

## Traditional Worship Ceremony in a Mountain Village in Western Arunachal Pradesh

It is the third day of our exploration of western Arunachal Pradesh in the foothills of the Himalayas. The day was auspicious, cool and bright, a pleasant change from yesterday's rain and snow. After breakfast, we pack the car and head down from Bomdila.



The first stop is the Temple to the Snake God, located on a rocky outcropping next overlooking the river. We walk up stairs and go inside. The priest blesses us, gives us puja, with lotus water, small beads of sugar and coconut meat. He tells us about the snake god, embodied in a hooded cobra that lives in the rocks below, to which the temple is dedicated. Milk is offered to the cobra and when it enters the temple to drink, it does not harm people who might be visiting.

Feeling calm and peaceful, we walk back down the stairs and get into the car to continue on. We soon turn off on a narrow gravel road that leads to a small village nestled in a valley. We have been invited to observe a traditional worship ceremony of the village people. Our host, Jawahar Dussuso, a village leader, greets us with smiles as Vijay introduces us and other men come out to greet us, too. We cross a wooden walkway to a doorway blocked by a wood plank half door to enter a long wooden house. To enter the atrium of the long house, we must step over this half door threshold and then step over another half door to enter a long, narrow room. We learn this is to keep out evil spirits. Smoke from wood fires blazing under circular hearths burns our eyes as we are seated, thankfully near an open window. We meet three other village leaders and drink rice beer together. Through Vijay's interpretation, we learn that the ceremony will entreat the gods to assist an elder, Jawahar Dussuso's father, who had recently died, to find his way to paradise while bringing blessings on his family and their village home.



The ceremonial treasures of the household are on display for us to see and they invite us to examine these articles, a silver crown and short sword and a headpiece made of silver chains and a medallion. "May we see them?", we ask. "Of course!" they respond so we do, taking photos of each as everyone smiles. Finishing the beer, we walk past the series of hearths smiling at each woman tending the fire and cooking and

at the small children who watch us shyly from behind their mothers. A short woman with a big smile and bright eyes greets me with a hug. She is Jawahar Dussuso's mother and she asks us to take her picture with me so we oblige happily.





Back outside into bright sunlight and fresh air, members of the family who live in other places and the villagers gather. Some sit watching as others, mainly young men, under the direction of an village elder, prepare alters made of wood and branches. Animals will be sacrificed, we learn. Since preparations are still being made, Mr. Dussuso's brother, Johar, invites us to walk through the village to the temple. We readily agree and walk down the main street and climb a path with occasional steps, through rich greenery up to the temple on a high hill overlooking the village. Many of the young people follow us and join us as we sit in the temple and look out in all directions, observing the sloping hills above the village where crops are growing in fields alternating with patches overgrown with low vegetation and expanses of forest. We learn that the practice is to clear an area of forest, grow crops until the land grows fallow, allow it to rest and revegetate and clear another patch of forest.

The whole group of us walks back down to the village, where preparations are continuing. We return to sit on a nearby rooftop to view the preparations and eat a snack of wild roots and corn beer. The roots are a bit like potatoes; the beer is delightful. Vijay brings out his laptop computer to show pictures of the village members who



had participated at a recent meeting of elders from the indigenous cultures of Northeast India. As the men gather around the computer to view the pictures, we enjoy the blend of ancient culture and modern technology.

Jawahar Dussuso comes to sit with us and he advises us that after the ceremony, he will remain in the long house for 10 days, meditating, remaining calm and hurting no one to ensure that the blessings gained from the ceremony remain upon the house and the inhabitants.

He and the other participants are dressed in special clothes now. Men wear white tunics with broad sashes and bright colored embroidered trim. The priest/elder wears a white jacket over a gold tunic with sash and embroidery trim. His headpiece is a rich brown crown trimmed with beads and feathers. Women wear square cut jackets of deep red trimmed with rich embroidery and shiny beads. One wears the silver headpiece I had tried on earlier.



While the men prepare for the sacrifices, women prepare rice for the feast.



Raw rice is placed in a hollowed out log, like a giant mortar, and two women pound the rice with thick staves in perfect turns. The pounding loosens the hulls so that the grain can be separated from the hulls by tossing in a shallow basket with just the right wrist snap. They let me try each task. The pounding is fairly easy; the tossing less so. They all smile and I let them take over again.

Now the preparations are complete. We return to the rooftop to watch as a fine dark young bull is roped and lead toward the altar. It bellows and tosses its head wildly so that the men must move quickly to avoid the sharp horns.



The priest/elder does a series of motions - a sort of ceremonial dance - to indicate the spot on the beast as the archers take aim with arrows first. We are told that he is asking forgiveness from the beast for taking its life; explaining the importance of the ceremony. The arrows fly, the beast bellows in pain, we stop breathing as we watch from the rooftop. Quickly another man with the heavy shafted spear thrusts hard to the heart, the beast sinks and dies quietly. We gasp, feel pain in our hearts, a stunned sadness and sense of loss. The ceremony will continue as more animals are prepared for sacrifice.



It is time for us to depart, after quietly thanking Jawahar Dussuso and the others. Still a bit stunned and shaky we walk solemnly to the car and drive away, leaving the rest of the people to continue the ceremony and feast.

What we have witnessed is 'hard on the heart', in the context of our cultural background and personal sensitivities. Still, we agree that it is essential for the traditions of this village to continue, keeping the cultural practices alive and sustaining the life of the village for the children.

Later, we reflect on what we have witnessed. We are humbled to think that the two of us, with our white faces and life that is about as different from these people as one can imagine, have been invited and welcomed to be a part of this important event in their culture. We know we will never forget this day.