

MA. 26. 55

# THE LHOTA NAGAS

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND SUPPLEMENTARY

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*Published by direction of the Government of Assam*



MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED  
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1922



*Pathi of Lakhuti in ceremonial dress*

doing the *Liritang* ceremony at the beginning of harvest a man must make a small offering of meat to his *oha*.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the *Pikuchak* "genna," too, all possessors of rice *oha* must inspect them, taking care to wash their hands both before and after. It is curious that the reason given why the Nyimshamo kindred of the Othui clan in Yekhum cannot set up stones after doing the mithan sacrifice, is that they have never been allowed to touch the village *oha*, when they had to be carried on migration, or indeed to have had anything to do with *oha*. What the connection is, however, between the two kinds of stone is not precisely stated.

## Charms.

Love potions are commonest in the villages near the plains. I remember a youthful widow of Sanis who was so indiscreet as to get engaged to two men in two different villages at the same time. When the tangle was brought to me to unravel she said she really had only meant to get engaged to one, but the other one had rubbed a love charm on her neck—at least she thought that was what he must have done, though she had not actually noticed him do so.

Certain old women are supposed to possess the knowledge of these charms, which is handed down from mother to daughter. One Amhono of Pyangsa is said to retail a root called *loha*, which has to be ground up and given to the shy loved one with cooked fish.<sup>2</sup> If the suit is hopeless the recipient of the root removes all doubt by being sick on the spot. My informant had never seen the root; he had only heard of it. Another charm is a feather of a bird called *tsentsü*—probably mythical, at least I could never find out what it was. If a man can once touch a woman's hand with this she is his for life.

Witchcraft, in the evil sense of the word, was probably never common among the Lhotas, though the practice used to exist of making a straw image of an enemy in another village, and after addressing it by name spearing it. This, however, could never be done by one Lhota to another.

<sup>1</sup> The Semas and some other tribes rub them with pig's fat.—J. H. H.

<sup>2</sup> It may be noticed that the presentation of fish by a man to his betrothed is the formal sign of the completion of an Ao marriage.—J. H. H.

It is believed to be possible, too, to bewitch a man by calling a stone or bit of wood by his name and cursing it. This belief in the power given by knowledge of a man's name is of course world-wide, and among the Lhotas gives rise to the custom of giving a false name at birth in order that the lurking evil spirits may go away thinking they have the real name. Besides their ordinary name most, if not all, Lhotas have a private name which is never revealed to any but relations or intimate friends. If two men bear the same name they regard themselves as bound together by a particularly close tie and address each other as *akam*. Similarly Lhotas are particular that no enemy should get hold of bits of their hair or clippings from their finger or toe nails. While the Naga Labour Corps were on their way back from France some Lhotas planned to offer to cut some Semas' hair for them, and do "genna" with the clippings when they got home.<sup>1</sup> The plan was only just vetoed in time by one of their own headmen. The commonest charm against evil spirits is a kind of wild mint called *rarakham* (*Ocimum basilicum*).<sup>2</sup> At all "gennas," or when going to a place supposed to be haunted by evil spirits, a Lhota wears a sprig in the lobe of his ear and rubs some in his hair. A small onion (*sandhra*) or a cowrie carried on the person is also considered to be effective.

Apparently the only charm used to make crops grow is a piece of rhinoceros (*molung*) bone hidden near the field.<sup>3</sup> It must be many, many years since any Lhota has killed one of these animals, but I am assured that pieces of bone are still carefully treasured, though they are never shown to strangers.

Ghost stories abound. The following one, which was Ghosts. told me by a man from Rephyim, is typical: "One day I

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Chap. XV.—J. H. H.

<sup>2</sup> *Rarakham* appears to be the same as the Sema *pulakhu*, which, however, was identified for me as *Mosla dianthera*. It is quite likely that both plants are used by Nagas under the same name.—J. H. H.

<sup>3</sup> The Aos erect a stout and tall rice plant on a piece of bamboo and put it by the field to make the rice grow, by its good example, as high from the ground as the top of the uplifted rice plant.—J. H. H.