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# Changing intellectual and spiritual expressions of the nomadic birhor in Jharkhand

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## Résumé

The Birhors are the most primitive tribe in India. The name Birhor comes from the mundaric words Bir for forest and Hor for man. The Birhors claim their ancestors painted our region's rock art. They worship land-forms. The Birhor sleeps on the bare earth in his leaf hut or Kumba as it is called. Their visual perspective is always from the ground up and in the middle of the circle is a pit where a fire is always burning, the family including the dogs and may be a goat or pet forest animal sleeping around it. Most Kumbas contain a bamboo cage with a parrot or a partridge used to decoy other partridges when trapping. Today the Birhor are increasingly exposed to highways being built through their forested territory. A couple of years ago I visited a settlement (tanda) not far from the highway where government was trying to resettle them in cement houses. Looking about the settlement for the "worship" site I found it in a small cleared space amidst the dense lantana bushes (lantana camera) and to my great surprise in the centre of this cleared patch was a huge nut and bolt smeared with red vermilion! Upon my questioning one of the men told me they had found it on the side of the highway and had brought it to worship it. An unknown power is a god!

When a Birhor child is born the afterbirth is taken out of the Kumba from a hole in the rear, and the same when a man or woman dies. There is no clear idea of belief in rebirth but it strikes someone now and then if a child is born about the time an old man dies that the old man's spirit has entered the child, but there is no set religious belief in these matters. They believe that life is breath and that when breath ceases life ceases but that wherever the breath goes life goes with it and this is shown in the creation legend in which the first man and woman are made by the creator Singbonga ( sun god) out of clay and he blows breath into their faces and so they become alive and continue to raise progeny!

Their knowledge of ethnobotany is vast! There is some connection physically in its shape or substance between sickness and medicine - for example anti venom roots are snakelike; medicine of hydrocile are yams resembling testicles; the root for arthritis is arthritic in shape, and so on. They place great significance on markings, be they the tracks of creatures or their own markings and this is important to note in a people who still do not read or write.

**Mots-Clés:** Jharkhand, nomadic birhor

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