

Cultural Continuity and Change among the Koches of Meghalaya: An Ethnographic Study of Rituals, Identity and Modernity

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Abstract

The Koches of Meghalaya are an Indigenous community with a distinct socio-cultural identity and rich heritage. Their language, part of the Bodo–Garo branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, is endangered, making documentation essential. However, many aspects of their everyday life and cultural practices remain underexplored. This study examines their festivals, rituals, social institutions, and language use to understand their evolving identity. Based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tura, Harigaon, and Kumoligaon in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya, the study draws on participant observation, interviews, and community narratives. It focuses mainly on marriage, birth, and death rituals, and festivals, highlighting their role in maintaining social cohesion and intergenerational continuity. The study also examines traditional practices such as matrilineal inheritance and the conditions under which property is transferred within families.

Findings reveal that while rural Koch communities continue to follow traditional practices with relative consistency, urban settings show increasing adaptation and cultural blending with neighbouring communities. Modernization has led to the simplification of rituals and changes in social institutions; however, the community demonstrates resilience through the active role of elders in preserving traditions and youth initiatives in cultural revival.

Keywords: Koch, marriage, birth, death ritual, modernization

1. Introduction

Cultural practices such as rituals and festivals play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, transmitting values, and shaping collective identity within human societies. Scholars like Durkheim have emphasized the role of rituals in strengthening the collective conscience, while van Gennep (1909, 1960) and Turner (1969) have highlighted their

importance in structuring social life and fostering unity. From an interpretive perspective, Geertz (1973) views rituals as systems of symbols that communicate cultural meaning. In line with these perspectives, UNESCO also recognizes rituals and festivals as essential components of intangible cultural heritage.

The Koch community of Meghalaya represents a significant example of an Indigenous group whose cultural practices are deeply embedded in ritual life. Despite their rich traditions, many aspects of Koch culture remain under documented, especially in relation to everyday practices, belief systems, and changing identity in contemporary contexts. This study attempts to address these gaps by providing a detailed account of Koch rituals, festivals, and social institutions, while also examining the impact of modernization on these practices.

1.1. The Koch Community: Language, Classification, and Sociolinguistic Profile

Historically, the Koches are believed to have originated as part of a larger Koch polity that once extended across Assam, North Bengal, and surrounding regions. Over time, socio-political changes, migration, and interaction with neighbouring communities such as the Garos, Rabhas, and Assamese contributed to the development of a distinct Koch identity in Meghalaya.

The Koches of Meghalaya are a distinct Indigenous community with deep historical roots and a rich cultural heritage. Recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in the state, they maintain a socio-cultural identity that differs from other Koch or Rajbongshi groups in neighbouring regions. Their cultural life reflects a synthesis of indigenous animistic beliefs and elements of Hindu practices, shaped through long-standing interaction with surrounding communities such as the Garos, Rabhas, and Assamese. Despite these influences, the Koches have preserved a unique identity expressed through their rituals, festivals, social organization, and language. Their cultural life reflects a synthesis of indigenous animistic beliefs and elements of Hindu practices. Traditional attire, weaving practices, and ritual observances form an integral part of their identity. Festivals, community gatherings, and shared rituals continue to play a central role in maintaining social bonds and reinforcing cultural continuity.

The Koch language forms a central component of this identity and belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, generally classified within the Bodo–Garo group. However, its exact classification has been debated among scholars. Early linguistic work by Damant (1880) placed Koch within the “Kachári–Koch sub-family,” while Grierson (1903) grouped it under the Garo subgroup. More recent scholarship, particularly by Burling (2003), argues that Koch should be treated as part of a separate Bodo–Koch subgroup, thereby recognizing its distinct linguistic status. These varying classifications reflect both the complexity of the language and its historical connections with neighbouring linguistic groups.

The number of Koch speakers has been difficult to determine due to long-standing issues of identity classification. According to the 2011 Census of India, there are approximately 36,434 Koch speakers, with the majority residing in Meghalaya and a smaller population in Assam. Although earlier estimates suggested lower figures, the available data indicate a modest increase in reported speakers. Nevertheless, the language is considered endangered, particularly due to declining use among younger generations and increasing linguistic assimilation. Internally, the Koch community is divided into several endogamous groups, each historically associated with distinct dialects. While earlier records mention nine such groups, only a few—such as Tintikiya, Wanang, Harigaya, Margan, and Koch-Rabha—continue to use varieties of the original Tibeto-Burman language. Other groups have shifted to languages like Hajong or to mixed linguistic forms influenced by Bangla and Assamese. Among the surviving dialects, Harigaya is widely understood and often serves as a common medium of communication within the community.

The Koch language does not have a standardized script and remains largely oral in nature. In Meghalaya, speakers typically use the Roman script for writing, while in Assam the Assamese script is more commonly used. Written materials in Koch are limited and are mostly confined to local magazines, often appearing alongside Assamese, English, or Garo texts. This limited literary presence, combined with the absence of a unified script, contributes to the language's endangered status and highlights the urgent need for systematic documentation and preservation.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Koch community of Meghalaya by examining their cultural practices, social institutions, and linguistic identity within a changing socio-cultural context. It also aims to explore how traditional practices are maintained, adapted, and transmitted across generations in the face of modernization.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To document the history, culture, and ritual practices of the Koch community.
- To examine major festivals and analyse their cultural significance and explore key social institutions, including marriage, birth, and death rituals.
- To understand the impact of modernization on cultural practices and traditions.
- To compare cultural patterns between urban and rural Koch communities.
- To assess the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach. Primary data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal discussions with community members, including elders, ritual specialists, women, and youth. Fieldwork was conducted in Tura, Harigaon, and Kumoligaon in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya.



Figure 1: Map highlighting the villages of field visit

Secondary data from published literature, census reports, and community writings were also used to support the analysis. The data were analysed descriptively to understand patterns of continuity, change, and adaptation within Koch society.

4. Festivals and Ritual Practices

Festivals are central to Koch cultural life and serve as important markers of identity and continuity. Sacred spaces known as Wai Than function as sites of ritual worship and community gatherings. Major festivals such as Pabuni, Baos Puja, and Aandari Puja are observed with distinct regional variations.

The Pabuni festival, celebrated during April–May, marks the Koch New Year and is dedicated to Pabuni Debota, associated with natural elements. It reflects the community's close relationship with nature and their belief in divine protection.



Figure 2: *“Pabuni xali” taken during the fieldwork*

Similarly, Aandari Puja is an important ritual associated with peace, prosperity, and protection from calamities. These festivals are conducted under the guidance of ritual specialists and involve offerings, communal participation, and symbolic practices that reinforce social unity.

5. Social Institutions and Ritual Life

Traditionally, the Koch community of Meghalaya follows a matrilineal system of inheritance in which property and land traditionally pass through the female line. Daughters are considered the primary inheritors of their parents' property, particularly land, which reinforces the central position of women within the social structure. However, this right to inheritance is closely linked to residence patterns after marriage. If a daughter marries away and settles in her husband's household, she cannot claim her parents' property. Inheritance rights are retained only when the husband marries into the wife's family and resides in her parental home, a practice locally known as *Juwai Khota* or *Kilang Lini*. This system has been practiced for a long time and reflects the matrilineal and matrilocal foundations of Koch society. In recent times, however, processes of modernization, changing economic conditions, and increasing influence of patriarchal norms have led to a gradual decline of this tradition. In families where there is no daughter, parents now often divide their property among sons, indicating a significant shift from earlier customary practices.

5.1. Marriage rituals

Marriage is a significant institution with multiple forms, ranging from formal arranged marriages to simpler and love-based unions. Birth and death rituals are also deeply

embedded in tradition, involving purification rites, community participation, and symbolic practices that reflect beliefs about life, death, and rebirth. Marriage among the Koch community is one of the most important social institutions and is marked by a variety of traditional practices. The society recognizes four main types of marriages: *Mata Halang*, *Kara Halang* or *Dangua*, *Nakahuva Takani*, and *Haadi Mani* or *Dayapara Biya*. Among these, *Mata Halang* is considered the most honourable and formal form of marriage. In this type, a mediator known as *Daasu* facilitates the initial communication between the two families. The process begins with the boy informally observing the prospective bride, after which formal negotiations take place with the consent of both families and community elders. Marriage rituals are conducted in the presence of elders and relatives, often within the household. The priest, known as *Ajeng*, performs the ceremony by reciting traditional mantras in the Koch language, which outline the duties and responsibilities of married life. The couple offers respect to deities such as Shiva and Parvati, and their union is symbolically witnessed by natural elements like the sun and the moon. Traditional exchanges, such as offerings of money and rice, form part of the ritual process. Feasting is an important aspect of Koch weddings, with rice, meat, and locally prepared wine being served to guests. While *Kara Halang* follows similar rituals in a simpler form, *Nakahuva Takani* is the most minimal, involving only symbolic gestures without elaborate ceremonies. *Haadi Mani* represents love marriages, which are accepted by the community but still require social approval and customary rituals.

Marriage practices also reflect social norms such as the prohibition of marriage within the same *gotra* (*nikini*), and the general absence of practices like child marriage and polygamy. Widow remarriage is allowed, indicating a degree of social flexibility within traditional structures.

5.2. Birth rituals

Birth rituals among the Koch community are relatively simple yet culturally significant. Childbirth usually takes place within the home and is supervised by a traditional midwife known as the *Dhurni*. Although there are no strict or elaborate restrictions placed on pregnant women, certain precautions are followed, such as avoiding inauspicious events and maintaining care in daily activities. After the birth of a child, the umbilical cord is tied with a thread and cut using a thin bamboo strip, reflecting the use of traditional methods. The placenta is buried in the courtyard of the house, symbolizing a connection between the newborn and the household. The newborn is initially given a spontaneous name by the midwife, often without a fixed meaning, followed by a more formal naming ceremony after one month, which involves the participation of the community.

A tonsure ritual is performed on the seventh day, coinciding with the drying of the umbilical cord. During the early days after birth, certain taboos are observed, such as restricting the movement of the newborn outside the house and avoiding exposure to cold. The house is

later purified by a priest, and guests are invited for a communal meal. These rituals emphasize purification, protection, and the social acceptance of the newborn into the community.

5.3. Death rituals

Death rituals in the Koch community are elaborate and deeply rooted in their belief system. Upon death, the body is either buried or cremated, and purification practices follow immediately after the funeral. Members returning from the cremation or burial ground cleanse themselves with water mixed with Tulsi leaves before re-entering the household. During the mourning period, no cooking or eating takes place in the village until the initial rites are completed. The duration of mourning varies depending on the age of the deceased—three days for a young person and thirteen days for an adult. During this period, offerings of rice, meat, and wine are made in the name of the departed soul. A significant ritual known as *Aadya-Shraddha* marks the end of the initial mourning period. In this ritual, a bone fragment of the deceased is preserved in a bamboo container and kept in the courtyard with a lamp burning continuously, symbolizing the presence of the soul.

The Koches believe in the concept of rebirth, and rituals are performed to ensure the peaceful transition of the soul. Annual memorial rituals, known as *Kam-mata*, may be organized by families, involving feasting, sacrifices, and traditional songs such as *Hoko geet*. These ceremonies reflect the community's beliefs about life after death, ancestral connection, and spiritual continuity.

6. Modernity and Cultural Change

Modernity has had a visible impact on the ritual and festival practices of the Koch community, particularly in urban and semi-urban settings such as Tura. Increased exposure to formal education, wage employment, mass media, and interaction with neighbouring communities has led to changes in the way traditional rituals are observed. In urban areas, Koch festivals are often shortened, simplified, or adjusted to suit modern work schedules and economic constraints. Certain ritual elements, including elaborate sacrifices, extended feasting, and prolonged observance periods, are either reduced or omitted altogether. As a result, ritual practices in urban contexts increasingly resemble those of neighbouring communities such as the Garos and Assamese, leading to a gradual blending of cultural forms and shared modes of celebration.

In contrast, Koch communities residing in rural areas such as Harigaon and Kumoligaon continue to observe rituals and festivals with greater adherence to traditional norms. Here, festivals like Pabuni, Baos Puja, and Aandari Puja are performed according to customary rules, under the guidance of community elders and ritual specialists. Sacred spaces such as Wai Than remain central to village life, and participation is collective and community-

driven. The rural setting allows for stronger continuity of indigenous belief systems, as daily life remains closely connected to agriculture, seasonal cycles, and ancestral practices. This rural–urban contrast highlights how spatial context plays a crucial role in shaping cultural persistence and transformation.

Despite these changes, the Koch community has not passively accepted cultural dilution. In recent years, conscious efforts have emerged—especially among the youth—to revive and promote traditional cultural practices. Young community members are increasingly participating in festivals, learning ritual songs, documenting oral histories, and organizing cultural programmes during community gatherings. Some initiatives also involve the use of social media and local platforms to share information about Koch traditions, thereby creating new spaces for cultural expression and awareness. These efforts reflect a growing sense of cultural responsibility and identity among the younger generation.

At the same time, elders continue to play a central role in preserving Koch traditions. They remain the primary custodians of ritual knowledge, customary laws, and oral traditions, and their authority is especially visible during festivals, marriage ceremonies, and death rituals. Even as external influences reshape certain aspects of cultural life, elders largely adhere to established customs and serve as guides in maintaining ritual continuity. The interaction between elders and youth thus enables a process of intergenerational transmission, where tradition is not merely preserved but adapted to changing social realities. This dynamic relationship illustrates the resilience of Koch culture, which continues to negotiate modernity while retaining its core cultural values.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the cultural practices of the Koch community in Meghalaya are deeply rooted in ritual life, social organization, and collective memory, while simultaneously undergoing transformation under the influence of modernity. Rituals such as marriage, birth, and death ceremonies, along with major festivals like *Pabuni* and *Aandari Puja*, continue to function as key mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion, maintaining continuity, and expressing a shared cultural identity. These practices are not merely symbolic but are embedded in everyday life, linking individuals to the community, the natural environment, and ancestral traditions.

At the same time, the study reveals that Koch cultural practices are not static but dynamic and adaptive. The influence of modernization is particularly visible in urban and semi-urban settings, where changing economic conditions, formal education, and increased interaction with neighbouring communities have led to the modification and simplification of rituals. For instance, elaborate marriage ceremonies are often shortened, and certain traditional elements are either reduced or omitted. Similarly, festivals that once involved extended communal participation are now sometimes adjusted to fit contemporary

schedules and resources. This process has also resulted in a gradual blending of Koch cultural practices with those of neighbouring groups such as the Garos and Assamese, especially in urban contexts.

In contrast, rural areas continue to exhibit stronger adherence to traditional practices. Rituals and festivals in villages such as Harigaon and Kumoligaon are performed with greater consistency and in accordance with customary norms, under the guidance of elders and ritual specialists. Sacred spaces like Wai Than remain central to community life, and participation in rituals is more collective and less constrained by external influences. This rural–urban distinction highlights the importance of spatial and social contexts in shaping the processes of cultural continuity and change.

Another important aspect emerging from the study is the transformation of traditional social institutions. The matrilineal system of inheritance, which traditionally ensured the transfer of property through daughters—particularly under the practice of *Juwai Khota* or *Kilang Lini*—is gradually weakening. Increasing economic pressures, changing family structures, and the influence of dominant patriarchal norms have led to shifts in inheritance patterns, with property sometimes being distributed among sons, especially in the absence of daughters. This indicates a broader reconfiguration of gender roles and kinship practices within the community. Despite these changes, the Koch community demonstrates a strong capacity for cultural resilience. Elders continue to play a crucial role as custodians of traditional knowledge, preserving ritual practices, oral traditions, and customary laws. Their authority remains significant, particularly during important life-cycle rituals and festivals. At the same time, the younger generation is increasingly engaging with their cultural heritage in new ways. Youth participation in festivals, efforts to document oral traditions, and the use of digital and social media platforms to promote cultural awareness indicate an emerging consciousness about the importance of preserving identity.

The interaction between elders and youth thus facilitates a process of intergenerational transmission that is both preservative and adaptive. Rather than a simple loss of tradition, what emerges is a process of negotiation, where cultural practices are reinterpreted and reshaped to fit contemporary realities. This dynamic process ensures that Koch cultural identity remains relevant, even as it evolves in response to changing social, economic, and cultural conditions.

Overall, the study highlights that the Koch community is actively navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. While certain practices are being modified or transformed, the core values embedded in rituals, festivals, and social institutions continue to provide a strong foundation for cultural continuity. This underscores the importance of viewing Indigenous cultures not as static remnants of the past, but as living systems that adapt, resist, and persist over time.

8. Conclusion

This study documents the cultural practices, ritual life, and social institutions of the Koch community in Meghalaya, providing an ethnographic account of an Indigenous community whose traditions remain relatively underrepresented. By examining festivals, life-cycle rituals, inheritance practices, and changing patterns of cultural transmission, the study demonstrates that Koch cultural identity continues to be sustained through everyday ritual practices despite the increasing influence of modernization.

The findings indicate that cultural change within the Koch community is neither uniform nor indicative of cultural decline. Instead, traditional practices are being selectively maintained, modified, and reinterpreted in response to contemporary social and economic realities. The contrast between rural and urban communities illustrates how geographical location, education, occupational mobility, and interaction with neighbouring communities shape the continuity and transformation of cultural traditions. While certain customary practices, such as matrilineal inheritance and elaborate ritual observances, are gradually changing, they continue to serve as important markers of collective identity and social cohesion. The study also highlights the complementary roles of elders and younger generations in sustaining cultural heritage. Elders remain the principal custodians of ritual knowledge and customary practices, whereas younger community members are increasingly adopting new approaches to cultural preservation through documentation, community initiatives, and digital platforms. This interaction reflects the adaptive resilience of Koch culture, demonstrating that tradition and modernity coexist through processes of negotiation rather than replacement. Although this study contributes to the documentation of Koch cultural heritage, it is subject to certain limitations. The research is based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted in selected villages of the West Garo Hills district and therefore does not claim to represent all Koch communities across Meghalaya or neighbouring states. In addition, the study primarily focuses on cultural practices and social institutions and does not examine in detail the linguistic dimensions of ritual discourse, language maintenance, or intergenerational language transmission.

Future research may extend this work through comparative studies of Koch communities across regions, further investigations of cultural and linguistic change, and interdisciplinary approaches combining ethnography with sociolinguistics and language documentation. Greater attention to ritual language, oral traditions, and the role of digital media in cultural revitalization would further enhance our understanding of how Indigenous communities negotiate identity in rapidly changing social contexts. Such studies would not only contribute to the preservation of Koch cultural heritage but also enrich broader discussions on Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural resilience, and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in Northeast India.

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Appendices

The appendices provide supplementary materials that support the methodology and findings of this study. They include a sample semi-structured interview schedule and representative participant observation notes used during ethnographic fieldwork. These materials are intended to enhance the transparency of the research process by illustrating the methods of data collection while preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

A. Sample Interview Schedule

The following semi-structured interview schedule illustrates the type of questions used during the fieldwork to collect the required information. Depending on the respondent's role (elder, ritual specialist, woman, youth, or community leader), some of them were modified according to the understanding level of the informant and follow-up questions were asked to obtain detailed narratives. The questions were asked in Assamese and Koch.

Section A. Background Information

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Village:

Occupation:

Educational qualification:

Section B. Festivals and Ritual Practices

1. Which festivals are celebrated in your village?
2. Can you describe the significance of the Pabuni festival?
3. What rituals are performed during Baos Puja and Aandari Puja?
4. Who is responsible for conducting these rituals?
5. Have festival celebrations changed over the years? If yes, how?

Section C. Marriage, Birth, and Death Rituals

1. What are the different types of marriages practiced in the Koch community?
2. Can you describe the major rituals performed during marriage? (ask for each type)
3. What customs are followed during childbirth? (including the naming of the newborn child)
4. What rituals are observed after the death of a community member?
5. Are these rituals still practiced today? (modern-day practices)

Section D. Social Institutions and Cultural Change

1. How does the traditional matrilineal inheritance system operate?
2. Have inheritance practices changed in recent years?
3. What factors have influenced these changes?
4. Do younger generations actively participate in traditional rituals and festivals?
5. Section E. Language and Cultural Transmission
6. Which language(s) are used during rituals and festivals?
7. Are traditional prayers or ritual chants still performed in the Koch language?
8. How is cultural knowledge passed from elders to younger generations?
9. What challenges does the Koch community face in preserving its culture?
10. What measures would you suggest for safeguarding Koch cultural heritage?

B. Sample Participant Observation Notes

The following are some examples of field notes collected during the fieldwork that illustrate the format used for recording participant observations during ethnographic fieldwork. The data is presented in a table for convenience.

All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. Personal identifiers have been omitted to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Date	Location	Event	Observation
15 April 2025	Harigaon	Pabuni Festival	Rituals were conducted at the Wai Than under the guidance of community elders. Offerings were made collectively, and prayers were recited in the Koch language. Community participation was high across age groups.
19 April 2025	Kumoligaon	Marriage Ceremony	The Ajeng officiated the ceremony using traditional Koch ritual formulae. Family elders supervised ritual exchanges of rice and ceremonial offerings. A communal feast followed the ceremony.
23 April 2025	Tura (Doordarshan Kendra)	Community Interaction	Younger participants frequently communicated in Garo, Assamese, and English during informal conversations, while Koch was primarily used by elders and during ritual activities. Several respondents discussed the influence of education and urban employment on changing cultural practices.
27 April 2025	Harigaon	Informal Discussion with Elders	Elders expressed concern about the gradual simplification of traditional rituals but emphasized continued efforts to teach younger generations through festivals and family gatherings.