

**‘HER TIME’ IN THE  
PANDEMIC: GENDERED  
TIME, TEMPORAL  
RUPTURES AND WANCHO-  
NOCTE COEXISTENCE**

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# **'HER TIME' IN THE PANDEMIC: GENDERED TIME, TEMPORAL RUPTURES AND WANCHO-NOCTE COEXISTENCE**

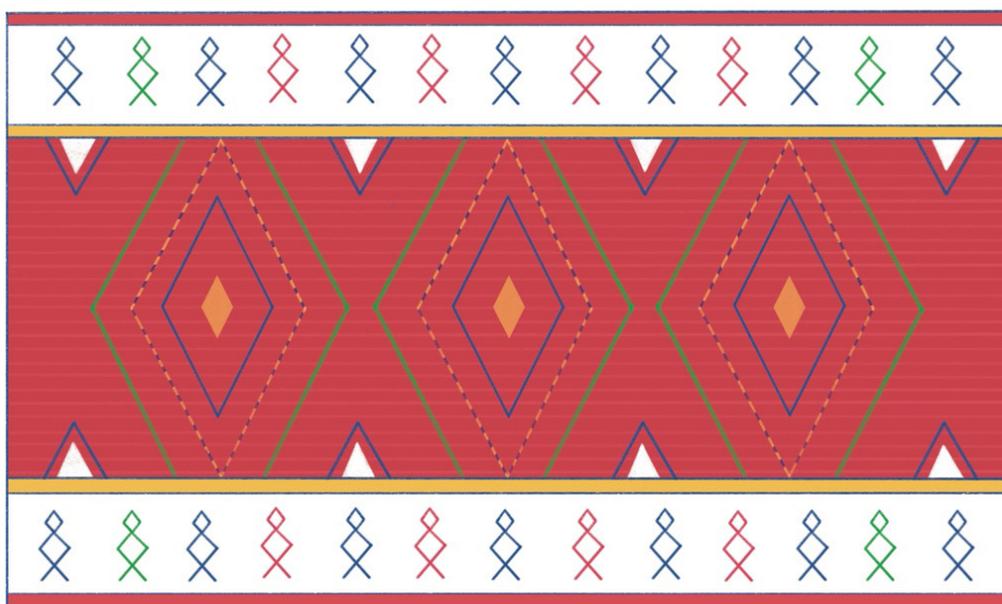


Fig. 1. A Wancho textile motif also used widely by the Nocte tribe.

The events documented in this essay are set in the remote areas of the southernmost part of Arunachal Pradesh, specifically in the Tirap and Longding districts. “Her Time” in the Pandemic: Gendered Time, Temporal Ruptures and Wancho-Nocte Coexistence’ centres on the lived experiences of Akhe Wangsu, a working-class Wancho woman from the Longding district, mapping her relationship with the spaces she inhabits and engages with for work. It examines how both indigenous time and modernity conspire to regulate women’s bodies and their societal roles. By foregrounding the personal, this paper acknowledges the narrative format’s capacity to illuminate realities that might otherwise remain unarticulated. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the implications of time and how gender and labour are institutionalised within indigenous societies, situating these dynamics within the larger context of a world profoundly affected by the disruptions caused by COVID-19. This work comprises multiple strands: it contextualises the cultural landscape of the region, presents Akhe’s story, and incorporates illustrated sketches that provide additional insights.

Before proceeding further with this narrative, I wish to reaffirm my scepticism towards grand claims of scientific objectivity, including those related to my own research. I value knowledge rooted in lived experience, and the multiplicity of reality has guided my decision to foreground the experiences of a single individual. While the documentation of customs, beliefs, and practices in this essay is grounded in verified data, its true value lies in conveying the magnitude of the struggles endured and the resilience demonstrated by women of Akhe’s social position during the pandemic. These experiences are deeply entwined with the question of time. Under capitalism, the value of work is determined not only by the time allocated to it, but also by its conformity to the demands of industrial, clock-based time. Standardised time structures bind workers to regulated hours designed to ensure the smooth functioning of the capitalist market. The globalised imposition and adoption of industrial time and its associated economic values have marginalised all that is local, context-

dependent, seasonal, and rooted in personal histories (Adam, 2002). Gendered time, which encompasses the experiences of time shaped by gender-based societal roles, informs the central concern of this essay. Time as a concept, however, presents significant challenges for analysis, largely due to its elusive and intangible nature. This complexity is exemplified by something as ostensibly simple as the difficulties inherent in establishing a uniform time zone for an entire nation, as such a framework may not adequately serve the interests of all citizens.<sup>1</sup> Colonisation entails the universalisation of a fixed, linear, secular time. This secular time, advanced by Eurocentric modernity, aims to impose order and simplify complex, heterogeneous socio-temporal realities. The concept of time is intricately linked to the discovery or construction of the Other, as well as the emergence of anthropology with its temporalising ethos.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Marie Degérando's assertion that the philosophical traveler travels in time—'Every step he makes is the passage of an age'—highlights this connection (Fabian, 2014). However, time also serves as a carrier of personal stories; our engagement with our environment inevitably involves an interaction with time. I contend that emphasising an individual's perception of time is emancipatory, as it allows for the articulation of personal subjectivity, without restricting the individual from being thrust into the framework of the time of the observer or researcher. Inherited cultural identity undeniably shapes gender roles and other identity-based societal roles. At the same time, the practice of perceiving individuals from tribal communities as residing solely in a distant past—whether idyllic or oppressive—reflects the perspective of the outsider looking in. Akhe's lived experience reflects a dynamic negotiation with multiple temporalities, rooted in her gender, ethnicity, regional location, and class position. My use of the term "Her time" in both the title and the essay is not a gesture toward fixed binaries or essentialist notions of gender. It aligns with Valerie Bryson's use of the term 'women's time' as a descriptive starting point, one that draws attention to recurring interconnections and structural patterns rather than offering a definitive or reductive account of women's experiences

across contexts, while also recognising that time itself is not gender-neutral (2007).

There exists a rich tradition of artistic engagements, philosophical inquiries, and scientific reflections that have critically examined the notion of psychological time, shaping and informing contemporary societal and cultural thought. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this engagement with psychological time was intensified, permeating everyday discourse. The quarantine measures implemented by many governments in early 2020, though they affected people to varying degrees, had a universally pervasive impact. The restrictions on movement and social interaction largely resulted in widespread frustrations focused on the experience of time (Grondin et al., 2020). For the privileged, the pandemic sparked feelings of boredom, prompting many to seek ways to ‘pass the time’. In contrast, those whose livelihoods depend on mobility and social interaction were compelled to navigate the challenge of ensuring that no time was wasted in securing their sustenance.

## **SHIFTING LANDSCAPES, INTERWOVEN LIVES**

Situated in northeast India, Arunachal Pradesh shares international borders with Bhutan, Myanmar, and the disputed Tibet Autonomous Region, making it a region fraught with geopolitical complexities. Neighbouring districts bifurcated in 2012, Tirap and Longding each share state borders with Assam and the international border with Myanmar. While Longding is home to the Wancho tribe, the Tirap district is where the Nocte and the Tutsa primarily live. These areas are also inhabited by several other communities, forming zones of dynamic and multifaceted cultural intersections. Designated as ‘disturbed areas’ under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, the people of Longding and Tirap are also familiar with a life marked by hardship and heartbreak.

The Wancho and the Nocte are tribes whose heritage traces back to Myanmar. Both Wancho and Nocte societies adhere to a system of chieftainship and share a now-defunct historical practice of headhunting. In addition to these shared traits, their proximity to each other enables ongoing mutual influence. Nevertheless, each community maintains its own linguistic identity, a distinct set of traditions, and oral history. Therefore, despite their affinities, it is important to recognise that the Nocte and Wancho inhabit and experience different worlds, shaped by their respective cultural worldviews and geographical locations, including factors such as class and gender. Arunachal Pradesh is characterised by diverse cultural landscapes that exist in parallel and often overlap, while also undergoing continuous change brought on by modernisation. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed yet another, entirely new reality, overnight.

While the Noctes have a long-standing tradition of tea consumption that predates the colonial era, the tea gardens in their current form exist as a result of the colonial legacy.<sup>3</sup> Many Wancho women travel to Pansumthong village in Tirap from the Longding district to work part-time in the tea gardens, especially when it is plucking season. Despite the relatively short distance of approximately 49.4 km between the headquarters of the two districts, the hilly terrain, coupled with the winding, serpentine roads that are perpetually in a state of repair, significantly prolongs travel time. These infrastructural conditions, typical of the region, highlight the ongoing logistical challenges faced by both residents and commuters in these remote areas. The time required for travel increases substantially depending on the location of one's village, and even more so in case of unforeseen but frequent obstacles like road blockades brought on by fallen trees and landslides. Pansumthong, now mostly a tea-estate village, was established in the 1970s due to its strategic location near the main road. Understandably, it may not appear as culturally distinct as some of the more remote tribal villages around these parts. For instance, it does not host a traditional 'morung' (dormitory). However, its uniqueness lies in

its character as a busy site of interdependent networks sustained by multiple communities. In the past, only Wancho men travelled to Nocte settlements to engage in a variety of economic activities. With the coming of motor vehicles in the region, around the 1960s, women gradually began commuting as well. The advent of industrial modernity restructured traditional roles, with women taking on new responsibilities, resulting in shifts in their relationship with space and altering their perception of time. As women migrate in search of employment opportunities, their traditional roles persist, contributing to a sense of temporal dislocation.

The people of Tirap and Longding are no strangers to danger. Yet, faced with the intrusion of the alien force of the pandemic sweeping through, panic settled in their hearts—‘What if I am to suddenly drop dead far away from my family and home?’ Escape seemed like the only option. On August 29, 2020, Pansumthong village was declared a containment zone. Accustomed to navigating life amidst the presence of AFSPA, the residents of Pansumthong I interacted with attest that the introduction of police had drastically heightened everyone’s anxiety during the lockdown. They were gripped by the fear of ‘being thrown into jail’ and ‘being separated from their family’ by policemen if caught loitering outside. As the urgency of the situation demanded, the Wanchos working in Pansumthong set out for their homes in the Longding district in the dead of the night to avoid detection. With the lockdown rendering travel via the intra-district main road impossible, they were forced to traverse unsafe and seldom-used paths across the dense jungle. Some travelled in groups, while others made the arduous journey alone.

Amidst this immeasurable pain and mayhem, 28-year-old Akhe Wangsu stayed put. Akhe is from Konnu village in the Longding district, and is the eldest of her siblings and the daughter of elderly parents. Over the years, she has travelled regularly to Pansumthong, often residing there for extended periods to sustain her livelihood. In addition to part-time domestic work, cultivation, animal husbandry, fishing, jewellery-making, and weaving, she has been employed at the

Pansumthong tea plantation for the past ten years. Such a prolonged association is uncommon for women from other villages unless they have permanently settled in Pansumthong, reflecting broader socioeconomic patterns and expanding roles for women within the region.

For the purpose of this essay, I have drawn a tentative map of Pansumthong village (Fig.2), a zone that is in a state of flux. It is important here to consider Henri Lefebvre's assessment of the limited capacity of maps to fully represent a social space. He contends that it

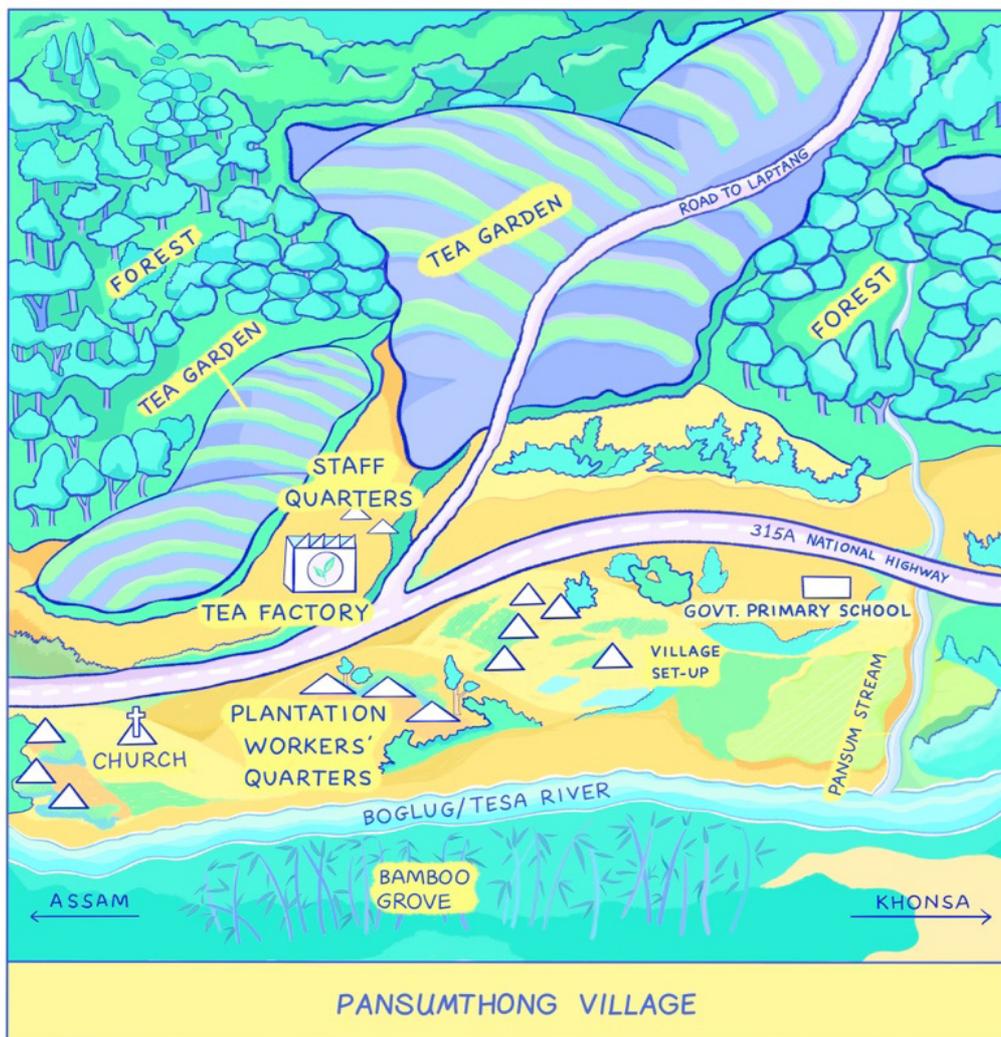


Fig. 2. Map of Pansumthong village.

is ‘doubtful whether a finite number’ of maps can ‘code and decode’ the meanings of a social space (1991). The map I have illustrated aims to trace the various locations in which Akhe’s daily work unfolds. Though her reality transcends the boundaries of any attempt at conventional mapping, the route of her daily schedule offers valuable insight. Firstly, it reveals the compactness of Pansumthong as a village, and secondly, it reveals how certain chores that Akhe carries out are more visible than her other activities. The visible activities are those that take place in the public domain and are industry-based in nature, for example, her involvement in the tea plantation. The realm of cartography has historically been dominated by men with maps, catering primarily to men’s needs. But space is not a neutral backdrop, and time is not the mere ticking of the clock. An individual’s experience of time and space is determined by gender, age, class, caste, physical ability, sexuality, culture, and health, among other factors. Consequently, Pansumthong assumes a distinctive character due to the nature and variety of activities in which women like Akhe take part. There are facets of the village that are usually not accorded any special value for they fulfil no industrial interest and have come into being only due to the social life of the villagers, particularly women. For instance, the abundance of wild bamboo groves in the village is significant not only for construction and building purposes but also because it yields bamboo shoots for consumption. The Wanchos and Noctes are fond of eating mishi, a fermented bamboo-shoot product that women have begun bottling and selling. Women from other tribes enrich the local diet of the regions they migrate to by foraging and introducing the villagers to new vegetation that is either edible or can serve other purposes for humans. In a capitalist framework focused on rigid models of productivity to benefit the modern economy, such significant contributions and active participation in cultivating spaces are often overlooked. Pansumthong, like many other areas of the Northeast, is undergoing significant infrastructural transformation, marked by the introduction of modern amenities such as highways and bridges. However, by focusing on the daily activities and lived

experiences of women through a gendered perspective, one can better understand the unequal distribution of these infrastructural benefits and the persistent inequalities that remain unaddressed despite these development projects (Kikon, 2019).<sup>4</sup>

In her introduction to *Centrepiece: New Writing and Art from Northeast India*, Parismita Singh succinctly points out that the image of the indigenous or rural woman diligently engaged in work continues to be an integral part of folk culture, colonial photography, stock imagery of tourism campaigns, and ethnographic iconography, presented for consumption 'without a deeper understanding or investigation of the nature of work and her position in society' (2017). An essential step in beginning to understand and appreciate Akhe's life, then, is to acknowledge that time, as Akhe experiences it, is moulded not only by her activities but also by her social identity and inner life. Central to her way of life is the state of constant mobility. Each decision and movement, while not necessarily calculated, is marked by a clear sense of purpose. She explains:

While in Pansumthong, I sell quite a lot on the way back home from the forest, without even trying. Right on the road as I walk back home. Someone or the other, commuting in their vehicles, will spot me carrying fresh produce and halt to enquire if I sell them. The Khonsa town market has wares, but no one can resist fresh, local forest produce at the end of the day. Not to mention, the market goods are quite expensive.

She insists her philosophy is simple:

I'm not a believer in constantly buying food to feed myself. Where will the money come from? How can I keep buying it? I'd rather grow it and sell the surplus. But I sell at a lower price compared to others. This isn't business for me. I'm not primarily a vendor. It is just one of the many things I do.

Access to land is, therefore, the key to survival. The barter system that villages follow as a part of their community-based living makes such forms of sustenance possible. Lend a hand in fishing in someone's

pond and distribute the fish. Offer fish in exchange for local pulses, and so on. These negotiations are based on trust and understanding and Akhe, appreciated for her skill, efficiency, and the reputation she has built over the years, is recognised by everyone in Pansumthong as someone who can be relied on. She also has a few clients in Khonsa who contact her via her cellphone. The halt in interaction and commuting during the COVID-19-induced lockdown thereby adversely affected and destabilised the very fabric the villagers had built their lives on.

Women from indigenous communities suffer due to the coming of a new time and suffer the loss of time itself. The ongoing pandemic has rendered an already precarious setup more difficult, compelling ‘her time’ to come to terms with the temporal rupture ushered in by the *kaknu laknu* (the Wancho word for the pandemic). Women like Akhe do not have the concept of leisure time; instead, what they partake in is a race against time. The lockdown and subsequent pausing of activity in the tea plantation gave her time to work on the bead jewellery and textile items she sells. Yet, with the lack of customers, most of the garden produce she harvested—papayas, banana flowers, and mushrooms—was left to spoil.

## INHERITING GENDERED ROLES AND SPACES

A look at a community’s long-held traditional worldview goes a long way in understanding the complexities of the modern subject’s experience of space and time. Like many other communities, the Wancho community is marked by gendered activities and spaces. Traditional houses are divided into two spaces: the inside and the outside. While the women inhabit the private, inner space where they engage in domestic chores like cooking, the men occupy the outer area for meetings and other public interactions. In the past, men and women of the same family would also sleep in these separate, demarcated dormitories. This kind of arrangement is no longer practised. The size

of houses has also diminished over time. It is important to note that traditional meeting halls are a central part of both Wancho and Nocte culture. Villages have morungs or bachelor's dormitories allotted exclusively for men to hold meetings, plan courses of future action, settle all kinds of disputes, and so on. In the days of the past, sentries looking after the safety of the village, along with these bachelors, not only gathered in the hall but also slept there. The main morung would be located near the chief's house and would be adorned with the heads of enemies and wild animals. Women are strictly prohibited from entering the morung, a rule that remains in effect today, except for rare instances when a tourist, seldom seen in these regions, might sneak in unnoticed for a photograph. Gone are the days of head-hunting, martial rituals, and constant vigilance, bringing up the question of the reconfiguration of traditional roles and responsibilities. The advent of a new time has invariably necessitated the need for urban employment, accompanied by the dismantling of long-held cultural identities.

Wancho men continue to participate in mih-hen. Comprising two words, 'man' (mih) and 'to call' (hen), 'mih-hen' means community duty, which is also performed by Nocte men who refer to it as 'beehien' in their dialect. It can include any group activity, such as lending a hand in the construction of a fellow villager's house, or carrying in harvest from the field. These tasks are mandatory, and keep the social fabric of the community alive. The realm of the domestic continues to remain under the purview of women. During the pandemic, men were appointed as village representatives to work as volunteers engaged in several duties for the safekeeping of the villages. Their access to mobility made them well-suited for the role. Men riding their bikes on the difficult terrain, commuting between town and village, are now quite a common sight. Akhe, along with all the other women in Pansumthong, on the other hand, sewed masks for distribution under the direction of women's self-help groups. They worked with caution, adhering to physical distancing guidelines, creating a scene markedly different from the usual vibrant and lively atmosphere that accompanies people coming together to work collaboratively.

The women's self-help group Akhe worked with is named Asenthong, which means 'the good place' in Nocte.

Despite the rigid division of the home space based on the gender of the family member, one should not think that women's work has only ever been restricted to the household. Farming, for instance, has always been a collaborative effort. Men clear up the field and get the land ready for jhum cultivation, and women work alongside them in growing the crops. Men are primarily responsible for clearing the designated forest area for jhum cultivation, while women work alongside them in sowing, tending and harvesting the crops. Sweet potato, cassava, tapioca, maize, sesame, phisi (a type of local pulse), and paddy demand dedicated labour. With baskets hanging down their backs, women head out to work daily. Furthermore, while preparing the land for cultivation, including the felling and burning of vegetation, requires considerable physical labour and is assigned to men, women are ever-present during the clearing process, gathering firewood to run their kitchens. Collecting firewood is a routine task for women. During the uphill climb, carrying firewood on their backs, they pause at measured intervals to catch their breath before resuming their work. The decision of when to pause is guided by an internal sense of timing, cultivated through generations of collective experience in the terrain, rather than by the ticking of a mechanical clock.

Most families in Arunachal Pradesh depend on agriculture for sustenance. Farms are usually far from the village. Akhe says most villagers commute by foot and from Konnu, it takes an entire day to reach the farmland. Given the distance, each family maintains a taap (the Wancho word for a small farmhouse made of bamboo and dried leaves) in the farmlands where they are lodged till the completion of work. The lockdown, however, temporarily disrupted such essential trips to the farm. As the lockdown became less severe, Akhe recalls the relief she experienced during her solo trips, foraging in the forest. She notes, 'Everyone could finally step out of doors to work without qualms, because being in the jungle or the farms meant social distancing was maintained by default.' It is important to acknowledge

the therapeutic nature of her solitary work in the forest, as it offers her personal space, privacy, and time for reflection. It is noteworthy that the activities laid out for men are occasional in nature, while the ones that women participate in must be performed daily, without fail, for the smooth functioning of a household. Relentless like the hands of a clock, every single day she rises early to fetch water and work in the field. She ensures her family is well-fed. Even as the world went awry during the pandemic, her duties not only remained intact, but intensified. Rationing the government-allotted relief packages, that is, stretching a few days' worth of food grains and resources to last weeks, was no mean feat.

As women's daily labour kept the home intact during the pandemic, enduring rituals functioned to safeguard the boundaries of the home. The Wancho youth who fled from Pansumthong to their homes in the dead of the night during the lockdown were not permitted immediate entry upon arriving at their respective destinations. Disease, or an epidemic of any sort, is never dealt with casually by the indigenous people. The site next to the Chijo river in Konnu was the quarantine centre arranged by the villagers. Huts were allocated for people who wished to return to their village, where they were to remain quarantined for around twenty days. Indigenous cultures all over the world have always followed pollution-abetting purification rituals with utmost discipline (Douglas, 2002). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nocte and Wancho villages strictly adhered to the 'closing of the gates' referred to as 'pan ka sak' in Nocte and 'pan gan gaipu' in Wancho. It is an age-old tradition followed during the time of an epidemic, wherein boundaries are erected and flanked by armed guards. Entering or exiting the village throughout the duration of this practice is a punishable offence. Konnu too closed its gates, and Akhe therefore found it pointless to leave Pansumthong during the first phase of the pandemic.

After more than a decade of work in Pansumthong, Akhe has decided to return to Konnu permanently, driven by the need to start her own family. She prefers not to discuss this decision in detail, and

I respect her privacy. Her brother is coming of age, and it will not be long before he brings home a spouse who shall run the household. It is time for Akhe to focus on establishing her own home.

Friends and acquaintances from Pansumthong insist, 'Reconsider. Compared to your home, life here is comfortable.' But Akhe will not be deterred. Her bags have been packed.

## **FERTILITY CYCLES AND THE URGENCY OF THE FUTURE**

It comes as no surprise that the Wanchos and Noctes have similar attitudes towards fertility. Most indigenous communities revolve around fertility cults and the birth of an heir, decidedly male, is immensely desired. Small communities, comprising only a few small villages, have survived against all odds and are particularly invested in the continuation of their clan. Women are thus caught up in the web of compulsory reproductivity. The competing framework of indigenous time and modern time conspires to regulate a woman's role in society. The traditional art of tattooing, now no longer practised, among the Wanchos also reflects the gendered nature of roles assigned to individuals in the community. While men earn tattoos on their bodies as an insignia of bravery by demonstrating their performance in war or hunting (handing the head of enemies to the chief, for instance), tattoos on a woman's body, on the other hand, indicate the marital and reproductive stages of her life (Dutta, 1990). The socio-cultural frameworks of the community are inextricably linked to constructs of fertility, gender, and identity, shaping and being shaped by traditional practices.

'Tham amah o!' is the curse the Noctes resort to when enraged. The phrase translates to 'May you not have an heir', and there are very few things as bad as this fate. The Wancho word for the state of bearing the curse of infertility is even more telling. Akhe explains that the word 'monpu' is used to describe the condition of a family with no

children or only daughters. 'Monpu, yes. Mithun, Kheti Bari is all over for them... Sab khotom.'

Monpu literally translates to 'fungus'.

As Akhe's explanation suggests, the state of ruin or decay is associated with both childlessness and with the girl child. What makes monpu or the image of being overrun with fungi truly devastating is that it does not denote mere absence; rather, it evokes a sense of active deterioration. It also marks the end of something. Sab khotom (it's all over). When the construct of motherhood has been institutionalised, and the heteronormative family is the societal ideal, anxieties surrounding procreation are significantly heightened during times of crisis. Women's decisions, in opting for or rejecting motherhood, are compromised in a pronatalist setup, with the dominant discourse of compulsory motherhood muddling their distinctive vision and aspirations, even though it is possible to devise strategies to resist matrigyno-idolatry (Meyers, 2002). Akhe has managed to postpone motherhood, a difficult feat for someone from her social circumstances. But the pressure of motherhood continues to shape her anxieties about her future. Over the past several years, many working-class Wancho women have been coming to Pansumthong in search of work opportunities, and some have settled there after marrying into Nocte families. Over time, they have not only learnt to speak the Nocte dialect but have also come to identify as Nocte. Such trajectories reveal that while identities remain fluid, social structures such as marriage and the negotiation of community life enable their gradual social integration. As uncertainty about the future heightened during the pandemic, the need for a home—stable and secure—and ultimately, an identity to rely on became more pronounced.

Our theoretical exploration of the gendered notion of time is profoundly influenced by Julia Kristeva, who, in her influential 1979 essay, 'Women's Time' ('Le temps des femmes'), highlights two primary forms of time linked to 'female subjectivity': cyclical time, associated with biological rhythms like gestation and nature's eternal cycles, and monumental time an eternal, all-encompassing temporal

experience beyond linearity (1981). These temporal modes, she argues, stand in contrast to the linear progression of historical time. Moreover, she points out that cyclical time and monumental time, are central to numerous cultural experiences across civilisations, particularly mystical ones. It is, however, important to keep in mind that Kristeva's essay is firmly rooted in the socio-cultural context in which it was written. Though by now, the feminist notion of time is no longer confined to essentialist and universalist formulas centered on embodied cycles, reproductive timelines, maternal narratives, and timeless ideals of femininity, the 'dated' aspects of Kristeva's framework on women's time present a crucial opportunity to reconsider and deepen contemporary feminist discourse on time and periodicity (Apter, 2010). Pamela Odih cautions against the reification of 'male' time and 'female' time as ontological realities (1999). Recognising that gendered subjectivities are endlessly multiple, Odih instead focuses on how the discursive constructs of gender identity resonate with the equally discursively constituted notions of temporality. While constructs of masculinity tend to align with linear time, those of femininity are more closely associated with embodied, relational forms of temporality (Odih, 1999). Within pronatalist cultures, the biologically deterministic construction of motherhood governs perceptions of time. Even in the realm of political discourse, heterosexual procreation is framed as the foundation for an idealised collective future, symbolised by the figure of the child, while queerness is seen as a threat to compulsory 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman, 2004).

An examination of the challenges faced by women in the region of this study underscores the necessity of approaching the binary of synchronic indigenous time and diachronic Western time with greater nuance. A simplistic glorification of the cyclical temporality associated with the precolonial era risks reducing individuals from marginalised social positions to exoticised entities, confined to an alternate, supposedly 'primitive' temporal framework, detached from the complexities and challenges posed by their own traditions.

While the rigid constraints of mechanical clock time demand a strictly regimented way of life, the sense of time derived from nature in pre-industrial societies is not inherently leisurely, relaxed, unscheduled, or 'humane' (O'Malley, 1992). Women bear the dual burden of being constrained by both traditional temporalities and the regime of clock-time. Age-old customs impose reproductive roles on them, compelling them to meet the cyclical demands of regeneration, upheld as essential for maintaining the continuity of the community. The advent of clock time, with its linear and standardised structure, provides little respite. Rather than alleviating communal burdens, it intensifies them by aligning women's labour with the demands of modernity, creating conditions for overwork and labour exploitation within the modern market.

## INTERVENTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In Pansumthong, it is generally believed that the lack of ample resources in their own villages compels women from Longding to set out in search of greener pastures in other regions. Akhe begs to differ. She says:

Yes, there are more provisions here. But I can find some or the other opportunity in my own village as well. A certain kind of independence, however, I would not be able to experience there. I manage my own income and savings and have control over what I purchase with my own money. That, to me, is the appeal of living away from home.

Evidently, a woman's choice of being away from home to earn a living reflects not only material concerns, but also a decisive step away from traditional social routes laid out for them. Many young Wancho women are motivated to travel also by virtue of sheer curiosity and the simple desire for a change in scene. Their routine in Pansumthong is

different from that in their homes which, as Akhe explains, leaves them a bit more room for the personal.

The time of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a rupture in the fabric of the indigenous lifestyle. During the first phase, when all the members were out farming, the Wangsu household in Konnu was robbed. Thievery, otherwise practically unheard of in the village, became a concern due to the pandemic and the consequent bankruptcy. In fact, traditional houses do not generally have doors meant to be fastened with padlocks. Akhe's was the only home that was robbed. She explains:

I would not care if they only stole money. The fact that they took away all the ornaments I crafted, along with the raw materials I collected, is what left me devastated. Raw materials are expensive and difficult to get our hands on. And the time I spent on the crafts, well, that is invaluable. Everything is over now.

She smiles when she says that, still in disbelief at the absurdity of the situation. 'My father went as far as to ensure the door was locked! Very few people do that. But whoever broke in did so by cutting a hole in our wall. I think it shows their desperation.' Indeed, the burglars in question were most definitely aware of the value contained in a woman's personal tin trunk. In these villages, most women who come of age own a trunk where they store their most prized possessions. Lack of familiarity with, and access to banks also means that these boxes serve as their personal lockers. When Akhe's family stepped inside their home on that fateful day, nothing seemed amiss at first glance. The utensils, along with whatever little food stock was present in the house, remained untouched. They soon noticed the tear in the wall and the reality of what had conspired dawned on them. The cash was gone. Several items, like women's traditional wear and other related articles, were also snatched from their rightful owner who had, over the years, worked hard to earn, procure, and craft them.

Akhe was in Pansumthong when this tragedy struck. She was thankful for the few items that were spared because she had happened to keep them with her. But most of her valued possessions—each bead and yarn, colourful, priceless and ablaze with promise—that she was in the habit of sending home, meticulously packed, were gone. Indeed, women's attire is ultimately not only an extension of the self, but also acts as a source of income for the entire family.

Due to the use of similar motifs in their designs (see Fig.1), Wancho crafts are in demand among the Noctes as well. The Wancho bag, popularly used by Noctes who call it 'khat-tong', is one such item. The Noctes were not originally a tribe engaged in weaving, and therefore have a long history of purchasing woven bags from the Wanchos. Back in the day, Wancho men would travel from village to village selling their collection of nyetong (the Wancho word for 'cloth bag') woven by the women in their village. Most of the motifs in Wancho and Nocte design, like the human figure, have ritual and symbolic value. With the erosion of old ways of life, the social function of indigenous crafts and design, along with their very existence is in peril (Van Ham, 2014). It is, in fact, miraculous that despite the circumstances, communities comprising such small populations have managed to keep certain traditions alive. Akhe does her bit in collecting different kinds of khusa (wrap-around skirt), not only to sell them in her village if needed, but also as a part of her personal collection. 'I know the worth of handloom,' she says, 'but people did not get to eat during the lockdown. Many small businesses had to be shut down. As such, the demand for crafts is low.'

By Christmas of 2021, she will be home for good.

People at Pansumthong suggest, 'Reconsider. Why not settle down with someone from this village?' But Akhe will not be deterred. Her bags have been packed and sent home.

The lockdown might have been lifted, but the questions of the period of isolation continue to linger. Clearly, the shift in temporal experience brought about by COVID-19 is not confined to visible



*February 2022. A photo Akhe shared from her home in Konnu.*

Fig. 3. Akhe at her home in Konnu, 2022, photographed by her father.

disruptions to routines. The temporal disruption the pandemic set in motion is better understood through the intersections of context-specific cultural significances and socio-economic realities, both of which are entangled with the notion of gender.

### *Visual Notes*

The final section of this essay includes a few visual notes produced as part of the research.

'HER TIME' IN THE PANDEMIC



Women keep the house running by ensuring the hearth is ever ignited. Thus, when the land is cleared for jhum cultivation, they rush to the area to gather firewood.

Fig.4. Women working in the jhum kheti.

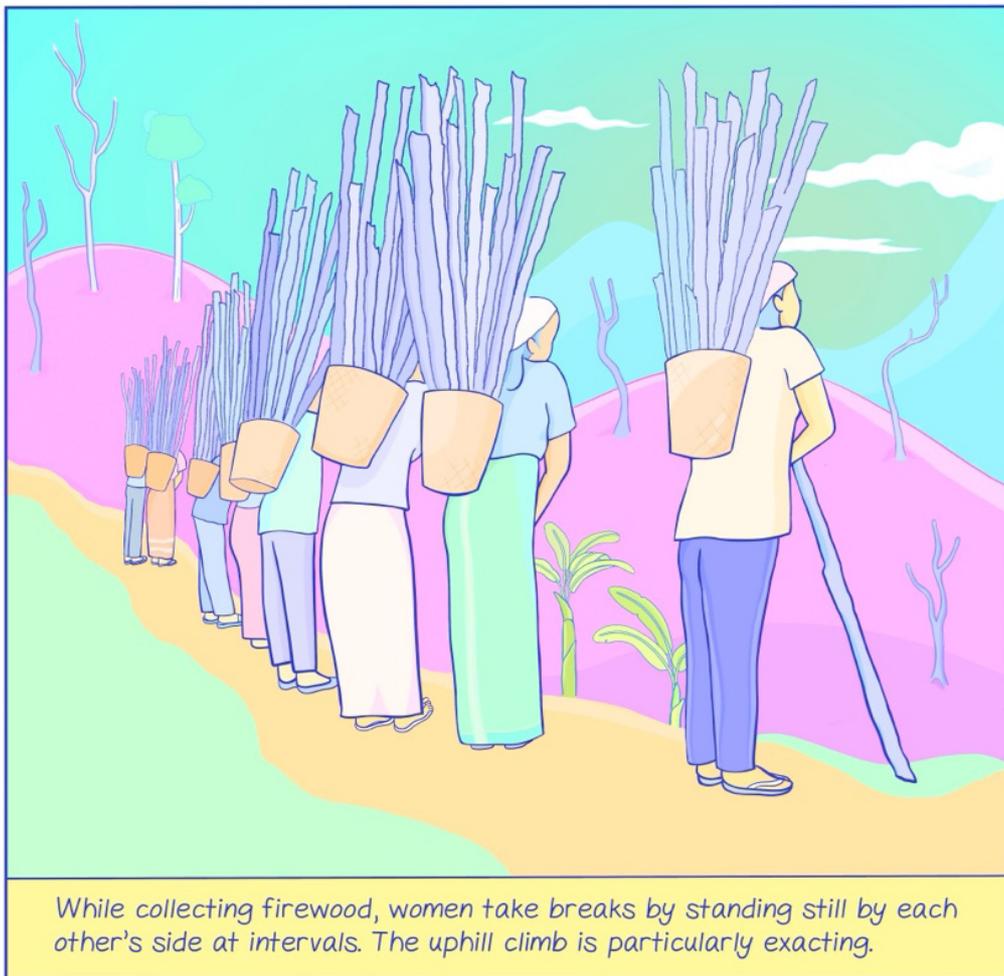


Fig. 5. Women at work, pausing to catch a breath.

'HER TIME' IN THE PANDEMIC



*The tea-plantation workers' quarters went palpably quiet during the lockdown as most left for their villages.*

Fig.6. Navigating community life and shared spaces.



Fig.7. The changing marketplace.



Fig.8. Crafting bead jewellery: Art, labour and livelihood decisions.



*Akhe says she misses the fish in Pansumthong and reminisces cooking meals in the Mizo cooker she left behind for others to use.*



Fig. 9. Objects and digital traces of memory: Left: The Mizo cooker Akhe used in Pansumthong; Right: The fish Akhe caught in Pansumthong, later shared on her WhatsApp status.

## NOTES

1. The introduction of daylight savings time has long been advocated by prominent voices in the Northeast, as sunrise and sunset in the region occur much earlier than Indian Standard Time, resulting in a loss of productive working hours. For further details, see 'Will separate time zone for northeast increase efficiency or logistical chaos, alienation?' published in *ThePrint*.
2. In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), Johannes Fabian demonstrates how Western conceptions of time deny non-Western societies a coeval existence with modernity by relegating them to a past detached from the anthropological present. According to Fabian, anthropology emerged and solidified as an allochronic discourse, framing itself as a 'science of other men in another Time,' despite the fact that anthropology's 'Other' consists of people who are, ultimately, our contemporaries' (143).
3. For more details on the history and impact of the British Empire's initiation of the Assam tea enterprise, see 'Anglo-Nocte Relations' (2021) in *Noctedigest.com*, and 'Beyond the Colonial Lens: An Investigation into the Chequered History of Assam Tea' (2023) by Dibyajyoti Dutta and Dibyanjoly Hazarika.
4. Dolly Kikon reminds us to 'turn our gaze on the womenfolk who sell vegetables beside the shiny highways in the region' (2019).

## INTERVIEW

Interview (November–December 2021) and personal communication (January–February 2022) with Akhe Wangsu.

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