

A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC ACCOUNT OF
THE SUNUWAR (MUKHIA or KOINCH)

BRIEF REPORT

ON

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT

&

SOCIO - ECONOMIC STATUS

OF

THE SUNUWAR (MUKHIA *alias* KOINCH)

OF

SIKKIM

SUBMITTED

BY

SIKKIM SUNUWAR (MUKHIA)

KOINCHBU

GANGTOK -SIKKIM

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A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC ACCOUNT OF THE SUNUWARS [MUKHIAS or KOINCHI]

Introduction: The word "Sunuwar" or "Mukhia" is a Nepali term. The Sunuwars call themselves 'Koincha'. According to an account available at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sunuwars are small and slender in built, somewhat smaller in size than the average Nepali. The cheek bones are fairly prominent and the eyes and nose typically Mongoloid. They live in high altitudes with high humidity and thin forests and heavy rainfall.

The traditions of the Sunuwars state that they originally migrated from Tibet until they reached the basin of the Ganges of India, from where they worked their way via Simraghur into Nepal and neighboring hilly regions. Another tradition say that they left Tibet and reached India via Kashmir and the Punjab, while the third one states that they came from Tibet via Assam across the Brahmaputra and so on. Physically speaking there is a strong resemblance between Mangars, Gurungs, Sunuwars, Rais and Limbus as recorded by Eden Vansittart in his book the "Gorkhas" (1906).

Population: No census report on communitywise basis for Sikkim is available. Total number of Sunuwar voters is 977 which is just 0.35% of the total number of voters in the entire state. Assuming each voter to represent a family of 3 members on an average, the population of the Sunuwars in Sikkim will work out to a meagre 2964.

Origin, Clan, Habitations (geographic): As per Bangshawali and oral tradition (called Mukudum) of the Sunuwars the community is one of the sub-races of the Kirats and descendants of the third brother Ramsingh Sunuwar Kirat (son of Sundar Bir Sunuwar Kirat who was supposedly the son of the Sun-God). Hence Sunuwars claim themselves to be Suryabangshi. It is said that the Sunuwars' forefathers were blessed by the Goddess Chandeswari Devi for their protection and food and were granted the mantras of Mukudum which are pronounced by the Poibo, Natso and Ngyami of the Sunuwars to this day on all rituals and ceremonies.

Sunuwars have three sub-group viz. Barsotharay, Dahsotharay and Jirel/Surel. They are further subdivided into Thars or clans. Barsotharays alone are subdivided into 88 thars or clans, a few examples of which are given below:

Rujich, Tholoch, Chuintich, Pargach, Katich, Kormaoch, Chyaba, Chhyompati, Gongrocjh, Gnawach, Jijeech, Jentich, Jesputch, Thangrach, Tepach, Turmuch, Dasuch, etc. etc.

These clans bear importance at the time of marriage. In fact inter-clan marriage is strictly forbidden.

Sunuwars in Sikkim live in distant and difficult terrain. Majority live far away from towns and bazaars. They are found scant and scattered in Chakhung, Mendo Gaon, Chumbung, Ongchun, Gyalsing, Rinchenpong, Khicheperi of the West District, Rameng, Nij Rameng, Tingmo, Kitam, Pokhok of the South District, Tarjin, Rishi, Kopchey, Sauney Bustee, Baghe Khola, Cheesopani, Nazitam, Tirkutam Chanmari, Rongyek, Bhusuk of the East District and Rangrang in the North District.

Language: Sunuwars speak their own language (called Koinchlo) which is of the Tibeto-Burman origin. Amongst themselves and where there are concentrations of Sunuwars Koinchbo is used as a means of communication. However, in communication with others, Sunuwars use Nepali language. They have their own script which according to some linguists is based on Cuneiform Letter. The specialists opine that the script was used in the days of the Kirats (almost 5059 years ago) and became dormant due to non-usage after the downfall of the Kirats. The Sunuwar script (or Koinch Bress) is given in Annexure I. There are 22 letters out of which 6 are vowels and 16 are consonants.

Occupation: Sunuwars mainly depended on their hunting skill for their livelihood in the early days. Various documents on Sunuwars [Darjeeling District Gazetteer (LSS O'Malley), 1907; Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, 1954] repeatedly mention this lifestyle of the Sunuwars and have described them as tribe. The tradition has been handed down to generations and even during the last Chogyal's tenure a Sunuwar was employed in early forties by the Sikkim Durbar as a hunter to go after wild animals that destroyed crops and gardens of the villagers in the kingdom. The man was given a plot of land as reward in the remote part of the West District at Lhamthang in Khechiperi block in appreciation of his service, and his descendants are found to be living there to this day. It is not uncommon to find Sunuwars even today being employed by villagers as tree-climbers/hunters to chase wild animals in odd places.

Majority of the Sunuwars in the villages earn their livelihood by cultivation and bamboo-craft nowadays. Sunuwars are known to be excellent basket-makers and their skill on bamboo-craft is displayed often in market-place to help them earn precious livelihood. Bamboo-baskets prepared by some Sunuwars are depicted in Annexure III.

Rites, Customs, Rituals: Sunuwars' custom, rites and rituals in various ceremonies and during birth, marriage and death are specific and distinct. The rituals are completely shamanist involving sacrifice of animals and birds of the jungle and the symbolic use of bows and arrows. Though some parts of rituals often involve the Hindu system (Hinduism was adopted by the Sunuwars in the late nineteenth century) the Sunuwars invariably employ their own poojaris called Poibo (male poojari), Gnyami (female poojari) and Natso (Annexure III: photographs). The Poibos often fall into a state of trance during the performance of the rituals and voices speak through their person. They communicate with the world of spirits, know the past, present and future and discern the causes of evils inflicted by angry spirits and then exorcise them. Poibos are the intermediaries between the world of spirits and the profane world of the villagers (Harriet Leva Beegun, Spirit Possession in the Himalayas –The Sunuwar shamans of Sabra, 1994).

Every Sunuwar keeps in his/her home bamboo altars called "Laga" which are set up on the northern and southern corners of a room at suitable heights. The altar on the northern corner is called "Yabray Laga" and the one on the southern corner is called the "Peepee Laga". The Lagas have several compartments that are supposed to accommodate the deities and spirits of the ancestors. A small bamboo cylinder containing clean water and tiny white cloth strip are installed in front of each compartment to propitiate the deities and the spirits of the ancestors. Pujas are conducted every full moon and new moon on these altars by the elders and on other important occasion by the Poibos and Natsos. The photograph of a Yabray Laga is displayed on Annexure III.

The Sunuwars begin their pujas by burning "Sukpa Dhoop" (incense) or butter at the fireplace/hearth and Nik Baku is offered every full moon and new moon at the altars or Lagas (Please see Annexure II).

Sunuwars are non-vegetarian, and eat buffalo, pork, fish, chicken and eggs. As such it is but natural to find Sunuwars using sacrifice of animals and birds lavishly in every ritual of theirs. In fact many of their community celebrations cannot be performed without the offering of the extremities of a pig (wild or domestic) to their deities. Alcoholic drinks are quite common and taken regularly by both sexes. Sanyaboo is a home made drink prepared from millet. The distilled drink called Raksi and Sanyaboo are widely used in the various celebrations and rites observed by the Sunuwars. No ceremony, puja or rites of the Sunuwars are complete without the use of Sanyaboo and Raksi.

Birth Rite:

- a) *Baslasyo*: It is the naming ceremony for the new born child. Third day after the birth of a child the newly born is taken to the room of worship where Lagas are kept. Generally grandmother of the house will display the baby to the Peepee Laga reciting mantras in Koinch and name the new born. This ceremony in Sunuwar language is called Baslasyo. For a son the rite is conducted by worshipping the Snake God in front of the house. Cowdung is placed on a stone, into which five small branches of a plant are placed. On each branch *Bospati* flower is attached and *Syanboo* in a small container is placed near by. The eldest of the family conducts puja and gives name to the baby. For a girl child the same puja is conducted at the back of the house.
- b) *Pasnee (Khome Umcha)*: Among the Sunuwar community six months after a son's birth or five months after a daughter's birth a feast is arranged for feeding the child with rice where relatives and friends are invited. This is called Pasnee. Maternal uncie presents a new dress for the child. The child is fed solid food on the occasion and each of the invitees blesses the child with Teeka and presents money. Either the grandmother or the mother walks a mile announcing that feast of Pasnee is executed.
- c) *Preeya-Precha*: When a male child is one year six months old, hair-cutting ceremony is observed where maternal uncle is the main participant. He shaves the child's hair and after the ceremony presents the child with new clothes and money. A feast is given to near relatives and friends, which consist of *Sel Roti, Kheer, Syanboo* and *Raksi* along with non-vegetarian items.

Marriage: For sorting out the arrangement of marriage the bridegroom's representatives visit the bride's home with *Raksi* or *Syanboo*. When the marriage is performed new clothes or dress, ornaments etc. to be given to the bride and the bridegroom are taken to the Lagas and shown to the spirits of the ancestors reciting incantations in Koinch.

The Sunuwars follow exogamy at the clan level and endogamy at the level of the community. Both sororate and levirate are accepted at the junior level. The age of marriage for girls varies form 15 to 16 years while that of the boys is between 18 and 19 years. There are different ways in which marriage is done: (i) marriage by negotiation, (ii) marriage through elopement, (iii) love marriage and (iv) after divorce marriage (*Jari*).

Application of vermillion on the forehead and wearing of Poteymala (3 or 4 strings of green beads as necklace) are the signs of a married woman. Bride-price in cash is to be paid at the time of marriage.

*Like other
nepalis*

Marriage rituals are performed at the residences of both the bride and the bridegroom, and feasts are given by both families. When a boy attains the age of marriage his family looks for a match. The first part of the ceremonial consists of negotiation with the girl's family. A *Lamee* (go-between) is sent to the girl's house with two bottles of distilled liquor (*Raksi*) or two pots of *Syanboo*. Then *Mangni* ceremony follows after some months/days. Boy's father along with *Lamee* goes to the girl's place with *Syanboo* (five *Pathi* millet – one potful), one he-goat, one cock, some coins (mohars), one *mana* salt, one *mana* turmeric (*besar*), cooking oil and small kid. These items are used to conduct customary puja (called *Pidar*) by the *Sunuwar* priest, *Poibo*. [If these articles are returned, the negotiation becomes null and the girl's parents are not bound to give away the daughter as bride]. This ceremony is called *Chardam Saimudri Theki*. Marriage date is then fixed when a Brahmin is consulted for selection of auspicious date.

The Bridegroom is taken to the bride's home on the day of marriage with *Jantee* (*barat*). Feast, according to financial flexibilities, is arranged on bride's home. After the ceremony, bride is taken to bridegroom's house with much rejoicing and dancing. On the fourth day after the marriage ceremony the bride and bridegroom visit bride's home from the groom's residence. This is called "*Duran*" and the couple returns to the groom's house after spending a few days in the bride's residence.

In early days, the marriage ceremony used to be performed by the "*Poibos*". However, in recent system the community uses Brahmin and Hindu rites are usually observed. The Brahmin reads mantras and builds a sacrificial fire (*hom* or *havan*). The bridegroom smears vermillion (*Sindur*) on bride's forehead and on the parting line of the hair (*Siundo*) in front of the sacrificial fire. The couple moves round the *Havan* three times. Then feast starts with guests, relatives and friends offering gifts and *Teeka* to the couple and merry-making. Observance of Hindu custom is indicative of how the traditional customs of the *Sunuwars* are slowly disappearing and being taken over by the others culture/tradition. Protection and development of tradition/culture of the minority needs to be implemented as urgently as possible before they get swallowed up by the prevalent rites/cultures of the majority.

Death Rite: Immediately after death, the dead body is covered with a shawl and a *khukri* knife is kept near the head with a plate (made of *Kans*) containing rice and a lit "*pala*" (lamp). *Poibo* is called, *Sagun* is offered to the dead and a pot of *Syanboo* is broken as the dead body is taken out of the house. One *mana* (a *pawa* or quarter seer) of rice is wrapped up in a

handkerchief which is placed on the chest of the corpse. Cooked rice is also brought to the cemetery or crematory for sprinkling over the dead body at the time of burial or cremation. Sunuwars either bury or cremate their dead. The elaborate death rite is conducted by the Poibos where the spirit of the dead is guided through various spiritual abodes. The soul of the dead is temporarily made to rest in a place known to the Poibos during the purification ceremony. This is usually done after 5 or 13 days from the day the person dies. Six months or a year later, Chhengoo is performed for the soul when the spirit is guided to the permanent ancestral home for the dead. In early days tabernacle for worship to the departed soul used to be erected and nine *Tormas* (rice cones) used to be installed. Poibos used to perform the ceremonial rites. However, fortunately or unfortunately, this custom is fast being replaced by Hindu System. Brahmans read mantras for ten days and the offerings made to the dead soul are thrown away by Poibos through rituals. On the last day of the rite, a fowl or a goat is sacrificed; the meat is cooked and on a leaf plate oil, salt and the meat are placed. All the relatives are then made to touch the combination, after which the period of pollution is said to end.

In addition to the rites mentioned above Sunuwars observe and perform various ceremonies and pujas on different occasion and season. These pujas are always conducted by the Poibo and Natso. Though several rites and traditions resemble with those of other communities like Gurungs, Mangars, Limbus, Rais, etc. there are such ceremonies and pujas as are unique among Sunuwar communities alone. A few examples of the ceremonies are summarized hereunder:

1. *Sagoon*: This is a minor puja done twice a year by Natso with *Syanboo*, incense, *Bospati* (*Oroxylum Indicum*) to propitiate the Sunuwar gods and spirits of the dead ancestors.
2. *Chhengoo*: During this ritual Poibos invoke Sunuwar deities and the spirits of the dead supposedly camping temporarily in a monastery after death. Altars are prepared and *Syanboo* offered and the Poibo chants incantations accompanied by beating of drums by the Natso. Cones of different sizes (called *Torma*, 108 in number), are prepared out of cooked rice for the ceremony. Bows and arrows are prepared and a dummy bird called '*Chirinamdi*' are modeled out of the cooked rice and placed upon the largest rice cone. During the puja the Poibo guides the spirit through the hunting grounds to the distant and invisible abode of the dead ancestors. The photograph depicting Poibos getting ready to perform *Chhengoo* is given in Annexure III.

- 108 → 108
3. *Kash*: An expensive worship of the Sunuwars lasting three days. It is presumed hundred and eight *Chhegoo* is equivalent to one *Kash* and hundred eight *Kash* equals one *Geel*.
 4. *Geel*: This is the greatest puja of the Sunuwars and is the most expensive requiring sacrifice of 360 birds and animals. Hence most Sunuwars use the occasion of *Chhengoo* to fulfill their wish to perform *Geel* puja.
 5. *Chandee*: This is a ceremony held in the month of Vaishak full moon day with great pomp and grandeur. Different types of drums (male and female) are used along with cymbals to worship the Goddess *Chandee* – the most important deity worshipped by the Sunuwars. Poibos lead the puja with sacrifice of the animals and offering of *Syanboo* to the Goddess. Large gathering of participants and audience take part in dances (at least 15 varieties) to the beatings (at least 10 different types) of the drums. There is one sacred locality where this ceremony is done by the Sunuwars in a group.

A host of other minor pujas are regularly performed by the Sunuwars throughout the year. Some of them are:

Surome puja: worship of Goddess of cereals & crop.

Saday puja: worship of the god who protects the house.

Mesemsee puja: done for overall good of the family.

Basuraja puja: done for fulfillment of wish

Baas puja: Rainbow god is worshipped

Phosoo puja: Fireplace is worshipped

Aitbaray puja: Spirit of young girl who was killed accidentally by a falling tree is worshipped. Usually roosters or a goat are sacrificed.

Folkdances, Folk songs, Musical Instruments: Sunuwar boys and girls, men and women dance together on important festivals. They have their own folksong. Their instruments are mainly different types of drums and cymbals. (Please see Annexure III). Sunuwars have four important folk dances- (i) Main *Chandi Sheel* (ii) *Bhor Puincha Sheel* (iii) *Buoor Sheel* and (iv) *Nougee Sheel*. Main *Chandi Sheel* has fifteen different types of dances in which movements of birds, animals and insects are imitated. Usually in *Chandi Sheel* eight different drums are used by eight different Natso for dance. Being shy and rather withdrawn Sunuwars have started participation in Bhanujayanti and other religious festivals of Sikkim only very recently, in which the folkdances of various communities are displayed.

Sunuwar's main dress resembles the dresses of other Nepali community in Sikkim, over and above which they wear their own special apparels. Men wear a colourful scarf, *Kamar Bandhi* and *Namja* (purse slung over shoulder and hangs over the waist on one side). These are hand-knitted and decorated with shining glass beads and tiny mirrors. Women wear similar colourful headgear which is also hand-knitted. However, the traditional dresses of the Sunuwar used to be knitted out of thread prepared from *Bhangre Sishnu* (Stinging Nettles), which is no more in vogue these days.

Economic and Social Status:

The *Barsothare* Sunuwar claim to be the highest in the social hierarchy. They consider themselves to be in the same rung with the Gurungs, Mangars, Rais, etc. in the caste hierarchies. Among the Sunuwar the extended family is more common than the nuclear families though there is a tendency of a steady decline in the extended family. Conflict and confrontation are not so common but may arise while making division of property or when there is challenge to the authority of the elders. The property is equally divided among the sons. Traditionally women did not inherit landed property like the men, but otherwise they have had equal status in society. During the puja or other religious and social activities women have their own role in the observation of the rituals. A very small percentage of women are engaged in earning money by selling agricultural produce in the market. Still they have more obligations towards domestic affairs.

At present the main economic resource of the Sunuwar is land. There are a few Sunuwar landowners (about 1%) who are marginal farmers. Majority of Sunuwar are landless and sustain themselves in the role of share-croppers. Agriculture and working as agricultural labourers constitute their primary occupation. As a subsidiary mode they work as labourers in road construction. They sell their excess agricultural products in the market to obtain cash. A few of them own domestic animals like goats, sheep, cows, etc.

Formal education is favoured for boys and only partly for girls. Boys study up to the secondary level and the girls study up to the primary level. The boys drop out from the study when they have to earn to support their families. Due to poverty and their habitation being in remote and inaccessible areas the number of school goers is very low. At present, mere 10% of the populace are literate - three are post-graduates, about half dozen are graduates and around twenty with Secondary and Higher Secondary Certificates.

Statistics reveal dismal picture of the Sunuwars engaged in Government jobs. Very few Sunuwars are inducted in Class I & II grades. Most of the Sunuwars employed in Government Services are in Class IV & III grades.

1. IAS	-	nil	2. IPS	-	nil
3. IFS	-	nil	4. Sr. Sikkim Govt. Officers	-	1
5. Sikkim Civil Service	-	1	6. Sikkim Finance & Account Service	-	1
7. Sikkim Police Service	-	1	8. Sikkim Judicial Service	-	nil
9. Engineers	-	nil	10. Doctors	-	nil
11. Lawyers	-	nil	12. Sikkim Forest Service	-	nil
13. Business	-	nil			

Socially, economically, educationally and numerically the Sunuwars are at the lowest rung amongst the various communities of Sikkim. Around 90% of the Sunuwars are below poverty line.

This brief account of the Sunuwars has been based on the following references:

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Annexure I

Sunuwar Script or Koinch Bress

(अक्षर) लिपि (स्वर लिपि) डोल			(व्यञ्जन लिपि) साङ्ग								
स्वर लिपि	उच्चारण	ध्वनि	लिपि	उच्चारण	ध्वनि	लिपि	उच्चारण	ध्वनि			
□	देवी (देवीह)	द, ड	𑌒	किरु	क	𑌑	बूर	ब			
△	तामसा	त, ट	𑌓	ममांह	म	𑌔	ज्युह	ज			
±	एफो	स, से	𑌕	आफ-फो	अ	𑌖	लोह-जा	ल			
†	इगर (इगंउ)	इ, ई	𑌗	पिप	प	𑌘	मोँथ	म			
N	रेऊ	र, रू	𑌙	गिल	ग	𑌚	शेह	श, स			
✓	उत्थ	उ, ऊ	𑌛	हा-शो	ह	𑌜	वाहरु (नाह-य)	व			
कोइँच हित सुनुवारी अङ्क			𑌝	चहमी (चाह-मी)	च	𑌞	यात (यात)	य			
			𑌟	नाँह	न	𑌠	ह	ख			
भङ्ग लिपि	1	†	±	□	△	▽	X	+	10	0	
उच्चारण	का	किं	साँह	ले	डो	रकु	चनी	साँ	माँ	गोरु	सु
द्वयनागरी	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	0
अंग्रेजी	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	0
रोमन	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	-

Annexure II

A sample of Sunuvars' incantations for worshipping gods or goddesses:

Sookpa dhoop or butter is put in the fireplace. A Sunuwar will start the puja with the starting mantra "Devaluki Surikhuri" and then chant the following incantations:

Sang So.....

Chuplo Bani, Dablo Bani, Shabda Bani,
Geebda Bani, Muso Thalo Bani, Khusyo Bani,
Kisyo Bani, Garg Bani, Rikhi Bani,
Jikhi Bani, Purkha Bani, Ala Bresyo,
Kali Cha Cha Thu Thu Kali Rachhey Pangeycha,
Chhama Pangeycha, Nou Grah Shanti Pangeycha.

[Gods that reside in various places like the fireplace, the house-top, tree, etc.etc. are invoked to offer protection to the family, to bring peace & prosperity and to forgive any mistakes and wrongs done by the living]

The Sunuwar or Poibo will next turn to the Yabrey Laga and invoke "the ancestors. He will mop the floor with water and keep various offerings on a bamboo cane plate to the right of the Yabrey Laga. This is taken to the door with burning of incense and the following incantations are chanted:

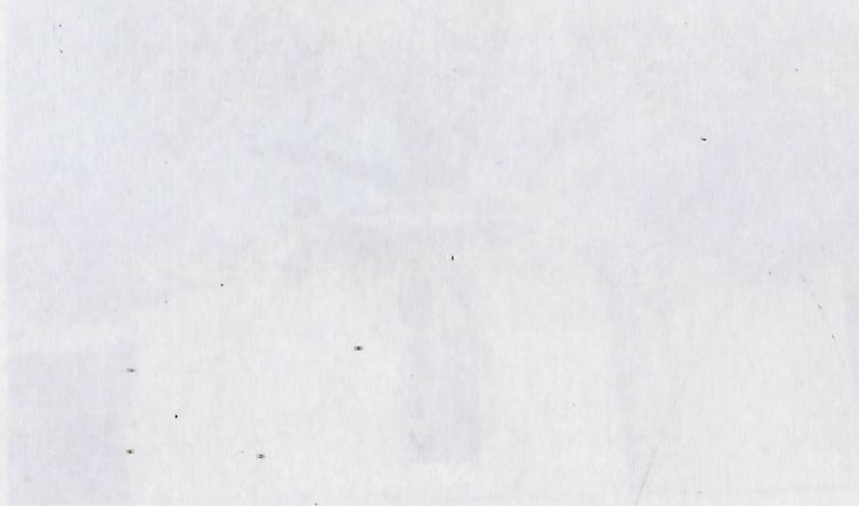
Sang So Pidar Namjanga Tara Sarangi Muli
Warangi Muli, Lolo Bolo Kali Chacha
Yuyu Kali, Rachhey Pangeycha, Chhama Pangeycha
Nou Grah Shanti Pangeycha.

Sang So Pidar Namjanga

Yabrey Hopo, Yabrey Gubrey, Muso Yabrey
Thalo Yabrey, Parug Yabrey, Maita Yabrey
Chyuita Yabrey, Syou Dumuni Gou Dumuni
Sang So

[The pujari or the elder chants: O various gods and goddesses of the land, water, trees, mountains, sky, rocks and caves ! I offer this incense to you. I offer the pure water and I bow down to you. Protect us and our children from evils, forgive us for our wrongs and give us peace]

The chanting that invokes many gods and goddesses and spirits of the ancestors is continued for half an hour or more at the end of which the offerings are distributed among the participants of the Puja and all other members present in the house.



SUNUWAR'S PLACE OF WORSHIP



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS WORSHIPPED BEFORE THE CHANDER DANCE



SUNUWAR'S PLACE OF WORSHIP



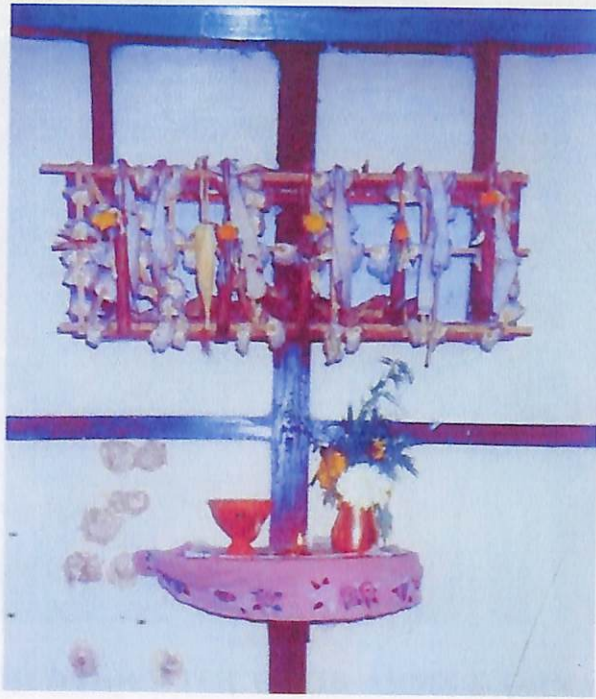
**MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS WORSHIPPED BEFORE USE IN
*CHANDEE DANCE***



OFFERING AT SUNUWAR'S POOJA



TYPICAL SUNUWASR'S POOJA WHERE POIBPO POINTS TO A WHITE SPECK IN WATER DEVELOPED AFTER INCANTATIONS - WHICH IS A HELPER TO PERSON'S SPRITUAL WELL-BEING



YABREY LAGA (SUNUWAR'S TABERNACLE)



A NATSO CHANTING INCANTATIONS



POIBOS & A HUNTER WITH THEIR ARMS & ORNAMENTS & IN TRADITIONAL DRESS



A POIBO PERFORMING POOJA



BAMBOO – CRAFT BY SUNUWARS



**DELEE: A BAMBOO CRAFT BASKET TO KEEP POIBO'S
ITEMS OF WORSHIP**



**A SUNUWAR IN TRADITIONAL
DRESS BEATING DRUM FOR
CHANDI DANCE**



A SUNUWAR HUNTER



SUNUWAR *BELLE* IN TRADITIONAL DRESS



YOUNG SUNUWAR COUPLE



A TROUPE OF DANCERS WITH DRUMS & CYMBALS



DHOBINEE SEEL - SUNUWAR DANCE



SUNUWAR'S HOME