

# An Ethnographic Note on the Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh

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**ABSTRACT:** Ethnography is an analysis and systematic interpretation of culture in the dimensions of time and space. Ethnography is a firsthand account of the social life and culture of a particular human community or society obtained through the procedure of long-term and face-to-face fieldwork. The present paper is to report the ethnography of the Wanchos. The Wanchos is one of the tribes of earlier Tirap district and currently Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh, a north-eastern state of India. They occupy the western part beyond the Tista river in the erstwhile Tirap district. The villages are generally situated on hilltops. This paper highlights the characteristics and factors that have and are being contributed to the primitive status of the Wancho tribe. The data were collected from Luaksim village of Kanubari block, and two villages viz. Senua and Zedua from earlier Tirap district and now Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh. Fieldworks were conducted during 2013-16. A total of 262 households from the Wancho community were surveyed. The present study's ethnographic notes are based on the field observations, informal discussions with the villagers, and in-depth interviews with key informants.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnography has its own place in anthropology for depicting a culture into its holistic perspective providing a descriptive account of a particular community. Ethnography is an analysis and systematic interpretation of culture in the dimension of time and space. Sarana ('83:27) writes, "With the publication of B. Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* in 1922 amateur ethnography was eclipsed. The term ethnography refers to the descriptive account of the way of life of a particular people usually, though not necessarily, belonging to a small scale or simple society."

It involves the participation of the ethnographer, in the daily life of people for a long time, watching what happens; listening to what is said, asking questions collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, '95).

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Ethnography gives a rich, detailed picture of a particular situation. Researchers usually return to the accounts that the colonial anthropologists prepared in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for reference, and some of us also think that the people of these ethnographies still exist in the same cultural mold (Srivastava and Chaudhury, 2009; Singh, 2011). This happens because the works have yet to be replaced by the recently studied accounts of communities (Srivastava, 2012). The goal of mainstream ethnographic research is to describe a culture or subculture in as much detail as possible (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). With the emergence of postmodernism and the linguistic turn in social science research, there has emerged an increasing interest in 'new' or 'post-modern' reflexivity (Lynch, 2000; Etherington, 2006). Ethnography has its roots in British social anthropology where researchers went out to study foreign cultures and in American sociology which used observation to explore the

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margins of urban industrial society (Brewer, 2000). The present study is to report the ethnography of the Wancho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India and to highlight their characteristics that have contributed to the primitive status of the tribe.

It is difficult to say in a definite term when the Wanchos first inhabit the present area or when they have first migrated to this area since there is a lack of any written records. However, as per historical records the Ahom king Sukafa first came and established his kingdom in Assam sometime in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD and the Wanchos were there in the occupation of the area. From this, it may be presumed that the Wanchos migrated many hundred years ago. The exact period of migration is, however, difficult to conjecture (Dutta, '90). More information was found about the Wanchos from the beginning of the British rule from the administration reports and also from the notes left by British officers. Mention may be made of the works of Verrier Elwin, Moheswar Neog, Von Furrer Haimendorf, and L.R.N. Srivastava. The latter has written a comprehensive travelogue on them.

#### METHODS & MATERIALS

##### *The Field Area of Wanchos*

Longding District was a newly created district from Tirap district on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2011. Longding district was created by bifurcating the erstwhile Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh bypassing the Arunachal Pradesh bill-2011 by the Arunachal assembly. The district is inhabited by the Wancho people. They are culturally quiet like the Naga people. Longding is situated 54 kilometers from Khonsa, the district headquarter of Tirap district. Longding is surrounded by Myanmar in the east, Nagaland in the south and west, and Tirap in its north direction. Longding district has various natural landmarks and is covered with green trees and lush dense forests. Additionally, it has numerous beautiful hills.

The data for the Wancho tribe were collected from Luaksim village of Kanubari block, and two villages viz. Senua and Zedua from earlier Tirap districts and now Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh. After having decided to study the effects of opium on fertility and infant mortality among the

Singphos, the ethnographic data were collected with a focus, on understanding the day-to-day life of the community. Fieldworks were done during 2013-16. The present study's ethnographic notes are based on the field observations, informal discussions with the villagers, and in-depth interviews with key informants. A total of 262 households from the Wancho community were surveyed. Field notes include both descriptions portraying the environment, people, and their actions along with their dialogue representing the interaction (Emerson *et al.*, '95). Standard anthropological methods were followed during the fieldworks (Pelto and Pelto, '78; Bernard, '88).

#### BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE WANCHOS

The Patkai hills in the south of the Wancho area form the international boundary between India and Burma. The whole area is hilly and undulating. A network of rivers and streams drain the hillsides. The hills here have been denuded of forest due to *jhum* cultivation. Bamboo grove and some tropical trees and plants are seen all over the area. The height of the hills varies from about 2000 ft in the foothills to about 6000 ft towards the Patkai range. As of the 2011 Census of India, Wancho have a population of 56,866 spread in an area of 83,743 square kilometers. The sex ratio was 965 females per 1000 males. These people have a rich culture with rituals, ceremonial practices, religion, and various dialects of Wancho. Banwang Losu, a school teacher devised a unique alphabetic Wancho script which is taught in some schools. In 2019, the script was officially published into the Unicode standard in version 12. This script has 44 letters (15 vowels and 29 consonants).

#### *Economy*

Their main economic resources are land, forest, and water and their primary occupation is cultivation. They prefer mainly *jhum* cultivation. Recently, some of them have adopted wet and terrace cultivation also. Paddy, millet, and maize are their main crops. Weaving, hunting, fishing, making bead necklaces, wood carving, cane and bamboo works, basketry are their subsidiary occupations. Most of the women engage themselves in preparing varieties of colorful bead jewelry and are fond of wearing them. The Wanchos have traditional trade relations with the people of

Burma and Nagaland. They also had close barter trade with the Noctes. They used to get salt in exchange for bamboo tubes, baskets, mats, opium, and many other local products. Opium and Indian hemp (bhang) are their main cash crops. They grow these for sale which brings them handsome income in cash. Some villagers have also started recently the cultivation of sugarcane (Dutta, '90).

#### *Religion and Festivals*

*Oriah* festival among the hill Wanchos of Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh is an indigenous one. They celebrate this festival after harvesting their crops. Young boys and girls used to dance and sing and takes part in merrymaking. The importance of dancing among the girls in this festival means a lot. The girls who do not take part in the community dancing are considered unfruitful for which they usually do not get marriage proposals and must remain unmarried. For this reason, they make it a must to attend the community dancing in colorful dress and jewelry. The boys in this festival use to show their strength by cutting a tree in the first beat. This festival is celebrated between March and April (Dutta, '90). A large number of wancho people still retain the belief in Animism. Christianity has gained its impact in the central regions. Accepting Christianity has largely to do with changing perspectives towards headhunting. However, this has also resulted in the decline in many aspects of their traditional culture, which has strong association with religion. As per the 2011 census, there are 2.55% Hindu and 0.55% Animist and remaining are Christians. The Wanchos are animists by religion. They cherish animism as their indigenous religion since time immemorial.

#### *Society*

The Wancho society is characterized by the existence of the class distinction of the "Wangham" or the chief and "Wangpan" the common person (Kumari and Reena, 2020). Wangsa and Wangsu two classes spring from the matrimonial union between Wangham father and Wangpan mother occupying the third stratum of social classification or hierarchy. The social distinction between the classes is very scrupulously observed in every sphere of their life. As in the village festival, the Wangpans are not

allowed to take the meal in the same row with the Wangham. They are also not allowed to marry a girl from Wangham's family although there is no restriction on the part of Wangham to marry a Wangpan girl.

#### *Habitation and Housing*

The Wanchos are a homogenous group of people. The main concentration of the Wanchos is in the Longding, Kanubari, Pongchau, and Wakka circles of the Longding district. They speak a dialect somewhat similar to the Bodo-Naga family of Tibeto-Burman language. Each village is divided into two or more divisions called jong, *senau*, etc. in Wakka area the two divisions are called *sinki ham* and *sinkhow ham*. Their houses are rectangular and constructed on the ground and only the rear part of the houses is raised. The roof is thatched with thick layers of palm leaves. There is no variation in the house type throughout the Wancho area. Houses are rectangular and constructed on the ground; only the rear part rests on piles from where the level falls away. Houses are built of solid logs and are spacious. The middle posts of the houses are projected 3 or 4 feet above the roof and are covered with Palm leaf '*tokopat*'. This is done to facilitate the use of the same posts when the lower portion of the posts got damaged. There are mainly four types of structures, the dwelling house called *ham* or *kom*, granary *pung*, farmhouse taps, and the bachelors' dormitory is called *pa* or *pau*. The funeral structures are called *gun*. Except for the granary, which is constructed on a raised platform, all other houses are built on the ground. Besides these, there are drying racks over the hearths, which are called *ha-cha-kalong* and the place where tubes are kept is called *si-tonuk*. The houses of the chiefs are generally larger in structure than the other houses in the village.

Before any new construction *ojokle* is performed and it occupies an important place in the society. In *ojokle* divination is performed with eggs, to select the site as well as to find an auspicious day. Before occupying a newly built house is accompanied by a ceremony *hamkele* or *kam-jan-gai* and the villagers are entertained with a feast. A pig is killed, and rice beer is brewed. A fowl is sacrificed by the priest called *Gampa*, and its head is fixed in front of the house on a pointed bamboo spear. The *Gampa* first enters the

house with a cane hat on the head and a spear in hand. Then, he recites the incantations and after him, all present there go about beating the walls and posts of the house to drive away from the evil spirits. This ceremony is performed on the day following the completion of the house when the belongings are brought in. The *Gampa* is remunerated with one bamboo tube of rice-beer, a few pieces of meat, and some cooked rice. The *Gamnu*, an old woman is also similarly treated.

#### *Dress and Ornaments*

The Wanchos use to wear clothes distinctively well adapted to the conditions of their environment. Their dress is very simple, consisting of only loin cloth for the man and a skirt for women. Assamese *eri chaddar* is used by most of the Wanchos as a protection against cold. The young boys and girls go naked till they attain puberty when they are clad ceremonially. Nowadays, however, they wear shirts, shorts, and trousers. Putting first cloth to young boys is called *Khiyatham* (Chopnu). A new cloth is generally given during the *Oriah* festival.

The loincloth is called *Khiya-hit*. On the ceremonial occasion, they wear decorated *lengti* which are beautiful. The main cloth *lengti* is used to be in blue and the two ends are weaved with colored beads and a kind of fiber dyed red. Similarly, the skirt is called *Na-sa*. There are varieties of skirts varying from village to village in size and design worn on different occasions. The skirt is generally 34 inches in length and 6 inches in breadth. This is woven in red with intermittent thin strips of black, white, yellow, and green.

The Wanchos have various ornaments for their decoration. These ornaments are made of colored beads and wool purchased from the market, jungle seeds, grass, reeds, cane, bamboo, metal, and ivory. The headgear of different shapes and designs are worn by both men and women. The ordinary headdress is called *Khohuon* and the one made of bead is called *Lik-Kha-San*. Males and females on certain occasions delight in ornamenting their naked bodies with rattan, amber, and glass beads. And the warriors, with the addition of human hair, strings of teeth extracted from the jaws of their fallen enemies, tusks of boars as earrings, wear a hide our warlike

aspect, the greater part of which articles remain on them working, bathing and sleeping.

According to Dalton (1872), “they wear singular coronals made of pieces cut out of large shells, and on the crown of the head, a little periwinkle-shaped basket work cap, black with a scarlet. Necklace, bracelets, armlets of beads, shells, brass, and cane work are worn in profusion, but no drapery to speak of. The girdle is of polished plates of brass with a kind of double stomacher above and below. A very small ‘apron of black cloth decorated with small shells is seen below this in most of the tribes, but I have seen tribes who wore nothing of the kind. The legs are also ornamented with bands of cane colored red. The arms are gleaming pole axe with a short black handle, decorated with a tuft of red goat’s hair; a broad-headed barbed spear, the shaft of which is covered with colored hair like a tassel and a shield of buffalo hide some four to five feet long. The women’s costume is simpler, consisting of necklaces and an apron, or sometimes without the apron” (cf. Dutta, ’90).

#### *Arts and Crafts*

Art has always been a part of life; art is always connected with a set of day-to-day activities like wood carving, textile weaving, basketry, pottery, etc. As such it has formed an integral part of the material life of the people. The chief center of wood carving is the Wancho area of Tirap district. The wood carving of the Wanchos is closely associated with the institution of headhunting, decoration of Morung (Youth dormitory), and funeral rite and to some extent with fertility cult. Wancho wood carving is highly realistic, vigorous, and representational. It is also noted for the ‘expressionistic vitality’. The wood carving of the Wanchos has a faint link with the art of South East Asia as it is revealed by the ‘square contour’ which is prominent on the wood carving connected with headhunting (Census, ’81).

#### *Tattooing*

Tattooing is one of the most important events in the life of the Wanchos. It plays a major role amongst them. Apart from being a most admired and cherished decoration, a tattoo with them is of important social significance. Tattoo marks indicate the stages in a women’s life and the social status and achievements

of a man. The repertoire of designs is consequently rich and varied and it varies with the rank and status of a person in the society. A member of a family of a chief, for instance, flaunts elaborate intricate patterns while a commoner has to be contented with the simplest possible.

#### *Youth Dormitory*

The Wanchos have a well-institutionalized bachelor dormitory system which is called *pa* but this institutionalized system is declining and almost became non-functional. In the good old days, the bachelor dormitory system was a part of life. The bachelor dormitory was an important educational institution for youth. These customs and traditions have been transmitted from generation to generation through folk music dance, folk tales, and oral traditions, carving of figure on wood. It was also used as a guardhouse during times of war. The bachelor dormitory is decorated with wood carvings and skulls of buffaloes and other animals sacrificed on various occasions. There is a qualification for admission to *pa*. Generally, children do not stay in the *pa*. As members though they may enter it, women of any age are not allowed to enter. Only on the day of construction of *pa* young girls and women may serve food in the feast given on that day. Each *pa* has a big log drum called *kham*. Different rhythm or sound of the log drum has a different meaning. People on hearing the rhythm or sound act according to the message it conveyed. Like boys dormitory, girl's dormitory was also prevalently known as *noi* where the girl would stay after attaining puberty till they choose their life partner and settles for family life. During her stay in the dormitory, she would learn weaving, cooking, and ethical code of conduct. Males were allowed to enter the *noi* but strict exogamy is maintained. The boys and girls of the same clan cannot enter the dormitory of the same clan. As nowadays the families staying in urban areas and with a better economic condition, they did not send their children to stay in the youth dormitories. Rather, they send children to residential schools for modern education. Numbers of students are found pursuing their education from some good institutes across the country.

#### CONCLUSION

Woncho tribe is relatively small and homogenous and is mainly located in the densely wooded hilltops. Wanchos practice shifting cultivation and often use technologically primitive agricultural tools. They are physically hard-working people. They are having similarities with the Nagas and the Konyaks in their physical appearance and dressing pattern. Houses of Wanchos are typical thatched houses, which are rectangular and constructed on the ground and the rear part of the house is elevated. The Wanchos are known for their rich traditional knowledge and as warm-hearted people and are reputed as 'head hunters' and a 'martial community'. They wear colorful attire and carry guns and spears both as their weapons and as personal ceremonial articles. Arts and crafts are an important activity in their life. They observe *oriah* festival with full rejoice every year. These days varieties of colours are used in their dresses and also in their beads and jewelry. A well-established youth dormitory institutions exist. However, they undergo significant changes in all spheres of life due to modernization.

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