

Indigenous knowledge of the A·chiks: A Reflection of the Culture in A·chik folk life

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"A sign is the representation of something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign. The sign stands for something, its object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea." Peirce called the sign a *representamen*, in order to bring out the fact that a sign is something that "represents" something else in order to suggest it (that is, "re-present" it) in some way. (Peirce)

Ferdinand de Saussure, the "father" of modern linguistics, proposed a dualistic notion of signs, relating the *signifier* as the form of the word or phrase uttered, to the *signified* as the mental concept. For Saussure, the sign is completely arbitrary—i.e., there was no necessary connection between the sign and its meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)

Roland Barthes a French literary theorist and Semiotician often critique pieces of cultural material to expose how bourgeois society used them to impose its values upon others. For instance, the portrayal of wine drinking in French society was a robust and healthy habit, this ideal perception was contradicted by certain realities (i.e. that wine considered to be unhealthy). He found semiotics is useful in conducting these critiques. A picture of a full, dark bottle is a sign, a signifier relating to a signified: a fermented, alcoholic beverage wine. However, the bourgeois take this signified and apply their own emphasis to it, making "wine" a new signifier, this time relating to a new signified: the idea of healthy, robust, relaxing wine. Roland Barthes (1915–1980)

Natural signs are used to provide information which determines appropriate responses to everyday communication, natural objects and events for example smoke indicates the presence of fire, giving rise to the proverb, "*There is no smoke without fire.*" A natural sign is a part of the greater event of a complex condition, which indicates the rest of the situation is its notable feature. Sign is an indication of a state of affairs.

There are three significant features in the use of signs in communication: the sign, its object and the subject who relates the sign and the object signified. The sign and its object (for example, smoke and fire) are logically related to form a pair. In any such combination one of the terms is less important--smoke, in this case--than the other--fire. The less important term, smoke, becomes the sign of the more important one, fire. The less important term is normally more easily available than the other term in the pair. For example, a scar as a sign is more easily available than the accident which is inferred from the presence of the scar. The accident then is the meaning of the scar as a sign.

A symbol is therefore is a powerful instrument of thought and conceptual abstraction.

Various indigenous symbols, it is clear that they constitute valuable source-materials for the understanding of A·chik orientations to life.

The Indigenous knowledge of the A·chik signs and symbols:

The A·chik have a belief that some occurrences of natural phenomenon or everyday life is a sign to signify something. They have transmitted this belief from one generation to the next. Different signs and symbols used by the A·chik community is related to certain cultural beliefs. The A·chiks believe in the occurrence of certain things by observing nature.

The A·chiks take certain signs as good or bad in their everyday life. Different things like natural phenomenon, behavior of animals, and birds, ceremonies, rites and festivals, dreams etc. is taken as a sign.

The behavior of animals and natural phenomenon which is taken as a sign is given as follows:

1. When a person sees an elephant and chase it to some distance, if the elephant break the branches of trees when it reaches a certain place, it is believed that it is a sign of warning or restriction for pursuer to obey and not go beyond it; or else the person will be in danger.
2. If a person sees a fresh excreta of an elephant on the way, it implies that one need not worry as it indicates that the elephant had just left the particular place. It is believed to be a good sign because it will take time for the elephant to come again.
3. If an elephant lifts up its trunk on seeing a person, it is believed to be a good sign. It indicates that the elephant will allow the person to pass by and will not harm him. But if the elephant bite its trunk, it is believed to be a bad sign as it indicates that the elephant is not allowing the person to pass by.
4. When lots of *a·kin* (white ant/termites) come out from the ground it is believed that there will be rain.
5. When the dark clouds move very fast in the sky it is believed to be sign of heavy rain, similarly when one sees a group of *saru/saruk* (a common myna) fly very swiftly, it is believed to be a sign of heavy rain too.
6. There is a belief among the A·chiks if the *do·chok* (sparrow) build their nest on the tree-top, it is a sign of good season without heavy rain. But if the same bird built their nest in the middle or low height of the tree it is a bad sign, because it is believed to be a sign of heavy rain with thunder and storm.
7. A·chiks are very intelligent when it comes to observing things from the surroundings. They can tell the time (morning, midday, afternoon, evening) simply by observing natural phenomenon and by hearing the singing of the insects, birds and by seeing the shadows, etc. for example; Earlier the A·chiks believe that when the insect called *chenggari* (cicada) sing thrice it is a sign that evening has come. *Do·ka jinma* or (group of crow) fly to the jhum field it is a sign of morning, but when the groups of crow fly backs to their nest it is a sign of evening.
8. A·chiks believe that the crying of the *do·uang* (night-jar) is a sign that someone will die.
9. There is a belief that if a tree breaks on its own, it is a sign that someone is going to die.

Different festivals, rites and ceremonies of the A·chik regarded as a Sign or Symbol:

Many visual symbols are found in festivals, rites, ceremonies and religious or philosophical beliefs. But there are also other symbols that express specific beliefs about the Supreme God and reveal the conceptions of his nature.

Some of the sign and symbols which can be seen in A·chik festival, rites and ceremonies are:

1. *Wangala*: (thanks-giving ceremony):

Wangala is the chief festival of the Garos. There is no uniform date except month in which this festival is performed. This festival is rejoicing of the community expressed with prayer to *Saljong*, the god of fertility for his blessing of welfare and plenty. He is represented by the sun and worshipped because all crops are in his care and without his favour no harvests would be reaped. Thus, *wangala* is a sign of thanks giving ceremony.

2. *Rongchu gala*:

Rongchu gala is an important pre-harvest festival of the Garos. Just before harvesting of crops *rongchu* or flattened rice is prepared out of the crops to be reaped and the *rongchu* is offered to the deities first and then the village people also eat it. The purpose of celebrating this festival is a sign of approval to eat new crops of the year.

3. *Kosi songa*:

Kosi songa (erection of stones in the restricted places/forest) in a particular place or forest is considered or believed to be sacred by the A-chiks. This is the place where their god(*mite*) reside. No one is allowed to collect firewood or to collect anything from that place. It is the place where nobody is allowed to use for Jhum field. If anybody has collected anything from that place he/she will get sick ultimately if not cured he/she will die it is called *mite rim-a*. *Kosi tata* ceremony is done once in a year where all the villages take part. Thus, *Kosi songa* symbolized the secret place.

4. *A-song tata*:

The A-chiks believe in the existences of god, goddesses, ghosts and miraculous divine powers. *A-song tata*, *kosi tata* or *A-song krita* is the spiritual functions of the A-chiks for the welfare of the village. They believe that these deities are guardian spirits and protectors of the villages. During *A-song tata* no outsider are allowed to enter the village. *A-song tata* is a sign of chasing out the malevolent deities from the village. These deities are believed to cause different sickness to the villagers.

5. *Kima songa* (lying of monolith or memorial post): *Kima* is the image made for the deceased. The A-chik believe that the *kima* or monolith cannot be taken out until and unless the last funeral rite or *mangona* (post funeral ceremony) was done for the deceased. The monolith symbolizes that the deceased person is still with the member of the family.

6. *Rango pujua* (lying of corpse on the gongs): *Rang* or gong symbolizes wealth. When a dead person is laid on the gong it means that the dead person is rich or wealthy. The value of *rang* or gong is equal to wealth.

7. *Jaksil ganna* (wearing of bracelet) by the *nokma* or a village headman symbolizes wealth. *Jaksil ganna* is a ceremony where a men (an intellectual) with good leadership qualities, financially sound or from well to do family is selected by the village elders as a village headman.

Beliefs relating to different signs related to *Do-sia* or marriage ceremonies:

Do-sia or marriage ceremony is performed in the following manner. In the presence of the two parties and their friends, the priest takes a cock and a hen, hold them close together and at one go pulls off both heads and throw

them on the ground. If the beak of the cock lie on the ground pointing towards the women and the hen towards men it is believed to be a good omen or sign.

Do-sia is followed by the *do-bik nia* (zoomancy) or checking the entrails which is another form of consulting the omens. An incision is made on the stomach of one of the birds, and the priest (*kamal*), introducing his fingers draws out the large intestines and holds them out before him. If they hang together, the omen is good one, but if they are apart, desertion or death is predicted. If the intestines are full of digested food, it is a sign that the couple will be rich, and if empty, it is believed to be a sign that they will be poor in future.

***Jumang nika* (Dreams):**

Belief in dreams is universal among the A-chiks and number of interpretation exists in which implicit trust is placed.

1. To dream of building a new house means or it is a sign of death of the near relation of the dreamer.
2. To dream of the catching of the fish means getting lots of money.
3. To dream of being naked is a sign of sorrow or sadness.
4. To dream of happiness and laughter means grief, distress or sadness.
5. To dream of chewing beetle nut which has reddened the mouth is a sign of getting injured.
6. To dream that a person died means that he or she had taken a heavy meal.
7. When a sick person dreams that a deceased relative comes and invites her to go along with him is a sign that her dead is near.

These are some examples of dreams and their meaning which the A-chiks believe. The list of dreams can be endless.

Thus, Signs and Symbols provides the insight of the A-chik culture, which helps to express, transmit and store their thoughts, emotions and attitudes of their way of life. The use of signs and symbols reflect their different beliefs which convey a number of information.

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