



Ritual Ecology and the Institution of Genna among the Koireng of Manipur: An Ethnographic Study of Seasonal Rites, Social Regulation and Religious Change

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Abstract

The Koireng, a small tribe of Manipur, organize their agricultural and social year around an elaborate cycle of communal rituals intimately linked to shifting cultivation. This paper presents the first comprehensive ethnographic account of this cycle, with special focus on the institution of genna (ritual prohibition) — the central mechanism that synchronizes labor, protects ritual efficacy, conserves resources and maintains cosmological boundaries. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in Longa Koireng, Sadu Koireng, Utonglok and Awang Longa Koireng villages, the study documents key rites (Khokam, Kaangrai mindai, Bedal, Chalamkei, Ruichum, Cham-er ser, etc.), the role of the village gate (suongkung), animal sacrifice, dream interpretation and titled functionaries. It further analyses how genna continues to function as an instrument of ecological and social regulation even after widespread Christianization since the 1950s. The Koireng case contributes to ecological anthropology, studies of indigenous temporality and understanding religious change in Northeast India.

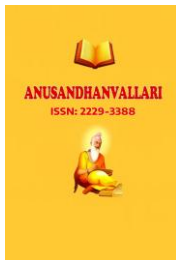
Keywords: Koireng, Manipur, genna, ritual ecology, shifting cultivation, village gate, indigenous knowledge, religious change, Northeast India

Introduction

The Koireng—who refer to themselves as Koren or Koireng—are a small Tibeto-Burman-speaking community situated primarily in Kangpokpi district of Manipur. Despite their long historical presence in the region, they remain among the least documented Indigenous communities, with only scattered references in earlier ethnographic writings (Zeite 1995; Bareh 2001). This lack of systematic documentation has resulted in significant gaps in our understanding of their cultural traditions, oral histories, and social institutions. Yet, the limited material that exists consistently highlights the Koireng as a community with a strong attachment to their land, agricultural rhythms, and ritual life.

Economically, the Koireng continue to depend heavily on jhum cultivation, a form of shifting agriculture practiced across the hills of Northeast India. Jhum is not just a subsistence technique for them; it is a rhythm of life that demands careful observation of ecological changes, climatic patterns, and ancestral rituals. In valleys where the terrain permits, they also maintain wet-rice terraces, though these are fewer compared to the extensive jhum fields on the surrounding hill slopes. Alongside farming, the Koireng rely on the collection of forest produce—wild fruits, medicinal herbs, bamboo, firewood, and edible plants. Forests hold more than economic value—they form a spiritual landscape where ancestral spirits reside and where ritual offerings are made.

The village is the core of Koireng social life. It represents both a physical settlement and a symbolic world where kinship, ritual obligations, and authority structures intersect. Each village is traditionally governed by a hereditary chief, referred to as the kulakpa or luklakpa. His authority is rooted not only in lineage but also in his role as the



guardian of the village's spiritual and territorial integrity. While he oversees administrative matters such as land allocation and conflict resolution, his responsibilities extend deeply into ritual domains.

Assisting the chief is the Thiempu, the village priest who performs the crucial task of mediating between humans and the unseen world. The Thiempu presides over seasonal rituals, healing ceremonies, and rites of protection. His knowledge of chants, ritual timings, and sacrificial procedures is considered indispensable. Alongside them are the panchi (council of elders) and other specialized functionaries responsible for maintaining the social, ritual, and moral order of the community. These institutions collectively reflect a traditional system where political authority and ritual authority are inseparably intertwined.

One of the most defining features of Koireng cosmology is their view of the agricultural cycle. For the Koireng, the agricultural year is not a neutral calendar of sowing and harvesting. Instead, it is understood as a dangerous and uncertain passage, a journey marked by moments of vulnerability when human actions are believed to directly influence the favour or anger of spiritual forces. Natural calamities, crop failures, and illnesses are interpreted not merely as environmental events but as consequences of ritual imbalance or neglect.

Thus, the entire year is framed by a sequence of collective ceremonies that open, protect, accompany, and finally close the agricultural cycle. These ceremonies are not isolated events; they are deeply integrated into the social fabric of village life. At the beginning of the year, rituals are performed to cleanse the land, appease territorial spirits, and ensure fertility. As the cycle progresses, additional rites guide the sowing of seeds, the growth of crops, and the protection of the fields from harm. Finally, the harvesting season is celebrated with thanksgiving rituals offered to ancestral deities who are believed to guard the prosperity of the community.

The institution that organizes and governs the timing and performance of these ceremonies is called genna. The term "genna" broadly refers to a period of ritual prohibition, during which normal activities are temporarily suspended. Genna is not a punishment; it is a sacred pause—a time when the village collectively withdraws from everyday life to honour rituals that maintain the balance between humans, nature, and the spirit world.

During genna, activities such as travelling to other villages, hosting guests, conducting major economic work, or engaging in conflicts are strictly prohibited. Villagers stay within the settlement, refrain from unnecessary labour, and concentrate on the rituals at hand. The objective is to protect the community from external disturbances at moments when they believe the spiritual boundary of the village is thin and vulnerable.

Genna also reinforces the unity and moral discipline of the community. Since it requires collective participation, it reaffirms the village as a single ritual body. Violations of genna are treated as serious offences, not only because they disrupt spiritual balance but because they undermine the social cohesion of the group. Through genna, the Koireng emphasise the idea that prosperity is not an individual achievement but a shared responsibility upheld by adherence to ritual norms.

Anthropologically, genna serves multiple functions. It regulates the tempo of village life, ensuring that economic activities do not overtake ritual obligations. It creates a sense of sacred time distinct from everyday time. It establishes the authority of the chief and priest, whose knowledge determines the appropriate moments for ritual closure. And most importantly, it constructs a protective boundary around the village—a symbolic fence that shields the community during periods of heightened spiritual sensitivity.

For the Koireng, the agricultural cycle is therefore more than a seasonal routine; it is a ritualised journey that requires careful navigation through ceremonies, prohibitions, and ancestral obligations. The village emerges as a moral and



spiritual entity—one that must be repeatedly renewed, protected, and sanctified. The chief, priest, and council members carry the responsibility of guiding the community through this journey, ensuring that each stage of agricultural labour is supported by the appropriate ritual framework.

Despite the pressures of modernization, external religious influences, and administrative changes, many Koireng villages continue to uphold these traditions. Their ritual system, especially the institution of genna, remains a powerful expression of their identity, resilience, and worldview. It reflects a philosophy in which human survival does not depend solely on labour or technology but on a deeper relationship with the land, the ancestors, and the unseen forces believed to shape the destiny of the community.

The Annual Ritual Cycle: A Chronological Overview

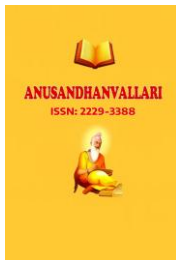
Local month	Gregorian equivalent	Major ritual	Purpose & key actions	Genna imposed
Wulpi (Feb)	Feb–Mar	Khokam / Khodoi tho	Village-sealing; heads of dog & goat hung at gate	1 full day
–	Mar	Kaangrai mindai	Collection of jhum ashes for fertility	1 full day
Mertun–Phurpa	Apr–May	Bedal (New Year & seed-sowing)	Digging of ritual clay, porridge distribution	1 night
Chaipi	Jun–Jul	Chalamkei / Charaikei	Protection of growing paddy from pests	1 day + night
Ertha- Thapal	Oct–Nov	Cham-er ser (Khopu rijul)	Expulsion of evil spirits by fire and noise	1 night
Post-harvest	Nov–Dec	Ruichum → Cha-del	Propitiation of rice spirit; thanksgiving	1–3 days

Other situational gennas (death, childbirth, abnormal omens) may interrupt the calendar at any time.

The Institution of Genna in Detail

The declaration of genna marks a moment of profound transformation in the life of a Koireng village, shifting it from the domain of everyday activity into a state of sacred protection. Although genna may be observed several times throughout the agricultural year, each declaration follows a formalised procedure that reflects the community's deep respect for ritual order. The responsibility for announcing the genna rests with the village crier, known as the tangva, who performs this task in the evening when the transition from daylight to darkness symbolically mirrors the passage from the ordinary to the sacred.

Standing at a central point in the village, or moving through its main pathways, the tangva proclaims the genna using fixed, traditional formulae. Among the most commonly used is the emphatic call: “Sun-serra jaan-serra!”—a phrase that translates to “Complete restraint day and night!” These words are not merely informative; they carry the authority of tradition and invoke an immediate shift in communal consciousness. Their recitation signals to every household that the village is entering a period of regulated behaviour, heightened discipline, and ritual sensitivity.



Immediately after the proclamation, the village gate, known as the suongkung, becomes the focus of symbolic action. It is fenced or bound with kaangjam vine, a plant chosen not for practical utility but for its ritual significance. The vine acts as both a physical marker and a metaphysical boundary, declaring that the village is now closed to movement, intrusion, or external disturbance. No outsider may enter, and no villager may leave until the genna period concludes. The vine, fragile yet potent in its symbolism, embodies the idea that sacred boundaries are maintained not by force but by collective obedience and shared belief.

Fencing the suongkung transforms the village into a protected ritual space. It is believed that during genna, the spiritual membrane surrounding the community becomes thin, making it vulnerable to malign forces, ill fortune, or ritual pollution. By sealing the gate, the Koireng symbolically enclose the village, preventing anything harmful—whether human, spiritual, or metaphorical—from crossing into the sacred interior at a time when the community is engaged in delicate rites.

The declaration of genna therefore functions on multiple levels. It is a legal announcement, a ritual invocation, a moral reminder, and a spatial transformation of the settlement. Through the tangva's call and the symbolic fencing of the gate, the Koireng reaffirm their unity, their respect for ancestral injunctions, and their understanding that communal wellbeing depends on strict adherence to ritual boundaries. The ceremony marks the beginning of a sacred interval in which ordinary life is paused so that the village may navigate, undisturbed, the spiritually charged moments of the agricultural cycle.

Core prohibitions During full village genna the following are forbidden to every resident:

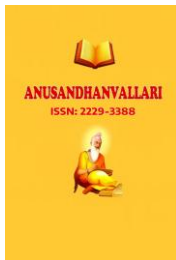
- leaving or entering the village
- all agricultural work and firewood collection
- brewing/distilling rice beer
- yarning cotton
- black smithy, drumming, loud noise
- sexual relations
- individual rituals or magic

Enforcement and sanction Breach is regarded as an offence against the entire community and the spirits. Traditional penalty (leisea) = one pig or large jar of rice beer. Social pressure is immediate and total.

Lifting At dawn the priest or chief removes the vine fence and announces "Ngun-na thak tü!" Normal life resumes instantly.

Functions

1. Ecological synchrony – forces simultaneous clearing, burning and sowing
2. Resource conservation – mandatory rest periods for soil and forest
3. Ritual efficacy – allows sacrificial "power" to work undisturbed
4. Social solidarity – shared restraint and subsequent feasting reinforce corporate identity.



Continuity and Change in the Christian Era

The mid-twentieth century marked a profound turning point in Koireng religious and cultural life. Beginning in the 1950s, waves of conversion to Christianity, particularly the Baptist faith, reshaped the spiritual landscape of the community. Missionaries, local evangelists, and returning converts introduced new forms of worship, moral teachings, and communal practices that gradually displaced many elements of the older ritual system. Conversion was not merely a change in religious identity; it was a shift that permeated social organisation, ritual authority, and the everyday rhythms of village life.

As Christianity took root, the community leadership began to formalise the transition from traditional religion to the new faith. The most influential interventions came from the Koireng Chingsang Committee, which issued important resolutions in 1950, 1970, and 1980. These resolutions directly targeted practices that missionaries considered incompatible with Christian teaching—especially those involving animal sacrifice, a central component of many gennas. Traditionally, sacrificial offerings were believed to placate ancestral spirits, ensure agricultural fertility, and protect the village during periods of ritual vulnerability. However, Christian doctrine rejected such rituals as pagan or spiritually harmful.

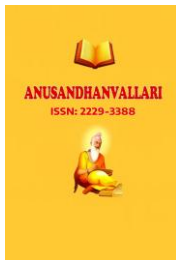
The Committee's resolutions therefore banned or significantly simplified gennas that required blood sacrifice. In some cases, the rituals were replaced with prayer services; in others, they were abandoned altogether. The authority of the Thiempu and ritual specialists declined steadily, while the pastor, church elders, and new congregational structures assumed moral and spiritual leadership within the village. Yet, despite these institutional changes, the memory and symbolic logic of genna did not disappear entirely.

Many aspects of the older system survived in transformed ways. Certain gennas that emphasised communal rest, village unity, or seasonal thanksgiving were retained but reinterpreted through Christian meanings. Prohibitions against travel or major work during sensitive times—once justified through fear of spiritual imbalance—were reframed as acts of collective discipline, reflection, or worship. Even the village-wide suspension of activity, formerly enforced by ritual authority, continued in modified forms during church-sponsored holidays, revival meetings, or prayer gatherings.

Thus, the Christian era brought both rupture and continuity. While the theological foundations of genna were largely dismantled, its social logic—collective discipline, sacred time, and communal identity—remained deeply embedded in Koireng life. Christianity did not erase tradition; rather, it reshaped it, producing a hybrid landscape in which remnants of the older worldview persist beneath the surface of modern religious practice. By 2025 the situation is:

- Khokam, Kaangrai mindai and Chalamkei are no longer performed with sacrifice in most villages
- Genna after death, childbirth and village cleaning is still universally observed
- Work and movement prohibitions remain strong even in fully Christian villages
- Elders frequently link declining yields and “disorderly” agriculture to the shortening of genna

Thus genna has proved more resilient than sacrifice itself — revealing that the core principle of collective sacred timing retains deep social and ecological salience.



Objectives

1. To examine the traditional institution of genna among the Koireng, focusing on its ritual structure, symbolic meanings, and its role in regulating agricultural, social, and spiritual life.
2. To analyse the transformations brought by the spread of Christianity, particularly how ritual prohibitions, leadership structures, and sacrificial practices were modified, simplified, or replaced through collective resolutions and church influence.
3. To understand the continuity and adaptation of cultural practices, assessing how elements of genna persist, evolve, or re-emerge in contemporary Koireng society through modified rituals, communal discipline, and hybrid cultural expressions

Literature Review

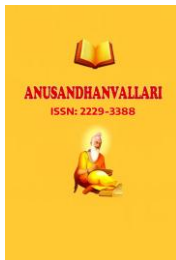
Scholarly literature on the Koireng is limited, with only a few ethnographic references available in earlier writings. Zeite (1995) and Bareh (2001) provide brief accounts of the Koireng's ethnolinguistic background and describe aspects of their subsistence patterns, leadership structures, and ritual life. Although these works offer valuable documentation, they remain largely descriptive and do not fully explore the deeper cultural logic of their ritual system, particularly the institution of genna. Studies on neighbouring tribes such as the Aimol, Chiru, and Purum provide useful comparative insights, as these communities share similar traditions of ritual prohibition, agricultural ceremonies, and village-centred governance.

Broader anthropological literature on Northeast Indian hill societies further contextualises the Koireng experience. Scholars such as Furer-Haimendorf, Gangmumei Kamei, and Kabui discuss how upland communities interpret the agricultural cycle as a spiritually sensitive period requiring protective rituals. Their analyses of genna-like institutions among various Naga and other hill groups help illuminate the cultural logic behind ritual closure, communal discipline, and the perceived link between spiritual danger and ecological vulnerability.

Christian conversion and its impact on Indigenous ritual life have also been widely examined across the region. Research on the Mizo, Tangkhul, and Kuki-Chin communities reveals patterns of ritual banning, moral reform, and the emergence of hybrid cultural practices. These studies provide a broader framework for understanding how the Koireng negotiated continuity and change through church resolutions, selective adaptation, and reinterpretation of older cultural norms.

Methodology

This study employs a combined primary and secondary research methodology to explore the institution of genna and its transformation in the Christian era. Primary data is drawn from oral narratives, personal conversations, and unstructured interviews with elders, village leaders, and knowledgeable community members. These oral accounts provide firsthand insights into the meanings, practices, and memories associated with genna, as well as the community's reflections on changes brought by Christianity. Narrative approaches allow participants to express their experiences in their own words, offering a deeper understanding of cultural logic, ritual symbolism, and historical shifts.



Secondary data is sourced from existing literature, including ethnographic writings, historical records, church resolutions, and comparative studies on neighbouring hill groups. Although documentation on the Koireng is limited, these sources help situate the community within broader regional patterns of ritual practice, religious transformation, and cultural adaptation.

By integrating oral testimonies with documented materials, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach. This blended methodology allows for a holistic reconstruction of genna—its traditional significance, its transformation under new religious influences, and its continuing role in shaping Koireng identity, communal discipline, and social life.

Discussion and Finding

The study of the Koireng institution of genna reveals a ritual system that has long served as a central mechanism for regulating social behaviour, maintaining spiritual balance, and ensuring agricultural prosperity. Genna, in its traditional form, was more than a religious observance; it was a powerful organising principle that structured the temporal, spatial, and moral life of the village. The declaration of genna, the fencing of the village gate, and the strict observance of communal prohibitions worked collectively to reaffirm unity, reinforce authority, and protect the community during periods perceived as spiritually vulnerable. These practices illuminate how the Koireng integrated cosmology with everyday governance, embedding ritual discipline within social organisation.

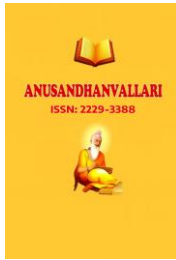
The findings also suggest that genna functioned as a subtle system of social control, shaping behaviour through shared belief rather than coercion. By situating agricultural tasks within a sacred framework, the community fostered cooperation, mutual dependency, and respect for customary leadership. The role of the chief, priest, and council of elders in overseeing these rituals underscores the interdependence between political and spiritual authority. The institution thus helped preserve order and continuity in a small, tightly knit society where cultural survival depended heavily on collective action.

However, the emergence of Christianity in the 1950s introduced significant changes. The resolutions of the Koireng Chingsang Committee, particularly those banning animal sacrifices, demonstrate how external religious influences reshaped traditional practice. Yet the research shows that Christianity did not entirely erase genna. Instead, many aspects of the institution were adapted, reinterpreted, or symbolically retained. While the ritual meanings tied to ancestral spirits diminished, the social logic of communal rest, discipline, and coordinated observance continued in various forms. This indicates a process of cultural negotiation rather than outright replacement.

Overall, the findings portray a community navigating the tension between tradition and modernity. Genna persists as a cultural memory and a moral framework, even as the theological foundations that once supported it have transformed. The Koireng experience demonstrates how Indigenous cultures selectively preserve, modify, or abandon practices in response to changing religious, economic, and social conditions.

Conclusion

The Koireng ritual-genna complex constitutes a sophisticated indigenous knowledge system that regulates time, labor, risk and social cohesion in a fragile hill environment. Its partial survival under Christianity demonstrates both the



adaptability of tradition and the enduring practical value of ritual ecology. The case invites comparative research with neighboring tribes (Kom, Aimol, Chiru, Purum) and contributes to broader debates on indigenous resource management and religious transformation in upland Asia.

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