into the youth group. Separation happens through symbolic acts, not physical isolation. For example, children are kept out of the ritual space, the girl acts shy, and the Ninu publicly 'captures' her to wrap the Rwsa cloth, all showing her move away from her old identity. Liminality begins when the Rwsa cloth is wrapped around her chest, followed by purification, blessing of the Zu, and the use of sikola. In this stage, she is no longer a child but not yet an adult. Incorporation comes when elders bless her as she bows, she is recognized in public, and she is expected to wear the Rwsa and join Rolom, the youth labor group. These steps make her new youth identity official in the community.

6.2 Liminality and Communitas in Youth Gatherings

Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas help explain the emotional and social aspects of Rwsa Bom. At first, the girl feels shy and hesitant, but she eventually accepts the cloth, showing the uncertainty that comes with being in an in-between social role. Turner's (1969) theory helps us understand why the youth-night is important. When the elders leave, the mood shifts as the young people come together, eat, drink, sing, and dance. This time brings the group closer, which is a key part of communitas. In this liminal setting, normal social ranks fade, and everyone feels more equal and connected until the usual routines return at dawn. The Ar Khong offering at dawn marks the end of the ritual and a sense of giving back, after which the young people go back to Rolom and their daily tasks. This ritual supports both the girl's personal change and the group's sense of unity and responsibility.

6.3 Symbols, bodily discipline, and gendered personhood

The research shows that the Rwsabom initiation ritual uses symbols to express the Hrangkhawl community's ideas about moral discipline, social maturity, and gender roles. Even though the ritual takes place before puberty, the community sees it as formal training for the behavior expected of young women. Van Gennep (1960) explains that these symbols help guide the shift from "child" to "youth." Turner's (1969) work on ritual symbols also helps explain how these elements can hold several meanings at once.

One important finding is the role of the paternal aunt, or Ninu, which shows an amitatic aspect of Hrangkhawl kinship. In anthropology, amitate refers to societies where the father's sister has ritual, moral, and disciplinary authority over her brother's children. During the Rwsabom ceremony, the Ninu wraps the Rwsa around the girl, marking her move from childhood to female youth. This shows that the father's family helps shape the girl's modesty and behavior. While informants did not directly mention this idea, the ritual matches amitatic patterns seen in other patrilineal societies. Dressing the girl in the Rwsa also marks her entry into a new stage, where she is expected to show restraint, self-control, and responsibility.

Purifying rice beer (Zu) with holy water and a traditional sword (dao) is another key ritual symbol that brings ancestral protection into the ceremony. Informants said the dao acts as a protective tool, keeping the girl spiritually safe as she enters a new social group. The three pitchers of Zu, especially the two smaller ones called Sikola, stand for bodily symmetry and expected feminine growth, especially breast development as a sign of maturity. Turner (1969) describes these ritual objects as multivocal, meaning they refer

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to the girl's changing body, social expectations of balance and proper behavior, and ancestral blessings at the same time. This shows that physical changes are seen in relation to social maturity, not just as biological events.

The ritual cock (Ar Khong) given to those who stay overnight is also important. It is not just a meal but an offering that stands for giving back and endurance. People who stay all night, taking part in drinking, dancing, and watching over the youth, receive this gift. The cock represents group effort and finishing the ritual, connecting food and ritual time in a meaningful way. The rule that the girl must keep wearing the cloth highlights the community's focus on self-control, proper behavior, and being ready to join youth society.

Each symbol works on different levels: personal (the girl's body), family (the aunt's role), community (blessings from elders), and spiritual (ancestral rituals, animal sacrifice, and purity rules). Together, these elements support the transformation described by Van Gennep's separation–transition–incorporation process, making Rwsabom a meaningful ritual that shapes Hrangkhawl identity, gender roles, and unity between generations. These symbols show that the community values social preparation more than physical puberty, and the ritual teaches discipline, modesty, and a sense of belonging as the girl joins the community's moral and productive life.

7. TRANSFORMATION OF RWSA BOM IN CONTEMPORARY HRANGKHAWL SOCIETY

The study found that the way Rwsa Bom is performed and understood has undergone significant changes over time. Older participants said the ritual used to be mandatory, and every girl had to undergo it to be considered socially complete. Van Gennep described it as an important rite of passage from childhood to youth. Today, many parts of the ceremony have been reduced, simplified, or left out, so some people now call it "only the skeleton" of what it once was.

Christianity has been a major factor in these changes. As many in the Hrangkhawl community converted, both the structure and purpose of the Rwsabom ritual changed. While many families still hold the ceremony, it is now mostly a cultural tradition instead of a sacred rite. Many original spiritual parts, like ancestral prayers, ritual chants such as Chawng sal, and the role of the Ochai, have been left out.

Today, Rwsabom mainly serves as a community event that supports cultural identity, rather than acting as a spiritual rite of transformation. This change reflects a wider pattern in Northeast India, where tribal customs are kept for ethnic pride and social continuity, even as their original religious meanings fade with the rise of new beliefs. Rwsa Bom, which was once tied to ideas of ancestral protection and ritual purity, is now often described as "our culture" or "tradition," kept for the sake of group identity instead of fear of supernatural consequences.

Key changes in the contemporary observance of Rwsa Bom include the following:

- Traditional beliefs regarding menstruation and ritual impurity, such as the exclusion of menstruating women and the requirement that the Ochai abstain if his wife was menstruating, are no longer practiced.
- Children can now attend and take part in the ceremony, which softens the strict age limits that once kept the initiate apart from younger siblings and friends.
- Zu, the traditional rice beer, is no longer made or drunk, and animal sacrifices have stopped, since these practices are now seen as not fitting with church values.
- Christian pastors have taken over the role of the Ochai and now start the event with a prayer.
- The girl, usually sitting with close cousins, is introduced to the community, receives blessings as gifts or money, and becomes the center of attention.
- After the ceremony, there is a communal meal that feels like a regular social gathering. It no longer has the complex rituals or the all-night youth vigil that once helped young people bond.

In the past, the ritual happened in the evening and lasted all night, giving young people a special time in a more equal social setting. Now, most ceremonies take place during the day. Families with less money might still hold the event at night to save costs by inviting fewer guests. Rwsabom is now more of a social rule, upheld by tradition rather than religious belief. Hrangkhawl custom says that Rwsa Bom must be performed before a girl turns twelve. If not, there can be a fine, especially if it is discovered before marriage. So, the ritual still acts as a rule, even though it has lost much of its deeper meaning.

A main concern is that girls now go through the ritual at younger ages, sometimes as young as seven, which raises questions about whether they understand or agree to it. Many young girls do not know what the ritual means, even though it was meant to help them get ready for adulthood. Greater access to education has influenced this change, as younger parents now see the ritual as part of their culture, not a spiritual duty. Because of this, they have changed the ceremony to fit modern life, making it shorter and focusing on blessings, food, and taking photos. From a theoretical point of view, these changes show how a rite of passage can shift from a deep, symbolic process with many rules and strong emotions to a shorter, more public event that still marks a change in status, but in a

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less intense way. Rwsa Bom has not disappeared; instead, its main meaning has been adjusted to fit Christian values, school schedules, and new goals. Still, as the next section will show, important values like modesty, discipline, respect for elders, and working together are still taught. This means that the social roles described by Van Gennep and Turner are still present, even as the ritual itself changes a lot.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the Rwsa Bom ceremony of the Hrangkhawl community of Tripura as a puberty-related rite of passage that organises the transition from girlhood to socially recognised youth. Drawing on classic theoretical perspectives on rites of passage, liminality, communitas and ritual symbolism, the study has shown that Rwsa Bom is not merely a customary observance but a structured social mechanism through which the community manages biological change, moral training and incorporation into the collective life of the village.

At the same time, the study has shown that Rwsa Bom is undergoing significant transformation. Under the influence of Christianity, formal education and changing aspirations, many of the earlier spiritual and ritual elements have been reduced, modified or discarded. The ancestral invocations and the role of the Ochai have largely been replaced by Christian prayers; prohibitions related to menstruation and the requirement that the Ochai abstain if his wife is menstruating have vanished; Zu is no longer brewed or consumed; and the vigil-like night component of the ritual, which once fostered strong youth communitas, has in many cases been compressed or abandoned. Today, Rwsa Bom is frequently framed as a cultural or customary event rather than a religious necessity, and is sometimes performed at much younger ages, raising questions about comprehension and consent.

Despite these changes, the core social functions of the rite remain recognisable. The ceremony continues to mark a boundary between childhood and youth, to signal the onset of new behavioural expectations and to enable entry into the cooperative labour system and broader social life of the community. Elders and parents still regard Rwsa Bom as important for instilling respect, modesty, discipline and a sense of obligation towards elders and peers. The ritual thus exemplifies how a rite of passage can be simultaneously attenuated and resilient: its symbolic density may be thinned and its cosmological scaffolding reinterpreted, yet its basic role in structuring life-course transitions and gendered socialisation persists.

Footnote

In this article, we describe Rwsa Bom as a pre-menarcheal initiation rite rather than a puberty rite in the strict biological sense, since it is performed before first menstruation. However, we relate it to the wider anthropological literature on "puberty rites" and "coming-of-age rituals" because, like those ceremonies, it organises the transition from childhood into socially recognised youth and prepares girls for gendered adult roles.

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