

The Place of Women in Naga Society



Naga Women's Union (NWU)

International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

**Henry Martyn Institute (HMI): International Centre for
Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation**

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First Published: 2018

Published for NWU, IWGIA, HMI

by

Christian Literature Centre, Guwahati

ISBN No.: 978-93-81758-43-4

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Printed in India at:

Barkataki Print & Media Services

Guwahati, Assam

Ph: 9435090325

E-mail: barkatakiprintmedia@gmail.com

About the Naga Women's Union

There are more than sixteen Naga tribes living in Manipur with a population ranging from one thousand to above one lakh in each tribe. Each tribe speaks a distinct dialect. No tribe, whether a recognized scheduled tribe or not, is superior to others, nor is any dialect, whether spoken by a majority, more important or valuable than the other dialects. Every Naga tribe has its own unique traditional culture, costumes, ornaments, and artefacts with varieties of colours, designs, shapes and sizes. Each of them holds deep symbolic significance in various important events and festivals of the Nagas. Designing and production particularly of costumes are done mostly by women.

The Naga Women's Union (NWU) was founded on 5th October 1994 by the Naga tribal Women's Organizations in Manipur. The NWU is committed to the cause of promoting and defending the rights and dignity of women including advocacy work on tribal issues and concerns in general and women upliftment in particular.

The NWU is comprised of sixteen Naga tribes' Women Organizations which are spread across four districts of Manipur. All Nagas are indigenous peoples and are known as tribal (Scheduled Tribes) in India.

Our Vision

Naga Women as Naga people in India and beyond fully understanding their cultures, exercising their rights, living with dignity and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their development in an environment of peace, freedom, justice and equality.

Our Mission

To strengthen the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of Naga Women in Manipur and beyond so as to promote and protect their rights and to ensure security and sustainability among them.

Our Work

- Awareness raising and advocacy for recognition of rights and contributions of Naga women
- Strengthening the role of Naga Women in addressing challenges facing Naga Society
- Capacity building for community empowerment, leadership and financial system management
- Facilitation for institutional strengthening of Women's Organizations and network building alliances
- Establishment of Resource Training centre cum Production of Naga Crafts and Ornaments
- Establishment of database of women Experts/Leaders
- Development, production and compilation of appropriate Training Manual for Grass-root Organizations and Communities
- Strengthening and exercising indigenous rights over our land, territory and natural resources through capacity building trainings using UNDRIP mechanisms

The motto of NWU is “Strength and Prosperity”, which is indicated in its flag by a rainbow representing the different tribes of Nagas and in its emblem, by a gourd indicating women as the custodian of the vibrant Naga life, culture and identity. This is done so considering the fact that Naga women are the agents and support base for social stability and continuity of life as they are the carriers of all intrinsic Naga values such as love, compassion, truthfulness, honesty and all elemental human feelings.

This book is a compilation of works of writers from seventeen Naga tribes who have done a commendable job in describing the different aspects of the Naga women. And it would not have been brought to fruition except through the sponsorship of NWU–IWGIA Partnership Project.

From the Coordinator's Desk

It is a pleasure to introduce the first book of its kind, the *Place of Women in Naga Society*, brought out by Naga Women's Union (NWU), with the support of International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Henry Martyn Institute (HMI): International Centre for Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation. This book is unique in the sense that all the articles in it are written by the Naga women except for an introductory article and another which is a male co-authored paper. This endeavour comes from the NWU Partnership Project with IWGIA under "Strengthening the Role of Naga Women in addressing the Challenges facing Naga Society". I regret that due to certain constraints, these valuable writings of women of the Naga tribes in Manipur could not be published earlier than this as targeted.

I am pleased that NWU is bringing out this work in print form, for a wider circulation and to facilitate positive changes in the right perspective within the Naga Society.

The Place of Women in Naga Society **written by women writers from seventeen Naga tribes is a much needed contribution to the very few existing literature on tribal ethnography of North East India.**

It is hoped that the present work will not only provide deeper insights into the cultural ecology of the Naga people, but also into the nature of social and polity formation of the Naga society concerning women.



(Aram Pamei)

Project Coordinator

Foreword

- Dr. Gina Shangkham

With the formation of the Naga Women's Union (NWU) on the 5th October, 1994 in Ukhrul, the Naga Women in the state of Manipur came together under a common forum. Henceforth, they could avail the space, meet, interact and exchange each other's experiences, and take collective decision together for ways forward.

Looking back to its short history, there have been a few achievements in terms of sharing information through the publication of news-links: "RAISUNRIANG" since 1995 for eight (8) years, and "Our News", a leaflet for some years. The organization also took up projects on "Peace Building", "Gender in Relation to Customary Practices", "Human Rights Defenders", "Leadership Capacity Building", "Fund for Women: Economic Justice", etc. These projects enabled the organization to learn about the cultural contexts in which women played the role of peacemakers, cases of successful women as decision makers, and women volunteers who came out to work together to combat illegal exploitation of environment and natural resources. The projects also enabled the organization to raise voices for the care of environment and the sustainable management of natural resources to prevent conflict, build peace and foster human prosperity.

Violations of human rights were rampant as the Nagas expressed their right to self-determination. In order to repress their aspirations, the Government of India (GOI) enacted Armed Forces (Special) Power Act, 1958 which empowered the Security Forces with impunity. This naturally led to the violation of human rights. Besides this Act, the rights of the indigenous peoples are violated by the enforced developmental programs in their areas by the Government without Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Traditionally, women are believed to have been given protection by custom which led to their confinement and constrained to the outside world.

Till date, there are very few Naga women who have published books and articles to their credit in different disciplines. This book “The Place of Women in Naga Society” is the first of its kind wherein the Naga women from 17 tribes get involved in projecting the traditional concept on women and the changes that have taken place with the driving forces behind. There are similarities as much as differences, all indicating the typical phenomenon that each tribe has as a part of the whole as well as the distinctive and unique feature that each tribe has of its own among the Nagas.

This is the first attempt of the Naga Women’s Union to bring out a book with the support of International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), Hyderabad, co-supporting. It is hoped that the articles will not only serve as sources of information to the readers but also as a source of encouragement to go forward.

PREFACE

- Aram Pamei

We believe that human spirit can transcend narrow boundaries of social structure and create newer and wider forms of human relationship. The development of this spirit within us can foster a sense of equality and bridge the divisions in race, class, caste and gender. In this broad perspective of understanding human beings and their potential for good and just relations through proper institutional mechanisms in society, the Naga Women's Union (NWU) undertakes this project of writing a book on the 'Place of Women in Naga Society'. This book is a clarion call to have an introspection of the socially and culturally constructed differences in notions of male and female and look out for areas of equality, partnership and mutual respect for each other.

Nature does not create gender inequality; it only provides biological differences through different organs for reproduction. In actuality, there is a man and a woman in each of us, but society does not allow the man in a girl or the woman in the boy to grow. This duality of 'inner self' is also reflected in creation stories of Genesis; "In the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them and blessed them and named them Man when they were created". This reflection is relevant particularly in the context of Naga society with a major Christian population. Such a perspective challenges all the hierarchical structures that we have in relation to our sexes. We need to understand that we are first human, our first entity or 'being' is human, and then, we become man or woman with all the socially and culturally constructed roles and responsibilities associated with each gender. Over the course of time, we seem to have lost this basic understanding and we need to re-orient ourselves towards such equal but differentiated responsibilities.

Although a number of studies have indicated that Naga women enjoy better place in their respective societies than women of other communities in India, patriarchal influences prevent them from enjoying substantive freedoms and equality of status with men.

It is a known fact that gender discrimination is systematically practiced and strongly legalized by tradition and customary practices. Women

have very little or no rights in voicing their opinion at the household level, in decision makings at the village levels or in inheriting family property. Their rights are curtailed in many fronts. By blindly upholding our culture, we are not bothered whether we are violating human rights or violating the principles of equality guaranteed by the national and international humanitarian laws.

In every society, there are certain components of culture that are regressive and need to be buried in time. For instance, Naga tradition and culture bar women's participation in the decision making processes right from the village council to the apex body of the tribe-Naga Hoho. These prevail despite the fact that Naga women are known for their cultural and political leadership potentials as demonstrated by Rani Gaidinliu, Apei Hinga and so on. It is also interesting to note that in our society most of the women have to cast their votes for that candidate whom their husbands choose and not of their own choice. Part of the reason for the low level of participation by women in political decision making is also their lack of awareness. They need to be educated and informed about policies and programs affecting them, their rights, the nature of democracy, bureaucratic processes and so on. If we could ensure a fair political participation of women, it will translate into co-decision making, power sharing and co-policy making at all levels of governance of the village or state.

To be really human is to have the right to one's opinion and the freedom of expression. The regressive practices in our homes, churches and society that curb such liberty and preserve or perpetuate divisions among the sexes, therefore, need reconsideration. Freedom of thought and expression, greater social and domestic space, political representation and decision-makings by and for women, at village and other institutional levels, all need to be facilitated further in the Naga society.

The objective of this book is two-fold. First, it attempts to bring together and take stock of different experiences and gender perspectives as observed by the contributors of articles. It documents the social and cultural practices with regards to place of women in the Naga society, the power relations in the household and village settings, the respect attributed to them, their struggles and the gender biases they suffer. Accounts of some exploitative practices inherent in the Naga patriarchal social structure is also provided.

Secondly, the book is a reflection of some of the root causes of the gender regressive practices with the objective to evoke a higher level of critical reflection to liberate Naga men and women from slavishly upholding the tradition which engenders gender discrimination and suggests recommendations to bring about an equitable society. It aims to bring about a clearer and deeper understanding of the existing problems and design pathways towards a genuine partnership between male and female for a more progressive Naga Society.

This book provides a platform through which the perspectives, insights and analysis of the writers are made available to a wider public so as to generate greater consciousness towards a more civil society in terms of respecting gender differences and their roles. It contains articles authored by the writers of seventeen Naga tribes. Certain similarities are inevitable under the main theme of analyzing the situation and position of women in Naga society.

The convergence of viewpoints of the writers, however, with their special emphasis on equal participation of women in all aspects of life is also visibly evident. The thoughts and analysis shared in this book invite us to re-discover the path to liberating humanity from all kinds of exploitation and discrimination and also to promote the spirit of freedom, partnership and equal participation. Women's equal status in every sphere is inextricably linked to a nation's progress and development.

A comprehensive book on Naga Women in terms of a variety of perspectives is not available yet, although certain literatures already exists which discusses different aspects of Naga women in a specific Naga tribe's context. In that sense, I am very proud to mention that this book is the first of its kind with a fairly wide coverage. Since it is an endeavour of the NWU for the first time, most of the authors are learners and beginners to writings but yet highly informative and resourceful in their own rights.

This small contribution, I hope, will yield fruits in promoting equal participation of women and men at all institutional levels, viz. family, village, church, tribe and apex decision making bodies such as United Naga Council (UNC), Naga Hoho and others, and also inspire all people of good will to join hands to march towards a new Naga Society.

Acknowledgement

The Naga Women's Union would like to thank all the people and organizations who have been associated with this book in different capacities. Although it is difficult to mention the names of all who have helped in the preparation and production of this book, we would like to mention Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), International Centre for Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation, Hyderabad for taking the writers of this book to Paro, Bhutan, and giving them a preliminary training on writing from 18th to 20th June, 2014 with Prof. G. Aloysius and late Robinson Thapa as the resource persons. The NWU is indebted to HMI, and Prof. G. Aloysius and Robinson Thapa for the handsome support and valuable services which had in fact kick-started the project for the publication of this book.

Acknowledgements are due to the writers of the seventeen Naga tribes contained in this book whose understanding of the status, roles and positions of women of their respective tribes from the women's perspective have been rewarded with this book, the first of its genre, in the region. Without them, nothing would have happened. They are the true unsung heroes in this industry. Many thanks to them, the NWU will always remember their efforts.

The NWU expresses its gratitude to the team of editors – Chingya Luithui, Dr. Achan Mungleng, Alan Vashum and Ngachanso Luithui, who had generously given their precious time for editing the articles with valuable comments and corrections. The inputs they had given with their absolute commitment and professionalism have gone a long way in the improvement of the writings. They know this business inside out. Thanks ever to them for all that they have contributed towards this publication.

We also gratefully acknowledge Dr. Adaina Panmei, Dr. Gina Shangkham and Aram Pamei for writing the introduction, forward and preface respectively which have altogether given a focused, dedicated and well connected overview of the book.

The NWU is grateful to Ajuna Pame who undertook the final editing of the whole book in minute detail. Deep appreciation is due to her for

the hard work of editing performed well.

The design of this book which includes the cover design, typing the manuscripts in the computer, page set-ups, etc., all has the stamp of Kc. Ahouna Gangmei, and if the book has an attractive look that compels you to leaf through it, it is on account of his efforts.

The NWU in particular would like to thank the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Copenhagen, Denmark for the full support right from the time of Chris Erni, Christina Nilsson and Signe Leth till today, as the Asia Program Co-coordinator in producing this book though the publication has been delayed. We express our profound gratitude for all the support from IWGIA, HMI and the then Deputy Commissioner of Senapati District, Ms. Jacintha Lazarus, IAS which have made the publication of this book possible. We should all be proud of this piece of work.

We acknowledge with appreciation to HMI for allowing us to use the HMI Calendar Quotations in this publication of ours.

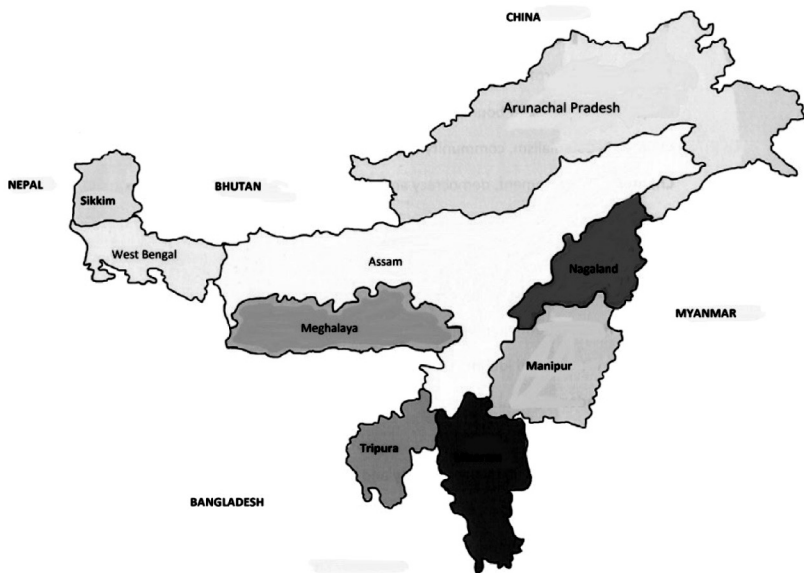
Thank you all, once again, for your incredible contributions.

And above all, we give thanks to God for enabling us to produce this significant book.

- Aram Pamei

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North East India



Manipur
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INTRODUCTION

Engendering Development Issues in Naga Society

- Dr. Kc. Adaina

The main purpose of this book is to discuss the Naga society and its cultural practices with special reference to the status of women. This book is unique because of the fact that the contributors of articles are all women. Earlier ethnographic materials and subsequent documentations have, to a large extent, been biased against women as the scholars or administrators have basically been men. This book is a great initiative in the sense that the Naga society and the place of women in it are reflected through women's perspectives and, therefore, is more likely to represent ground realities. The methodological rigor and the level of articulation may suffer a setback in certain instances but in terms of depicting the cultural practices and customary laws and how they affect women in their everyday functioning, the writings can be well appreciated.

Discourses on development issues have brought out the fact that gender inequality is quite pervasive across the globe and such inequality hinders the development process. One, gender inequality is more deeply entrenched among the poor than the non-poor and is therefore inextricably linked to poverty. Access to health and education, property rights to land, labor market opportunities, availability of credit etc. are more restricted for women than for men and this is more pronounced among the poor. This would mean that women would be able to participate much less in the development process and will consequently also reap less from the development process. Secondly, by ignoring the existence of gender disparities, a nation slows down on the development path and in the long run is unable to grow sustainably.

The position of women in any society is a true indicator of societal progress and essentially reflects the state of development. Throughout every culture, systems of social stratifications are gendered, based on different perceptions and evaluations of gender roles. Social and

economic indicators for developing countries suggest that women are consistently marginalized in the process of developmental intervention, access to education, access to and control over productive resources, access to employment in the labor markets, meaningful exercise of civil and political rights and so on. At the same time, in communities like that of the Nagas, women are effective agents of conflict resolution, poverty alleviation and economic revival. This brings out the need to document the historical and current social and cultural practices that hinder women to function effectively, to study the way they are treated in the society and to explore ways forward to enable them to realize their full potential in the development process. Almost throughout the world, women's primary roles have been family oriented with their activities and relationships largely confined within the context of the family. Thus, the study of familial positions of women as daughter, wife, sister or mother from the Naga cultural lens is fundamental to understand women and their status in the society.

Naga society is a casteless and classless society where, traditionally, women have enjoyed a high social positioning and a fair spirit of independence, playing very central roles in family and community affairs. This is well reflected in the works of the Austrian ethnographer Haimendorf von Christoph who studied the Naga people extensively in the late 1930s, *"Many women in the more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'savages'"* (Haimendorf 1939:101). However, gender inequality does exist in the Naga society and many see it as a given social phenomenon which is strongly normalized if not legalized by customary laws and traditional practices. With this view in mind, the following sections will provide some important insights as to how gender situates itself within varied aspects of economy, society and polity of the Naga community.

Women and Property Rights

In the Naga society, women do not enjoy landed property or inheritance

rights as per the customary laws. Naga society is a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal society and the son carries forward the name of the family. It is the male child who inherits the family properties (to be understood as a plot of land for living or for cultivating) and the female child is not entitled to any of the family's landed properties, except when given to the daughter as a marriage gift in very rare cases. Such a customary practice can be contrasted with the Hindu Succession Act and the Muslim Personal Law; the Naga customary laws here do not recognize inheritance or property rights even if you are the only daughter. This implies that if a family does not have a male child, the property and land will eventually be inherited by the next closest male kin to the family. Sometimes, this male relative may even be four or five cousins away in the family lineage or just any one from the clan.

It may be noted here that being a patriarchal society, customary laws in the Naga society have always been interpreted from a patriarchal frame of mind. This might well explain why we notice certain biases embedded in customary laws against women. It is also pertinent to understand that Naga customary laws are not written or coded, but largely oral and are referred to only as customary practices. Since they are unwritten, there is every possibility that such laws are interpreted away from the original intent or content to the advantage of men. The most commonly cited reason for denying inheritance rights to women in the Naga society is that women are *'meirammei tuang nap phunbou de'* (in Rongmei dialect) meaning women (and any properties with them) are basically other households' resources once they are wedded off. Any land or resources inherited by a woman will eventually belong to her husband and hence a loss for the parental family. This traditional practice is largely embedded in the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal social system where male member (the youngest/eldest in the family) takes care of the aging parents and therefore the family ancestral resources rightfully should belong to him. Another reason for denying inheritance rights to women in the Naga society is the land holding system where clans in the village have their share of land which should flow down to the male members of the clan only. If the daughters are given land it will automatically go to the other clan.

The socio-cultural ethos that hold good and valid in the traditional and more primitive Naga societies are increasingly becoming obsolete and disconnected from the emerging social realities. The traditional laws pertaining to inheritance rights remain rigid despite many changes in gender roles. It is high time that we look for amendments or clauses to provide some amount of justice to women in the sphere of property and inheritance rights. However, one may notice that the scenes are slowly changing now. Some families use their own good judgments or discretion to give immovable properties to their daughters, especially those bought or acquired by the immediate parents themselves.

Women and Labor Markets

Participation of women in the labor market acts as a key factor in the development process. Policy makers, therefore, across the globe are concerned with creating equal opportunities for both men and women to effectively participate in the labor market. The gender division of labor and gender roles is a social set-up which puts women in the reproductive sector and care economy. Women are traditionally regarded to be more specialized in domestic and reproductive works and also in caring for children and the aged. These reproductive and care works are mostly invisible, unaccounted in economic terms and unpaid for. Women spend a great deal of time on these works and therefore lack the time to invest on their own human capital formation, attend meetings, build social networks or participate in decision makings that affects their interests. This also hinders women's participation in the paid labor markets. Even if they get the opportunities to work for a pay, these appear largely in the informal sector where both welfare entitlements as well as earnings are quite limited.

In the context of the Naga society, opportunities to work in the paid labor markets are limited because of the economic backwardness of the region. There is a lack of employment opportunities in both the formal and informal markets. Even if there were opportunities for paid work outside of home, an unwritten yet widely followed code in the Naga society is that a woman's duty was to work and not to earn. A mother, for instance, toils on much of the farm work and on returning

home, manages the household chores with little or no help from the male members. The responsibility of taking care of domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, collecting fire-wood, fetching water as well as caring for elderly and children in the family is largely performed by women in every household. They are generally the last ones to retire to bed at night and the first to rise at the break of dawn. The traditional culture requires Naga women to be humble, submissive and perform the roles of a wife, mother, child bearer, farmer and household manager, all of which are unpaid for. Very often, a women's work is not even considered to be 'work' which leads to naturalization of women's obligations to the family. Even in cases, where women contribute in some form to the income of the family by running businesses or selling food produces from their farms or kitchen gardens, their household and domestic obligations still need to be fulfilled. This results in the double burden of work for women. Despite the fact that women work very hard within the household and also in the farms, their status is comparatively very low even today. There is a need to redistribute and share the burden of such unpaid care works by both men and women and move away from the stereotype gender roles that might possibly have worked in the context of warring tribal communities.

In the last one and a half decade, there has been a massive migration of Naga women to different cities of the country in search of job opportunities. Many of them are employed in IT enabled industries like the Business Process Outsourcing (BPOs), in spas and salons as masseuses, in retail sectors, small scale businesses and so on. There are no well documented studies or research on the absolute number of Naga women who are gainfully employed in different cities or the levels of income they earn, but the number of employed women in both the formal and informal sectors have tremendously increased. In these changing economic scenarios, it will not be wrong to point out that women are as much the bread winners of the family as men. These women workers send a significant share of their monthly income to their parents or otherwise financially support their other siblings in education. Any quick glance at the Naga society will reveal that there is a sea change in the gender roles envisioned in the traditional world.

Naga women have now moved out of their domestic confines, started assuming many managerial or leadership roles, and become financially independent through gainful employment in either private companies or firms in cities or in public sectors.

Education and Health

Assessing the education and health outcomes of Naga women requires, as a starting premise, an understanding of the strong preference of the Naga community towards male children. Since the Naga society is patriarchal with a tradition of strong warrior values, it was considered an honor to be born as a man. In some rare cases, when no male child is blessed to a couple, the husband is even entitled to a divorce with his wife. Another reason as to why parents may prefer boys to girls is because they construe that girls are not capable of preserving their family or ethnic identity for reasons of being given away in marriages. Whatever be the reasons for preference for male children, such preference accordingly gets translated into a differential educational investment for male and female children. In a family of five children, for instance, if the family income allows for supporting only three, it is most likely that the educational opportunities would go in favor of the boys. Also, on matters of higher education, women are generally not considered to be requiring as much financial and academic attention in comparison to men. There is no particular social logic as to why women need not pursue higher studies but is largely dictated by traditional women's roles which are highly domesticated. Another common argument put forward is that the benefits of most investments on women's higher education will only be reaped by her husband's family. Such notion, however, is hypocritical because of the fact that these very families expect their daughters-in-law to be highly educated and to be capable of augmenting the income of the family.

In the olden times when inter village feuds were very common, men were borne by the responsibility to be at the forefront protecting their families and, therefore, the need to be healthy and strong was of prime consideration. And by logic therefore, the choicest portion of any meal would be allotted to the male child. The girls on the other hand would

generally be served the leftovers or the unwanted portions. Sometimes, mothers would teach their daughters to pretend as if they had their fill even if they would not have eaten. All of these familial practices determined by social requirements and compulsions of the time would reflect in differential health outcomes for both men and women.

With changing times and social contexts, parental attitudes are slowly and surely changing in the contemporary Naga society. There is no visible preferential treatment of a male over the female child in terms of provision of both education and health facilities. Education comes as a boon for the Naga women and it is through education that women attain a place in the family and in the community. In fact, one of the highest conceivable educational degrees such as a Doctorate degree was first held by a woman in Inriangluang village of Tamenglong district, to cite a case.

Women in Decision Making

There is a growing realization globally that development policies and measures affect women and men differently and that it is imperative to recognize and ensure representation of women's interests, priorities and needs in policy formulation. For instance, cuts in social security spending, militarization of an area as in the Naga Hills increase the burden of women's labor and even affect their psychological well being. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, 1995 clearly highlighted the need to ensure 'gender equality' in mainstream society in all areas of social, political and economic development. Unless women are made to be part of the decision making processes, their major concerns and interests will never get reflected in the policy sphere.

Within the decision making institutions of the family and society, exists a deeply embedded patriarchal notion that women need to be protected by men. Patriarchy in that sense provides a seemingly secure environment for women but in essence do not allow for full realization of their potential. Patriarchal social structure is the source of inequality with differential power base for men and women. A Naga woman lives in silence for most part of her life. She is the daughter in her father's

home, a sister to her brother, wife to her husband in her husband's family, mother to her children and so on. In most of these roles, she has no voice of her own. On any disputes between husband and wife, the woman is almost always at fault and the man is insulated from any blame. For instance, a husband coming home drunk and beating up his wife would more often be seen as a provocation from the woman's side than the fault of the husband.

At the family level, however, there generally are discussions between the husband and the wife before taking a decision on most matters. Final authority in decision making normally lies with the man but his decisions are largely influenced by his wife who actually runs the household. Women in fact, occupy an important position and play key roles in maintaining the household economy. The economic structure is largely agrarian and families are seen to run subsistence agriculture. The surplus, if any, is sold in the markets, the returns of which are mostly used by the women towards various household expenses. In the case of the Naga society, men do not generally have command over the earnings of the women.

Naga women are seen to be very entrepreneurial and hardworking. Their entrepreneurial acumen is also reflected in the fact that a number of women are seen to be increasingly engaged in saving circles of varying amounts. This acts as a saving and security for any contingencies or purposes in the future. These savings vary from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 2,000 per month to even Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 20,000 per month depending on the capacity of the saver. The longer that one keeps the money from recall, the greater is the return at the time of recall. There are no other formal institutions involved in the process and the entire system runs through informal networks where mutual trust and obligations play a very important role. It may be pointed out here that there is a positive linkage between earning capability of women and their level of influence on various decision makings in the household activities.

However, at the community level, women have a much less say in decision making. The more formal and political decision making institutions like the Village Authorities or Village Councils are fully

dominated by men. By definition, political institutions are essentially a public domain, their basic concerns, allocation of authority, responsibilities, policy and decision makings are sufficiently removed from the domestic arena. This restricts the Naga women from participating in this domain given their traditional domestic roles. Women are not allowed to attend any Village Authority/Council meetings and therefore, their voices are practically absent on various public issues. Traditionally, if a woman is present at some village level gathering or meeting, she may not open her mouth in the presence of male village elders, even if she has a valid point to share. Certain issues like property ownership, land rights, inheritance rights and marital disputes easily affect women and yet they are expected to primarily be recipients of decisions taken by men folks. Any impact that a woman can have on political decision making processes is largely indirect and through influence on men-folks at home. Women's role is only passive, that of a persuader, while men being the head of the households and village authorities enjoy the prerogative of final decision making. There is also a common perception that women have a low political quotient and may, therefore, not participate in the political processes of the village. In some villages however, such as in Tamenglong district, the Tamenglong Village Authority has agreed to allow for two female member representatives, a rough 10% representation in the committee. Such kind of representation at the village level will eventually pave the way for inclusion of women in more formal political settings such as at the State Assembly level. This will on one hand, boost the confidence of women to participate in the wider political decision making process and at the same time, change the political mindset of men-folks to accommodate women as equal decision makers.

For the Naga society, with Christianity as the dominant religion, church is a powerful institution and plays a very important role in regulating the behaviors of the village members. Decision making at the church level is predominantly a male domain. There are no women representatives in the church deacon board, although they have a separate women society wing. Women are also not ordained even if they have the required qualifications for ordination. Ordination of a woman would entail that

one is now fully licensed to preach in the pulpit which is traditionally a man's pedestal, literally and metaphorically. She would also be serving in the capacity of a minister in marriage ceremonies, conduct baptism and funeral services. As of now, barring preaching, the rest of these church activities are considered to be men's forte. In fact, the extent of repressiveness in some churches against women can be seen from the fact that there are weekly night or morning services conducted only by and for women. Here, women are free to speak, share and pray together without having to think too much about the propriety of speaking or discussing God's words in the presence of religious men. They can also make certain decisions here that affect only them but having no influence at the Church level.

The decision making structure is slowly changing in some churches. For instance, in Tamenglong Baptist Church, for the last two years, the Church agreed to install two deaconesses to represent women in the Church deacon board. This is a heartening and positive development.

Some Ways Forward

On the whole, it may be mentioned that the Naga society with its patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal social system inculcates the norms and attitudes of patriarchy, which affects the place of women in the society. Institutional set-ups and traditional customary laws are inspired by the belief of male dominance and female inferiority. On matters of public participation, irrespective of her competencies, qualifications and abilities, a woman is still considered inferior to men in many areas of life. Although patriarchy is a dominant social conditioning in the Naga society, one must be aware that its intensity, deep rootedness and impact on women vary from community to community. However, with many social changes and development, Naga women now enjoy a lot more privileges and opportunities on various fronts of society and economy. The Naga communities are transitioning from traditional to more modern ways of thinking about changing women's roles. Education, in this regard, is a key enabler for defining new status of women in the society and much progress has been made in this arena.

The coming of Christianity in the Naga Hills of Manipur in the early

20th century has also various positive ramifications on Naga societies. In the pre-Christian Naga society, divorce was quite liberal and the traditional rules were biased against women. In many communities, if a woman cannot adjust to her husband's family and wants to leave for her parent's house, she can do so by taking nothing with her but the cloth she wears. A husband on the other hand, can leave his wife without any such pre-conditions. In the Christian era, both wife and husband are bound by their vows pronounced before God and men and hence marriages appear more stable. Thus, one may say that the Christian tradition has brought about a greater sense of rootedness within the family and thereby greater sense of security for the women. Despite the changing waves of modernity, adoption of Christianity and exposure to widespread education, a Naga woman is still fettered by many social stigmatizations about the ways she conducts herself and remains chained by many traditional 'dos' and 'don'ts'.

The strategies for action plans to accommodate women in decision making is briefly discussed below as a way of realizing inclusive development. First, since the Naga social structure is based on patriarchy, there is a need to understand the discriminatory effects that patriarchy generates on women within the Naga society. It is only through an interrogation of existing patriarchal practices that one would be able to discern the differential impact that such practices have created on women's lives and in their ability to function effectively as equal citizens. Therefore, if positive changes in the lives of women are to be realized, the existing patriarchal norms should be questioned within the community itself. This will be more effective because realizations and changes will then come from within and not from without or imposed by external agencies. There is a need to seek reforms in some of the regressive traditional beliefs and customary practices which are outrightly biased against women. It is important to critically look at the prevailing cultural practices and stop the blind idealizing of everything that is cultural or traditional because one must admit that they are based on patriarchy.

In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins; not through strength, but through persistence. – Gautama *Buddha*

Secondly, there should be gender sensitization training for all law enforcing agencies in the village level including the customary courts and village councils. Such a step will promote proactive and consensual participation in different levels of decision making. Women should be given enough space and recognition in important decision making roles including cultural and ceremonial roles, whether it is in the church, or village council meetings or others where interaction, sharing and intergenerational transfer of knowledge takes place. Through these processes they can empower themselves and others.

Third, bringing about a change in the mentality of people towards women leadership is another important area. There is a hesitance to address women leadership in social, economic and political issues because to do so would be seen as ‘interfering with the traditional culture’ or ‘imposing western values on native social system’. This is a misguided notion and needs to be rectified. It is important that women assume leadership roles where their voices would be heard, since they would be in the best position to identify and remedy the problems pertaining to them. A society can never fully develop until all sections of society can stand for themselves and can make their voices heard.

Fourth, some form of capacity building measures that would help women to take up self employment should be in place at the village level. At the most basic level, this could include vocational training centers for tailoring, weaving, basketry, basic computer literacy, start-up entrepreneurial skill development and so on. The advantage of such intervention would be to generate sustainable employment opportunities within the village itself thus reducing the vulnerabilities and insecurities associated with migration of women to mega cities. The financial independence arising out of this will simultaneously enhance their self confidence. Additionally, it will provide the much needed impetus to the growth of the indigenous production economy. At another level, women’s participation in wider social and political circles need to be encouraged and accepted. There is a need to sufficiently institute women empowerment organizations with the

required skill set. More number of seminars and workshops on self-realization, capacity building, conflict resolution etc., needs to be organized to enable village women to realize their full potential. An altogether different outlook on higher education, professional courses and women will also go a long way in making women equal partners in the development story of a village, district or state.

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The Anāl Women in the Contemporary World

- Dr. Ht. Rozy Veronica

The Anāl tribe is one of the oldest indigenous communities, which mainly dwells in Chandel district located in the south east of Manipur, having a population of approximately forty five thousand. Few households of Anāls are found inside the Indo-Myanmar boundary. Therefore, Anāls can be called trans-border tribe. They are a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal society and are cited as a typical example for having the most significant character of moiety system in the northeast India. The socialization of Anāl men and women can be understood within the framework of patriarchal system, the mechanism through which they acquire socio-cultural values and ideologies that shape their parameters to which they are trained. The Anāl social organization is distinctly characterized by the existence of exogamous moieties. Ethnographic as well as historical analyses prove dual organization as one of the original attributes of the Anāl culture.

Family is the smallest social unit of a larger social network of relationships among the Anāls. It has been, and continues to be, one of the strongest institutions and is ultimo-geniture in nature. Though all the sons share the responsibilities of looking after their parents at the retiring age, the youngest son bears the maximum responsibility. His proper maintenance of the family may entitle him to better position in the village, clan, and society as well. An attempt is made here to look at and analyze the status of the Anāl women within the kinship organization and its interrelationship with other important institutions.

There have been some important revelations during my research work. It was found that the strength of character and spirit of the Anāl women were the pillars that supported the patriarchal set up. The male power and authority, in private as well as in public sphere, was strengthened

“Peace demands the most heroic labour and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience”. – *Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968), USA*

as a result of the patriarchal set-up, where descent is traced through male child. Though men depend on women for most activities, they dominate women in every sphere, simply because of the perception that lineage continues through them. The prevailing principles of descent are so deeply embedded in the ideology that even women adhere to the stereotype notion of being inferior to men. The Anāl society perceives women as inferior and irrelevant; and such a perception is considered natural. However, when viewed from an outsiders' perspective, women play significant roles in all social activities. For instance, they handle all the agricultural activities except ploughing, and their role in visiting market places and marketing the agricultural products or visiting other villages to fulfill social obligations, and the importance of their participation in rituals and ceremonies are clearly visible. Thus, there is a stark difference in the emic and etic view on the position and role of women in the society. Within the society, there is limited recognition of the important role they play.

The researcher explores some important social institutions to understand the position and status of Anāl women in a given social set up.

Anāl Woman as a Baby Girl

The birth of a girl in the Anāl society is never unwelcome both in historical and contemporary perspective. By birth, the female child acquires her clan membership which is retained permanently, and serves as her identity throughout her life in the society. The empirical study among the native reveals that in the olden days, the birth of a baby girl was considered as the arrival of source of wealth, prosperity, and well-being in the family. However, in reality women are taken for granted to be mere helpers in the families. The birth of a boy in a family brings about a higher degree of happiness, which is clearly exhibited by the performance of elaborate rituals and warm welcoming of the baby boy. The Anāls believed that a little girl should be taught to bear pain and deprivation. She should accept whatever is offered and provided to her

What is beautiful is good, and who is good will soon be beautiful. – *Sappho* (615 – 570 BC), *woman poet, Ancient Greece*

without any disapproval. From childhood, she is trained and expected to acquire the character of self-denial and shape up her femininity. Another feature of being a girl child is that she has to act as a constant helper and a companion to her mother. In so far as a young girl has a mother to love and follow, she has a role model of becoming a 'little mother' and there is a consequent transition into womanhood without much effort. Through the ways in which a girl experiences her ties with her mother and learns to deal with the interpersonal demands of the family, feminine personality is built up in her.

Anāl Woman as a Daughter

According to the Anāl custom, an adorable daughter in the family should have the character traits of good morality, modesty, obedience to the parents and being hospitable to others in the society. From the Christian perspective, she should be a God-fearing and religious woman. Her outlook should be straightforward but her demeanour should be quiet and shy. Customarily, the Anāl woman comes to reside with her husband in her conjugal family, leaving her natal family following her marriage. Marriage brings about several realignments and changes in the position of a woman, from a daughter to a wife. A woman has to make many adjustments with the new relatives and environment. The Anāls do not practice cross-cousin sister exchange marriage. Thus, it is even more difficult for the woman to adjust to a completely new set of people as the Anāls marry into a different moiety after considering various aspects and relationship. Traditionally, men used to make adjustments with his conjugal family at least for the initial period of three or five years of marriage. He had to render the customary service to his parents-in-law by residing with them. The Anāl man had to hold an important customary feast called *Hmarsha* and then only he was allowed to marry her. But this type of marriage by servitude is no longer practiced.

The period between puberty and marriage is considered as the most vulnerable phase in a woman's life. Therefore, the post-pubertal phase is

"All of God's children and their different faiths help us to realize the immensity of God. God's love is too great to be confined to anyone's side of a conflict or to anyone's religion". – *Desmond Tutu (born 1931), South Africa*

marked by restrictions on movements, restrictions on interaction with males, and continual guidance by elders to prevent any pre-marital affairs. In the Anāl society, a woman's sexuality is not only controlled by male members of her immediate family, but also by the expanded kin group. It is traditionally accepted that men have to protect and control the female body. This culturally rooted norm has been reinforced and strengthened by Christianity. The church emphasizes on the notion of virginity until marriage. The emphasis is greater upon female virginity than male virginity. Ensuring the purity of women and consequently controlling their sexuality is an important function of the family and kin group.

This account of the subordination of Anāl women differs from that of other tribal women of the Northeast. Generally, tribal societies are known to allow free interaction among men and women, and restrictions on pre-marital affairs are not stringent. However, in all northeast tribal societies the degree of freedom to express their sexuality given to boys is more as compared to that given to girls. Among the Anāls the rules are strictly observed almost certainly because it is a small and closely-knit community. Besides, the northeast women are considered to be more outgoing and active. At this point, it is crucial to enquire if this view portrays the real image of woman's status and identity. It is crucial to find out the factor(s) that force them to come out from the confines of domestic world to struggle hand-in-hand with men. Perhaps it is because the male, as a breadwinner of the family, has failed to fulfill his duties towards the family.

Marriage marks the second major transition in a woman's life. Though a girl is always consulted before selection of a groom, she does not have complete freedom in this regard. However, girls are not forced to marry someone they do not like. But, the choice of groom is closely controlled by the parents and close relatives. In the past, clan exogamy was the main rule for marriage. However, these days, besides clan exogamy, religion endogamy is greatly favoured. A number of girls were unable to marry men of their choice due to family objections.

When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice. —*American Indian Cherokee Proverb*

They had to compromise for the sake of family's honour. Once a girl is married, her ties to the natal family become weak. She has to find her place in the new family, and establish her status in the new role of a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She looks after her husband's family, performs household and field works. She has to bring about a shift in her loyalties and habits, in order to adjust and get completely absorbed in her new family. The Anāl woman after her marriage is expected to be under the guardianship of her husband. Customary and moral values demand that she treats her husband as master and head of the family. She should possess qualities like fidelity, faithfulness, devotion, love, generosity and kindness. She is expected to be submissive, humble and quiet at every place of public gatherings like church services or any function. The most important individual to a man is a good wife who moulds and makes his life stronger, grander, nobler, and makes him stand tall among men. All her contribution and charity works are for the wellbeing of her family.

The significant changes that take place in a woman's life are not marked by the performance of any symbolic ritual. As opposed to non-tribal societies, there are no specially prescribed foods, nor are there any taboos to be observed. However, the days of menstruation and a few days after childbirth are believed to be *vaso do thung* i.e. when the blood is young. Women are believed to be in a delicate condition during these days and it is not good to do hard work. However girls continue to work in the fields and at home during menstruation. Women feel ashamed if others notice that they are menstruating. Thus they live in a world of self-denial and self-restraint, continuing to act normal on all days.

Anāl Woman as a Mother

The Anāls believed that a woman is a *phungkareeh* i.e. housekeeper, responsible for the management of all domestic affairs. And the father of the family is believed to be the *hmalpa* i.e. the nominal head. In spite of their role as the *phungkareeh*, women get no credit for the achievements and well-being of a family. Also, they have limited say in the decision

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage. – Lao Tzu (between 6 – 4 BC), poet, philosopher, author, China

making process, even in matters related to the domestic world. They play a passive role and men are active in all decision makings. The authority of men is manifested in the family, both instrumentally and symbolically. Structural subordination of females is quite marked in the Anāl society. The household chores and raising children are entirely the job of the women. Men usually keep away from these activities, as they believe them to be beneath their dignity. However, if the affairs of the house are well-managed and the children are well-behaved, men never fail to take the credit for it.

Immediately after her marriage, the Anāl woman is accorded the status of motherhood. The status of motherhood is clearly marked by her potential fertility, i.e., her ability to conceive a child so as to continue the patrilineage. The attainment of motherhood favorably influences her status and position in the society. She commands more respect as a mother gradually in that a married woman's position and role changes from submissive wife to that of a mother. While examining the underlying cultural ethos of the people and expectations from the Anāl mother, the most highly appreciated quality in a mother is gentleness. By becoming a mother, she obtains more responsibilities, power and influence within the family. She should be faithful to her husband and most importantly she should be a good moral teacher for her children. By her good conduct and flawless character, she should prove herself worthy of her husband's trust. Besides being greatly valued for her procreative power to continue the patrilineage, a home is a woman's work place. It is a place where she puts all her best efforts to render her untiring services, solve family problems, and bear the burdens of every member of the family.

Anāl Woman during Pregnancy and Delivery

The Anāl society prescribes various taboos and restrictions on the life of a couple from the period of conception till childbirth. Throughout the world, ranges of beliefs prevail about pregnancy period. These beliefs restrict mothers and, in some cases, fathers, from engaging in certain

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. – *Margaret Mead, USA*

activities. The widespread, if not universal, occurrence of such beliefs raises questions as to why it is so. Pregnancy and childbirth being risky to the health and survival of both the mother and the infant, the existence of numerous taboos to prevent the disastrous outcome may be the explanation. In case of stillbirth or early death of infant, blame is usually placed on the mother for violation of one or some of the myriad of taboos. The burden typically weighs more heavily on women because more restrictions are prescribed for mothers than fathers. The following taboos should be followed by Anāl woman during pregnancy. (a) She is forbidden to move out of her house during late night; (b) she should avoid eating creepers, climbers, wild fowls and meat of ferocious animals like tiger, monkey, bear, etc., or else the child would be affected; and (c) she is forbidden from cutting down Siamese tree branches. From the time of conception, a pregnant woman's spouse is not free to engage in social activities and economic affairs like other man in the society. The husband is prohibited to go out for hunting, to participate in digging the burial ground, to kill any living beings especially snakes, and to plant banana or bamboo either. In the olden days, at the time of delivery, a midwife comes to help the woman in her house. One taboo, which was greatly observed, was that a barren woman or a person who had committed a crime or violated social norms such as murder, theft, invalid marriage, etc., were not entertained to prevent any ill influence on the child.

Anāl Woman as a Step-Mother

The perception and notion towards stepmother (*Nulah*) is unfavourable in the Anāl society. People often narrate many lores and myths pertinent to step-motherhood. One of the folklores reveals a step-mother's cruelty and ill-treatment towards her step-daughter. The step-daughter was sent to a jungle all alone to carry firewood where she met her misfortune and got killed by her rival group. In a similar vein, there is another folktale 'Kota' which tells about the consistent harassment and torture meted out to a boy by his stepmother that he eventually

turned into a bird. In today's contemporary context too, the notion about step-motherhood is inauspicious. Some widowers with children do not remarry, thinking that the stepmother may fail to look after the children well unlike the first wife. Such stance on the part of a male is considered thoughtful and praiseworthy in the society. There are many widows who circumvent second marriage no matter how young they might be. However, more widowers are found to be getting married again, though unostentatiously, as compared to widows though they may be of the same age or have the same number of children.

Anāl Woman as a Spinster

There exist instances of Anāl women choosing spinsterhood though it is not something desirable. In the Anāl society, marriage is considered a natural phenomenon, and most of the people prefer to marry, rather than remain as a spinster. People do discourage and disapprove of spinsterhood, as it is a stigma to the family. This is one of the reasons why girls generally do not remain unmarried. Another reason is the fear of insecurity during old age. However, to remain a spinster is not considered a taboo, nor considered inauspicious in the Anāl culture. In comparison, bachelorhood is seen and treated somewhat differently. People generally make fun of bachelors but spinsters are not treated with mockery or disrespect.

Anāl Woman as a Barren One

A barren woman was considered inauspicious and unfortunate in the olden days. Her participation in important rituals and ceremonies was restricted and unsolicited. The notion behind this belief was that her misfortune might befall upon children. The husband and other relatives often humiliated a barren woman and never consulted her for any ritual performance in the family. Since a marital union was considered a failure if a child was not produced, an infertile woman was often deserted and divorced by her husband, ascribing all the blames upon her. Also, in the past the funeral rites of a barren woman

Love is beauty; it is the shadow of God on the universe. – *Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), poet diplomat, educator, feminist, Chile*

(and man) were observed differently. A particular tree, natively known as *Padungthing* was ceremoniously erected on her/his grave. *Athim*, a traditional witch doctor would ritualistically perform his/her funeral rites. This was symbolically done to stop and prevent the rebirth of the person's soul. This rite was performed without fail especially for a woman, because of the false belief that she was wholly responsible for her childlessness. However, now-a-days this ritualistic funeral ceremony is no longer practiced and followed. Most of the misconceptions and restrictions have been done away with in the present time and a barren woman is free to attend any ritual and ceremony.

Anāl Woman as a Widow

Widowhood is not looked down upon in tribal societies of India unlike in most of the Hindu societies. In the Anāl society a widow is free to re-marry if she is young and industrious. Generally there is no social stigma attached to a widow. They are not believed to be inauspicious for any ritual performance. However, if a widow fails to maintain her decorum, she invites criticism. Her wayward behavior may bring shame to both her natal and conjugal family. On the other hand, a widow with good moral character is treated well. She gains sympathy of the people. In the olden days, out of sympathy towards widows especially those of low economic conditions, they were exempted from certain social works. The villagers used to extend help by working at their fields. A woman had moral and legal right to go back to her parental family, if she becomes a widow at young age, before begetting children. She was also not debarred from any activity normally performed by married women. She worked in the field, raised her own family and exercised the authority of a woman of her age. Even today, a widow is never deprived of any social privileges. Widows were praised for revering their dead husbands by never remarrying again. A woman whose husband has expired after fulfilling all the customary duties towards her is socially known as '*Hmikhunu*'. A man who wish to marry her had to pay widow's price' called *Hmikhunu min*'. However, a man may

<p>It is no longer good enough to cry peace; we must act peace, live peace and live in peace. — <i>An American Indian Shenandoah Proverb</i></p>
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be exempted to pay the *Hmikhunumin*, if he belongs to the same clan of her deceased husband.

According to the Anāl customary law, widow remarriage is permissible but it is not a common practice. Though the law permits remarriage if the widow so desires, she still faces the prospect of losing her rights over deceased husband's properties. The Anāl customs and laws relating to widow remarriage reinforced the idea of denying the rights to property and access to land. The widow is entitled to maintain the property of her deceased husband as long as she remains single and can continue to live with her in-laws. The right to maintenance of the deceased husband's property is forfeited once she remarries. However, her sons begotten from her deceased husband are still entitled to inherit and own their father's property.

There is a special chair and share of meat given to a widow of a former chief, who had performed the customary feast of chieftainship coronation known as *Phamka*. This respect and special share of meat is given at the time of the chief's coronation feast hosted by the immediately succeeding chief. In the absence of the former Chief due to death, his widow may occupy the chair and get the special share of meat in place of her husband. Even in case the Chief was unable to attend the feast due to other reasons his wife could represent him. This act of respect and honour is found to be a peculiar characteristic of the Anāls. Though it is mostly a man who enjoys the privilege of honour in the society, here the presence of a woman is significantly felt. She occupies a special place during customary feast and is given due respect.

Women during Feast of Merit (Totangkam)

In olden days, wealth was measured in terms of the amount of rice and number of animals one possessed. It was through accumulation and distribution of rice and meat by performing various kinds of feasts that one's status was determined. The social and cultural dynamism of the Anāls was manifested in its riches of traditional festivities and their

True peace is not merely the absence of war; it is the presence of justice. – *Jane Addams* (1860 – 1953), *philosopher and social worker, USA*

distinctive songs and dances. They were expressed through various celebrations in times of victories in war, bountiful harvest, feasts of merit, etc.

Totangkam (the feast of merit) was the most expensive and prestigious celebration among the Anāls. There were seven stages of the feast of merit namely *Inzu*, *Butang*, *Sa-pi-ae*, *Akapidam*, *Lambning*, *Soltang* *Piithalduthuh* and *Nungpatha*. On the first day, they came out dancing from the feast-giver's house to mark the beginning of the feast. Then the slaughtering of animal ensued. The man who led the dance group was required to uniquely dress in female attire because a woman was considered a symbol of wealth, prosperity and fertility. People refer to these traits as *Chanu Barnu*. A brief description of the life of the feast giver and his wife is usually inscribed. The inscription invariably includes name, clan name, age, year, month of the feast, the animals he killed and any other outstanding feat that feast giver had performed. It has been observed that the names of the clans of the feast giver and his wife are inscribed separately on the huge erected stone. This shows that the clan of the woman does not change even after marriage.

Women in Economic Subsistence

The mainstay of the economy of the Anāls is agriculture. Women have always played a prominent role in this subsistence activity. Generally, women are experts in detecting different soil types favorable for different crops. This knowledge has been the key to a good yield year after year. Sowing of particular varieties of rice in particular soil types, and at the correct altitude, ensures a good crop. In the past, men played an important role in barter and sale of good grains and other local products. They carried products to the urban centres and exchanged them for salt, meat, tobacco, betel nut, pulses, cotton, vegetables, etc. Nowadays, women have stepped up to take care of that activity as well. Nowadays, women participate (and sometimes even singularly handle) all activities related to production, processing and distribution of food

For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.
— Frantz Fanon, *psychiatrist, philosopher, writer, novelist, Caribbean*

grains. A large number of Anāl men, employed in the Indian Army or other government services, posted in distant places are temporarily away from their homes. The prolonged absence of the male partners in the family compels women to handle all the household tasks, irrespective of traditionally ascribed gender roles thus doing away with the notion of hard work for men and soft work for women. However, despite their major contribution women's work remains devalued. Women do not have any decision making power regarding the utilization or sale of agricultural land. Land and its products are owned under the domain of men.

Land is the most valuable immovable assets for the Anāls. The ancestral property is divided equally among the sons. Daughters do not inherit the ancestral land and other immovable properties, including the house site (*Inhmun*) and kitchen garden (*Inkhon*). However, women can inherit the movable properties such as livestock (*Donkar*), agricultural implements, kitchen appliances (*PhonkanTeko*), clothes (*Budil*), and ornaments (*Nahro*). Thus, we notice an unequal distribution of the ancestral properties, which furthers the subjugation of women thus making it impossible for women to attain economic independence, which is the first step towards improving their social status. Women remain insecure both in their natal and conjugal homes. Like in most societies, in the Anāl society also, we find gender-based stratification. Resources are unequally distributed between women and men. Women only control those resources, which are required for efficient management of the family and household, and they are not considered as valuable as economic resources controlled by men.

Women and Inheritance

Inheritance is obtained purely through male line among the Anals. This was and is the traditional custom. Even today, lineage membership and social identity are closely connected with the patterns of inheritance of property and resource distribution. Only the male has coparcenary

Sooner or later, we will have to recognize that the Earth has rights, too, to live without pollution. What mankind must know is that human beings cannot live without Mother Earth, but the planet can live without humans. - *Juan Evo Morales Ayma*, politician and activist who has served as President since 2006, Bolivia

rights to an ancestral property that has been handed down through the line of descent. According to the Anāl customary law and conception, daughters have only right for the maintenance. Irrespective of whether it is of an ancestral property or self-acquired property, a daughter has no share in it. She is absolutely deprived of the share in her father's property. Only male members are considered legitimate and entitled to inherit their ancestral properties and represent the family in any public affairs. This ensured that the ancestral properties remained within one's own clan. On the other hand, women are not that keen to acquire the ancestral property as they too believe that it belongs to their fathers or brothers. The woman does not obtain or get any profitable share of her father's properties following her marriage in spite of her years of toils and hard works in the family.

Generally women in the North East are viewed as having more freedom. However, this does not mean that the society is free from all social evils. My study has revealed that though women do not feel the brunt of social evils like child betrothal, female infanticide, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc. (which women in other parts of India suffer from), they suffer immensely due to male dominance, both physically and psychologically. The Anāl women actively participate in various social activities, engage in different economic activities, are mobile and are distinctly visible outside the four walls of the house. However, they have to endure high degree of domestic violence.

Women in Religious Domain

Before the advent of Christianity, the Anāls did not have any systematic religious calendar. The primitive religion that they followed upheld the social norms and acted as a crucial agent in promoting social solidarity. Beliefs and practices were based upon supernaturalism where the supernatural being (*Asapavan*) controlled the entire universe. His name was chanted when a person faced danger and when certain events were beyond their understanding. People used to make offerings to the

Only when the last tree has withered, and the last fish caught, and the last river been poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money. — *An American Indian Cree Proverb, America*

lesser spirits. The various rituals involving sacrifice of animals such as dogs, cock, pigs, etc were in vogue. Gradually, exposure to the outer world, better communication, trade and commerce, and interaction with other cultures brought about by the adoption of Christianity and education pushed the Anāls to evolve to a new dimension of life. This is true regarding religion as well.

Christianity and education, therefore, are the two main factors among others that have led the people to transcend the boundaries of the microcosmic world to the macrocosmic world. When the Anāls came under the colonial rule, they were exposed to the Christian missionaries. This was the beginning of their long association with the wider world of Christianity. The spread of Christianity and western education changed the socio-cultural ethics and ethos of the people. Western education system acted as a source of liberation to human mind in collaboration with the spread of Christianity. They both helped in liberating people from fears and superstitions.

In the past, the Anāls addressed the Supreme Being as *Asathi-pavanthi*. The same terminology is employed by the Anāl Christians today for the Supreme God / Holy Spirit in Christianity. It would, therefore, be wrong to say that Christianity has completely uprooted the indigenous beliefs and practices. The truth is that the underlying concepts are more or less the same. And there is affinity between the indigenous religion and Christian religion. However, unlike other several institutions operating in the society, the church serves the women best, even though it still upholds the notion of generic inequality between men and women. The church does encourage theological graduates, irrespective of their gender.

In every church there is an active participation of women. Thus it is not wrong to say that the spread of Christianity and Education has

The old Lakota was wise. He knew that a man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too. So he kept his children close to nature's softening influence.

— *A Lakota Proverb, America*

provided a platform where the position and status of women is upheld. Traditionally, the most honorific status in the Anāl society was that of traditional priest (*Khulpu*) who was a male. In the contemporary world too, the highest status is given to the reverend or pastor of the church who is a male. According to the Anāl culture, males alone possess charisma. Thus, recruitment to the highest order, the very embodiment of what might be called ‘institutionised charisma’ is restricted to males. This is not to argue that women are not given any position in the society, but the status is of a lower prestige.

The Myth of Eternity of the Anāl Woman

According to the Anāl customs and beliefs, keeping plenty of water was considered good. The water-filled pots in the house reflected upon the nature of women members of the family. There was also a myth, associated with the notion of storing ample water at home. Once, there was a widow who was survived by two children, a son and a daughter. The widow died leaving behind her two children. The daughter felt very depressed by the loss of her mother. Most importantly, it was high time for her to learn how to weave and spin but she had no one to teach her. In spite of her attempt to do it by herself, she could not make it. Ultimately, she felt the need of her mother’s presence to help her. One day, she went to her mother’s grave, cried her heart out and asked her to come back to life. The mother on hearing her daughter’s wail and prolonged cries could not resist any longer. Therefore, she came out from her grave to help her daughter. The daughter was extremely happy and took her mother home. Because of the fact that her mother had expired years back, she was covered with mud and her clothes were all torn. She wanted to bathe her mother but realized that there was no water in the house. Therefore, she asked her mother to sit near the fireplace (*Pakum*), and went down to fetch water from the stream. In the mean time, her brother came into the house and saw a lady sitting near the fireplace. He could not recognize that she was his own mother.

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect. – *Chief Seattle, USA*

He became very furious and asked the woman to leave as quickly as possible. The woman tried to convince him that she was his mother who had come back to life. However, the boy refused to believe her and instead repeatedly asked her to leave the house. As the mother was thrown out of the house, she went back to her grave. After sometime, when the daughter returned and found her mother missing from the house, she worriedly asked her brother about the whereabouts of their mother. The brother replied that he had thrown out of the home a dirty woman sitting near the fireplace. On hearing this, she became worried and went back to her mother's grave. She cried and pleaded her mother to come back again but the mother refused to do so. The daughter had to return without her mother. The children, thus, lost their mother once again. They lost the most precious thing, which could have been prevented had there been water in the house. Therefore, in the Anāl Society, every Anāl household keeps water in plenty. This folklore explains the custom of constantly storing water in the house. The Anāls strongly believed that a family is incomplete without the presence of the mother. This is proven by the fact that usually widowers remarry but a widow seldom remarries. Thus, women are believed to be essential for the survival of the family. In this myth, the mother comes back to life for her family. No such legend is associated with men.

Women in Political Provinces

The political administration and governances of traditions and customs within the social structure of the society is duly attended so as to bring out their impact on women. This discusses the extent of women's participation in the political realm and various issues that restricted them to be active members of the governing body. In the past, due to lack of written records of customs and beliefs, oral constitution was the only source of maintenance and regulations in the village administration. To be strong, wise, and brave was the persona that elevated the men to be the protector, wherein his words were regarded as law and were seemed to be abided by the people.

You can chain me, you can torture me, you can even destroy this body, but you will never imprison my mind. – *Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), lawyer, freedom fighter, writer, editor, mediator, peace activist, Independence Movement, India*

The socio-political mechanism and position of the Anāl women may be implicit from the following discussion in the light of the Anāl customary laws. The Anāls are deeply rooted in their traditional values having rigid customary patterns to be followed. The society being patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, the general notion of women is that of 'inferior' or 'other', particularly more in political aspects. Therefore, the male holds a more decisive position in the society. Traditional laws of the Anāls urge women to be wholly dependent. Like in many other communities, the Anāls consider women as physically and mentally weaker than men and it is the responsibility of men to protect the weaker gender. Such beliefs make a woman unable to hold any post in any public offices. The customary lawmakers, implementers and village court, all were and are, thus exclusively a male club.

The Anāl society is governed by traditions and customs that include their beliefs, social mores, precepts, rites and passages practiced since time immemorial. An in-depth study of these traditions reveals that they are not conducive to the interest of women. On the contrary, they are oppressive in many ways. Since by cultural prescription the exercise of authority is a male prerogative, any status that is endowed with authority is, by cultural ascription, a male monopoly. Thus, in the macro-social system, all political offices, from chief of state to village headman, are typically open only to males. In due course of time, the strong and rigid customary laws of inheritance and property possession are being loosened in the Anāl society. Today, women are not as strongly prohibited in the village court as it used to be in the past. Nevertheless, even today they are not given any chance to hold a post in the village council. Internalization of the knowledge of their subordinate status, and culturally imposed constraints has made women hesitant to take part in the public affairs.

The current situation demands that women become politically as active as men, so that they can act as mediators and peacemakers. Various

Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world...would do this, it would change the earth. – *William Faulkner (1897 – 1962), writer, Nobel Peace Laureate, USA*

incidents have shown that women have successfully solved situations of crises by negotiating between two rival groups. Despite this, their potential has remained un-explored at the village level politics. The intervention by women was greatly desired, but their actions were controlled by men. Women merely acted as instruments of negotiation, as it is less likely that the fighting factions would leash out their anger and violence on women. Feminists have argued that women have their own existence and they are an essential part of the universe, like men. Women's moral development is not deficient, but different from that of men. To achieve full gender justice, political democracy would have to be accompanied by social democracy that implicitly challenges the ideological subordination of women at all levels of the empirical reality such as the household, family, work place, community and society. My research has shown that most Anāl men were of the opinion that women should remain far from the political arena; similarly, women were also of opinion that politics is meant for men-folk. However, some middle-aged and young educated women are favorable towards the idea of women in politics and have started to raise their voices against oppression. They are also demanding reservation for women in the village council posts. During the Executive General Assembly meeting, organized by Anāl customary law committee (attended by the most decisive executive union comprising of many well-wishers and intelligentsia, village elders, etc.) the resolution to create a post for women in the village council was passed after heated debates by the executives members of *Anāl Sinnu Ruwl*. After many years, the amendment of Anāl Customary law to include women in the village council is another breakthrough for Anāl Sinnu Ruwl. The interesting, and encouraging, trend is that the attitude of men towards the entry of women into politics has changed from total rejection to limited objection.

Power and Authority in Her Domestic World

During my research work, a large number of cases of physical and mental

<p>Conflict exists strictly as an opportunity to raise our consciousness. – <i>Carl Jung</i> (1875 – 1961), <i>psychiatrist, psychotherapist, founder of analytical psychology, writer, Switzerland</i></p>

abuse of women were revealed. Wife beating is a frequent phenomenon among the Anāls. It is a hidden trauma that is not revealed to the outside world. Very few women report these atrocities, as they feel ashamed. The social environment not being friendly she goes through denial and self-blame. Violence within the family is an outcome of inherent social hierarchy, power inequalities and discrimination within a patriarchal society. Man's sexual and physical violence is supported by the institutional power of the village council, which defines it as 'appropriate' behavior. For example, a man is 'entitled' to respond violently if his wife attempts to depart from the prescribed norms of marriage and motherhood. During my research work, I came across two such incidents, where women were suffering at the hands of their husbands, but the village council supported the actions of the men. In the first incident a woman, whose husband was a government servant posted outside the village was accused of having an extra-marital affair. When her husband learnt of it, he divorced her, without giving her a chance for any explanation. However, my interviews with the concerned parties revealed that the genuine reason for divorce was that she could not bear children. However, the village council did not support the woman's case, and judged that divorce was appropriate for an unfaithful wife.

The second incident concerns a married man, father of three four children, who was having an extra-marital affair for the past many years. However, his wife was not in a position to divorce him, as she was economically dependent on him. She did not have the courage to file a case in the village council, and seek justice, as she had been threatened and terrorized not to open her mouth. The mental and physical abuse had completely shattered her sense of self-esteem and dignity. I encountered many more similar cases showing how the sufferings of women are veiled and suppressed. Family and children are the priority in a woman's life. She whole-heartedly feels the need to

<p>Nonviolence is the constant awareness of the dignity and humanity of oneself and others; it seeks truth and justice; it renounces violence both in method and in attitude... It is the willingness to undergo suffering rather than inflict it. It excludes retaliation and flight. – Wally Nelson, <i>activist, war tax resister, farmer, USA</i></p>

make the marriage work. Divorce is not only seen as negative, but also destructive. It is seen by most women as impossible, considering that they see family as the core social unit.

The Formation of Anāl Women Society

The first Anāl women society (Anāl Sinnu Ruwl) was formed on the 20th of November, 1955. And the first meeting was convened where it was resolved that the Anāl women should meet frequently to discuss various issues for the betterment and empowerment of the women. The Anāl Sinnu Ruwl (ASR) is one of the most active women organizations existing in Anāl society. The aims of the union are as follows;

Safeguarding women's rights and privileges

Enrichment of women in various fields

- Deliberating the grievances of women in the society
- Participation of women in decision making
- Freedom from socio-economic exploitation, political domination and military repression.

Anāl Sinnu Ruwl created a broad consciousness among the Anāl women to maintain their dignity and enable them to fight for their emancipation. Their efforts have raised them to the status of a recognized group in the society. The policies and strategies of the Union are primarily for the good of the community, unlike other women's organizations that are working towards an equal footage with men in every sphere. The aims of the Union are abolition of alcoholism, drug addiction and crime, bringing peace and justice, prevention of exploitation of women and children, organizing health awareness camps, promoting child-care and education, etc. However, the spheres where women suffer maximum, like domestic violence, polygamous liaisons, gender inequality, etc. are to a great extent not attended efficiently. For instances, cases of

We are not fighting for integration, nor are we fighting for separation. We are fighting for recognition as human beings... In fact, we are actually fighting for rights that are even greater than civil rights and that is human rights. – *Malcolm X (1925 – 1965), American Muslim minister, Human rights activist, USA*

divorce and wife beating seem to be beyond the control of the Union. These aspects are strongly guided by the rigid tradition. However, the organization has been resolutely fighting against all forms of injustice, social oppression and repression at their best disposal. To cite examples, a minor girl of 8yrs was raped in January 2015 at kabung village and a woman of 49 yrs was also killed by her husband in August 2015 from Ruwngchan village. In regards to these horrendous incidents the Anāl women society took the initiative to fight against these awful acts. They are striving in every aspect of life – political, social, economic and educational. Bringing about change for the betterment of the whole society is a long-term process. Women in this organization are conscious of this, and are eventually progressing by bringing changes at the grass root levels. They are seeking to bring justice and succour to the people of their community, whether it is related to restoring peace at the level of family, village and society at large.



Women are gradually realizing that they have personalities of their own as human beings and that their mission does not end by becoming good and wise daughter, sister, wife, and mother. The wider social

Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. – *Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 - 1968), Baptist minister and activist, humanitarian, and leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, USA*

consciousness that paved way to participate in broad, extra-domestic, socially useful activity has also been made possible due to modern devices, which assists to decrease the drudgery of domestic work and give some respite. There are a good number of women engaged in and enjoying the prestige of salaried jobs in various fields. The Anāl women in today's life do not live a passive life. And this is despite the restricting practices of the community, where women were meant to be invisible. Women now dare to look beyond the given social order for building better and brighter society.

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Chothe Women: Status and Issues

- Y. Tabitha Chothe

Introduction

The Chothe, a small tribe in Manipur, was recorded as having only 250 people in 1931 census and 2675 in 2001 census. The Chothe is one of the oldest indigenous groups in Manipur. The total population of women in the Chothe community is around 2,000 and total active women member of the Chothe Sanu Lim is 720. At present, the total population of the Choths is around 6000 scattered in 18 villages, 16 of which are in Chandel district and 2 in Bishnupur district. The literacy rate of the Chothe people is 60% of its population.

It is believed that the Choths are the descendants of “*Pakhangba*”, a python. “*Thanidam*” the mother of the Chothe people is believed to be the mother of all humankind. Pakhangba and Thanidam had 8 children - 7 sons and 1 daughter. The 7 existing clans represent the 7 sons – Makan, Mareem, Yulhung, Khiyang, Thao, Rang sai and Parpa Rakung. The daughter, *Api Tuishipi*, is known as the “Goddess of weaving” as she was able to weave cloths with patterns of python stripes that were used to scare the tiger away from the entrance of the cave in which the Chothe people lived thereby doing away the difficulty they faced to come out of it.

The Chothe society is a simple one which has been patriarchal, patri-lineal, patri-local and ultimo-geniture (youngest son) in nature since time immemorial and agriculture has been the main source of their livelihood. They strictly follow clan exogamy. Cross-cousin marriage was/is the most preferred form of marriage. In the past, the mate was acquired either by negotiation, service, and elopement or abduction.

A person, who no matter how desperate the situation, gives others hope, is a true leader. – *Daisaku Ikeda (born 1928), third President of new religious movement Soka Gakkai, Japan*

However, in the present times, there is hardly any marriage by service or abduction but more of church marriage after mutual consent between the couple and between the two families, and marriage by elopement.

The Chothes believed in ‘Lungchungpa’ in the past. At present, the Chothes are all Christian since its first conversion in 1937. Since conversion to Christianity there have been many changes in the society especially towards women. Coupled with access to modern education, the status of Chothe women is on the rise.

One of the uniqueness of the Chothe society is in the administration/ governing system. There exist two governing bodies “*Hloukal*” and “*Loumi*”. As and when a new village is established, the village is administered by “*Hloukal*” constituted by one member each from the 7 clans. There are 7 posts in the system which is filled through tough competitions. “*Loumi*”, on the other hand, is also constituted by one member each from the seven clans. However, they act as the opposition to “*Hloukal*”. Such dual existence helps in scrutinizing and balancing the village administration.

Women in Chothe Society

Chothe women are hardworking, responsible, honest and faithful towards family of orientation and procreation. Apart from doing the household work and raising kids, Chothe women also contribute economically through agricultural work, weaving and involvement in other small scale industries.

In the Chothe society, women were/are considered inferior to men. This is evident from the way they treat a girl from the moment she is born. Most parents exuberantly welcome the birth of a boy child over a girl child. On the christening day of the boy child it is celebrated extravagantly by killing animals which otherwise is more of a quiet affair with just a prayer and tea for a girl child.

In the Chothe community, a girl child cannot inherit family property

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. – *Maya Angelou, USA*

like the boy child. Man carries the name of the family or the name of the clan, owns the property of his parents and shoulders the responsibility of taking care of the parents. This is especially so for the eldest and the youngest sons. Girl child is not considered important as she has to leave the family and the clan when she gets married. And therefore, she is not entitled to inherit any property or have any rights in the family where she was born. The mentality that a girl has to leave the family on her marriage discourages some families to give her education too, while the boy child is provided and encouraged to pursue quality education and higher studies.

A male child is taught to look after and give attention to the family he belongs to while a girl child is taught from the beginning as to how she should take care of her husband's family with a great sense of belonging. The girl has to bear the name of the family she marries into. Even in case of divorce, the daughters are advised to consider her mother-in-law and father-in-law as her own parents. In rare cases, a daughter is welcomed back by her parents and allowed to choose another partner if her first marriage fails.

During Menstruation

As women are physically weaker than men, they are given special care from ancient days. During menstruation, she is considered impure. She is exempted from cooking, carrying heavy loads, and doing hard works.

Early Marriages

Early marriage was not much common in the past. Young boys and girls enjoyed courtship but marriage took place after the attainment of at least 18 years of age. In the present times, there have been incidences of early marriages; otherwise, generally marriages take place when the couples are mature. Having a job before marriage is mostly preferred. In the present days, Christian marriage with the consent of both the

Isn't it wonderful to have a method of struggle that makes it possible to stand up against an unjust system, fight with all of your might, never accept it, and yet not stop to violence and hatred in the process? – *Martin Luther King, Jr., USA*

parents is the most preferred and respected way of becoming husband and wife. However, due to the huge expenses involved in such marriage, many people have opted for elopement.

Elopement

Elopement is one of the burning issues in Chothe society. This has created many problems and enmity between the families of the boy and the girl. In this kind of marriage system, the couple agrees with each other according to their feelings but without the consent of the parents, they secretly run away on their own and set out for a new living.

Besides elopement, there is marriage by abduction where a girl is forcefully abducted to become the wife of a boy. This is actually illegal and violation of woman's right. In such a situation, the boy's family is charged with a heavy penalty by the girl's family. However, this has a serious repercussion on their own daughter's future as she has to live with her in-laws in the future.

Some of the customary fines/penalties are:

Yurman Pekni: Fines imposed by the girl's family on the boy's family.

- Vok Awon Alei Kai (Pig)
- Siel Akha (A Cow)
- Rein-Zubel Akha (Rice beer worth Rs. 300 during pre-Christianity),
- Chothe Puon Akha (the traditional shawl)

Normally, elopement or/and abduction is/are considered for marriage. It is usually finalized after a consensus is reached between the two families through negotiations.

However, in case of the girl's refusal to marry the man who forcefully abducted her, the penalties demanded by the girl's family from the boy's family are:

When you drink from the stream, remember the spring. – *A Chinese Proverb*

Mimalung: It is the penalty taken for molesting and violating the girl's dignity – 3 huge pigs of 5 *vais* (fists measured by the girth just under the forelegs) each, and 3 *kharungs* of wine which in total today is equivalent to Rs. 3 lakhs.

Maithirung: It is the penalty for insulting the girl's family and relatives. The demands vary from person to person and from family to family. Usually the penalty amounts to 3 huge pigs of 5 *vais* each and 3 *kharungs* of wine.

Another type of marriage which is considered a crime is the elopement or running away of a married woman from her husband's house with another lover-boy. In such a case, the girl is charged with double penalties of Mimalung and Maithirung. And sometimes the couple may be excommunicated by the village.

In marriage, if the husband is from outside the village, he is asked to offer/treat the villagers of the girl especially the village authority with '*PhuntangRam*'. The acceptance of '*PhuntangRam*' has significance in that the villagers and the authorities agree to bear witness in time of living together or apart, and will still take responsibility and stand for the girl.

During Pregnancy

As per traditional practices, during pregnancy, a Chothe woman has to avoid eating bird or wild animal or mushroom. These forbidden things are believed as "*Rouh*" which means curse from nature. But these days, such beliefs and practices are discarded and the modern medical care is more preferred and followed. The husband is also restricted from killing and hunting during his wife's pregnancies.

Childbirth

The Chothe traditional way of health care for woman during child birth is not to take fruits and spicy foods, but to drink only boiled water so that the child can be kept away from infections. The child-

In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins – not through strength, but through persistence. —*Buddha, India*

bearing mother used to take “*Chiseh*”, a specially caked salt, with only fish and non-vegetarian food that are desiccated. They practice this for at least 3 months as a tradition. Though the traditional practices still continue the modern medical care is valued and followed more.

Divorce and Widow Status

Divorce is not common but it does occur in the Chothe society and it is punishable to the partner who initiated the divorce. Huge fine according to the custom is imposed on the person who initiated the divorce. In divorce, the ownership of the children is decided by the parents. Children are mostly owned by the father but if the children are too young, the custody is usually given to the mother with a condition to take care of them for some years.

In the past, widows were said to be given special cares and exempted from social services and duties. But now-a-days, women in the community in general are overlooked and considered of low status and given less importance. As a result many underprivileged widows are there in almost all the Chothe villages. Instead of enjoying their bereaved husband's pension or other beneficial schemes, majority of them survive on hand to mouth situation, working as daily labourers or depending upon forest and agricultural products and small scale industries such as weaving and handloom. In fact the voice of the lowly and poor have not been heard and considered in the society as well as in the government platform.

Violence against Women

In the Chothe community, violence against women is rare though the family is dominated by the husband as the head of the family. Wife battering is not common and is considered a taboo in the traditional beliefs. Such beliefs prevent the husband from resorting to physical violence towards his wife although quarrelling is common. However, in case of alcoholic husband, physical violence is common but the society

The wound caused by a sword can eventually be healed; the hurt resulted from vicious remarks can never be undone. – *A Chinese Proverb*

condemns the husband for his act.

In case of pre-marital pregnancy, the father of the child is fined as per the custom. If after impregnating the woman, the man is not willing to marry the woman he has to give as penalty 3 pigs measuring 5 *vais* each and 3 *kharungs* of wine to the woman's clan. And if the man is willing to marry the woman whom he impregnates still he has to pay 1 pig of 5 *vais* and 1 *kharung* of wine.

The woman, though as the victim, also bears the brunt of punishment if she does not tell who the father of the child that she carries is. Two huge irons from the wooden poles used for pounding rice are crushed on her feet by the women folk if she does not reveal the truth. She cannot name any man she likes as the father of the unborn child. As and when she is compelled to marry the father of the unborn child, very often she is treated indifferently by her in-laws if she was not the preferred wife for the boy. Then, for the sanctification of the village the man and woman are equally fined one pig of 5 *vais* and 1 *kharung* of wine each.

Women's Participation in the Society:

Domestic Sphere

As the Chothe society is patriarchal in nature, women do not enjoy equal right with men in the family. Almost every decision making is done by man. Women are suppressed by their husbands and in-laws. They spend most of their time in household works and remain economically dependent throughout their lives and hence they are viewed as inferior to men. In the family both father and mother shoulder equal responsibilities to raise their kids. But as the father is the head of the family the final decisions are taken by him. Decision making is rarely done by the mother in the family although some of her opinions are taken into consideration for decision-making by the husband.

An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind. – 'Mahatma' Gandhi, India

Public Sphere

The participation of women in the public sphere is rarely seen in the Chothe community. Chothe women are still strictly bounded by traditions, customs, and age-old superstitious beliefs. Therefore, the participation of women in public space is very limited or nil.

Political Sphere

Chothe tribe is a male dominated patriarchal society. As a result, men as a whole control the administrative work of the village as well as in the larger social sphere. Men have all the rights, authority and voice that can be heard or exercised in the village court. No women participation have been heard or seen in the village court so far. Women's fray into social and political sphere is seen only in the village women society and the church.

The women society is recognized and respected by the community and village authority. Women play an important and effective role in dealing with abuse of substance like drugs and alcohol and other social evils, and in defusing tensions that may arise. Yet participation of women in decision making is absent despite women being capable of taking up leadership roles.

At the tribe level, whether in social or religious bodies, women are not allowed to take any leadership role; due to lack of educated women among the Chothes, it becomes difficult for the women to assert their rights for leadership in any organisations.

Property Ownership

Family properties, both movable and immovable, belong to man. Based on the customary law of the Chothe society, women do not have the right to inherit any property of their parents. Some gifts presented on the wedding day or marriage confirmation day is the only property a

Peace cannot exist without justice, justice cannot exist without fairness, fairness cannot exist without development, development cannot exist without democracy, and democracy cannot exist without respect for the identity and worth of cultures and peoples. – *Rigonerta Manch, Guatemala*

girl receives from her parents. The immovable properties such as house, field, etc are to be inherited by the men in the family. If there is no son/man in the family to inherit the property, the next closest kin of the family inherits all the properties and is given the responsibilities to look after the family. Now-a-days giving away family inheritance to the son-in-law (person married to the last daughter or the only daughter in the family) is also found in some families in case of no sons. According to the Chothe custom, the last son in the family looks after the parents and inherits the bigger share of the family property.

Economic Sphere

The Chothe women generally lag behind and are economically dependent on men. Women employees and full time job holders are less in the society. The tradition of man going to office or doing manual works outside home and woman staying back at home and taking care of the household work is still common in the Chothe community. Chothe community is basically dependent on agricultural economy and a good harvest is the most desirable thing. Men folks do the ploughing and harder works in the paddy field while women do the plantation, weeding and harvesting. As the majority of the Chothe populations live under poverty line, women could not participate freely in the social activities as they have to care for all the household maintenance and responsibilities.

Religious Sphere:

Women folk could lead the people as song leaders in every traditional festival. They are called the “*Rung Hoith*” meaning song leaders. They could not lead all the village people as only men folk could lead; but they have great responsibilities in the household works that have stood them in good stead to take up all kinds of activities in day-to-day life. In all the traditional festivals, preparations are done by women folk. They bake breads and make many kinds of eatables in the traditional ways. There cannot be any traditional dances without the female groups.

He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; he who does not ask a question remains a fool forever. – *A Chinese Proverb*

Conclusion

In the present context, realizing that women too can be skilful and knowledgeable like men folks, education of women is much encouraged; the literacy rate of Chothe women today has reached 60%. And considering the need of the time and keeping in view of the fact that women can organize themselves and collectively work towards the betterment of the society the Chothe Women Organization christened as the Chothe Sanu Lim was established in the year 1994 under the guiding principle “Empowering to Witness Glorious Future”. Profile of the Chothe Sanu Lim till date is given hereunder

- 1994-1996: Ms. Yoktel Chothe as the Chairperson and
Ms. Diachim Chothe as the Secretary
- 1997-2000: Ms. Diachim Chothe (Chairperson)
Ms. Y. Tabitha Chothe (Secretary)
- 2004-2012: Ms. MK. Damtin Chothe (Chairperson)
Ms. Y. Tabitha Chothe (Secretary)
- 2013 till date: Ms. Y. Tabitha Chothe (Chairperson)
Ms. MK. Tamphamani Chothe (Secretary)

It is high time that the Chothe society looked into the status of their women from the wider perspective. Age-old superstitious beliefs and other impractical traditions and social evils have to be discarded in order to bring about transformation in the society at large. Special platform should be given to the women to take responsibilities in the larger scale. Equal importance should be given both to the male and female child especially in the field of education. Giving proper respect and treatment to the women is an important step for progress. As the popular saying goes, “*There is a woman with every successful man*”, it seems like no success and victory can be witnessed without the contribution and participation of women. In fact, women especially our mothers have been our guide and so chances have to be given to listen to what they have to say.

He who steals in order to give to god can only get advice from the devil. – *A Nigarguan Proverb*

The Status and Role of Women in Inpui Society: Past and Present

- L. Noela Khumba & Luriang Khumba

Introduction

The Inpui Naga is one of the recognized tribes residing mostly in the western part of Manipur. The Inpui tribe numbering about 11,000 in population is mainly concentrated in 15 villages - 9 in Tamenglong district and 3 each in Imphal district and Senapati district of Manipur. A large section of the tribe's population can be found scattered and mingling with villages of other tribes in various places of Manipur and Nagaland. In the past, several Inpui villages had been totally assimilated into other neighboring tribes which had considerably reduced the population and resulted in the identity crisis of the Inpui tribe.

The Inpui tribe was also known as Koupui, Kaupui, Koupooee, Kapui, Kabui, Pooeron, Puiron, Puimei, Kaupui by different people. All these are misnomers of 'INPUIRWAN' by which the tribe people called themselves. The term *Inpuirwan* (In-House, Pui-Big, Rwan-People) literally means People of big house.

Until the Gazette notification of 9th January, 2012 of the Union Govt. of India, the Inpui and the Rongmeis were collectively recognized under one Scheduled Tribe, Kabui. The nomenclature 'Kabui' is a misnomer given by the Meitei kings and popularized by British administrators. It has been assumed that Inpui and Rongmeis were one and the same because they possessed a good number of similarities and also close affinity. However, they are now separately identified as Inpui and Rongmei. Apart from the Rongmei tribe, the Inpui also share a close similarity with the Zemes and the Liangmais in terms of culture and beliefs.

Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways; for the perverse are an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence. – <i>The Bible, Proverbs 3:31-32, NRSV</i>

Women in the Inpui society are valued and enjoy power and privileges especially in negotiations and peace missions. They are hard working and mostly the bread earners of the family; but the Inpui society, being patriarchal and patrilineal, women do not enjoy the same status as the men do with respect to public activities, administrative affairs and inheritance of property. They play a vital role in their social, cultural, economic and religious ways of life. They are highly respected in the society as well as in the family and are also given a great deal of freedom. But the patriarchal character of the society makes the women, whether as a wife, daughter, sister or mother, feel inferior to man. It is in the social, economic, religious or political sphere that they have been denied roles equal to the male members of the society.

The Inpui society considers women as an equal partner in word, but the word 'equal' could not be counted because women are not considered as equal with men in practice.

Status and Role of Inpui Women in the Family

The family structures in the Inpui society are patriarchal where women have no authoritative power in the family. As a patrilineal and patrilocal society, the rule of descent is strictly based on the male line only. Thus all the children follow the clan of the father. However, the bond of love and care between the brothers and sisters are deep and special till the point of death in the Inpui society. This is signified by the fact that a special cloth/shawl called "*Thijunpwan*" presented by their beloved brothers or sisters is to be worn by the dead women or men, whether single or married, when they die.

Girl Child or Daughter

The Inpui society has a preference for the male child but do not discriminate against girls by way of female infanticide or sex determination tests. Discrimination between girls and boys is not obvious; but, the birth of a male child is a matter of great joy for the

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less. – *Marie Curie (1867 – 1934), France*

birth of male ensures that the family lineage will be carried forward. Having a son meant a life-long emotional gain, continuation of the family line and old age insurance in terms of the obligation towards taking care of elderly parents which are the causes behind higher parental preference for the boys. The birth of a girl child is considered as a boon and is welcomed because she is seen as a helper of the family. Girls do not inherit land. Nonetheless they are not abused, hated or subjected to strict social norms. Girls are free to participate in social events, dancing and other recreational activities. There is no dowry on marriage; instead, the father of the bridegroom has to pay bride price to the father of the girl. A girl is expected to help her mother in domestic responsibilities as well as in agricultural activities. Girls are trained to be good housewives and mothers, together with behavioral pattern that are consistent with obedience, being ladylike and are expected to be passive.

Traditionally, girls played the role of a second mother by shouldering the responsibilities of household work such as looking after the siblings, fetching water, collecting firewood, cleaning, cooking, etc. The girls were taught the art of weaving from a tender age as it was believed that girls who did not know how to weave would have difficulty finding a good husband. Girls were not denied of education; however, though they were enrolled in schools, due to the financial constraints of the parents and other factors girls normally had limited educational opportunities. Most of them studied up to primary and middle level and then ceased studying in order to support their younger siblings' education. However along with economic development, social notions and culturally determined social phenomena are changing. Nowadays like the boys, the girls enjoy equal access to education; but their rate of literacy is still much lower than that of their male counterpart.

The marriage of a girl takes place at the age of understanding and that too with their consent. Girls have considerable freedom in selection of partners though parents often insist on finding for them a suitable

Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. – <i>The Bible, Psalm 82:3, NRSV</i>
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match. Daughters have no legal rights to family property. In fact the laws of inheritance are basically the same among all the Naga tribes. Only the sons have the right to inherit the property of the parents. The youngest can take the responsibility of taking care of his parents when they become old. This responsibility comes with the right to inherit properties including house, ornament, money, domestic animals, livestock, and land; agricultural fields are divided equally among all the brothers of the family.

Even in the absence of sons, women have no right to claim the property. On her marriage, gifts of various items including livestock, utensils, ornaments and other goods are given depending on her family economic condition. If the household is wealthy, a plot of land called *loutak* may be gifted. An unmarried woman has all rights over her personal belongings. She has a right to build her own house and is allowed to cultivate in her ancestral property during her lifetime but without ownership/inheritance rights. A daughter who remains unmarried nevertheless is expected to live under the protection of her father and after her father's death, under the control and protection of her brother; otherwise she is on her own.

Married Women/Mother

The Inpui society being patriarchal, the father is the head and in charge of all the family affairs; yet the mother plays an equally important role in the family. Her position is an honored one. She is the joint owner of the household with her husband though in actual practice she is the subordinate partner who considers her husband as superior to her, respects him and assists him in most of the work. She contributes positively towards the economy of the family along with her husband and participates in all agricultural activities like weeding, hoeing, harvesting and threshing. In reality, some women do more work than men.

Inpui women enjoy considerable autonomy pertaining to family

Reconciliation requires changes of heart and spirit, as well as social and economic change. It requires symbolic as well as practical action. – *Malcolm Fraser (1930-2015), politician, Australia*

authority. She plays the main role in running the affairs of the family. The men leave the women with full authority to manage the household responsibilities and maintenance of the family. Child rearing and domestication of animals is her responsibility. She handles the granary affairs; but when it comes to disposal or selling of grains in bulk for commercial purposes, she carries that out only with the consent of her husband and parents-in-law in case of a joint family. She can sell and buy handicrafts, shawls, domestic animals except cattle without consulting her husband.

Decisions on minor economic matters, i.e., day to day expenditures for household requirements and their personal needs are generally taken independently by women but decisions on the major investment, purchases and savings are taken by men. In the decision-making process related to social aspects, the wife is consulted by her husband in all family decisions. Decisions regarding the care of children, education, health issues and agricultural matters are taken care of by both the parents.

Her social status is not only that of a loving wife but also of a loving mother. As a wife and mother, she has much influence on her husband and children. But in spite of the important position she enjoys in the family, her authority within the household is subordinate to the final decision of her husband in general.

Widow/Divorcee/Barren Women

In the Inpui society, widow enjoys the same status as she enjoyed during her husband's lifetime. She can take part in every social function in the same way she did earlier. She can also maintain her deceased husband's property like house, land, fields etc., as long as she is not separated from her husband's family. After the demise of her husband, she acts as the sole guardian of her children. No social stigma is attached to her. She is exempted half from all the duties of the village. There are no restrictions on widow remarriage if she desires but are not encouraged

During a negotiation, it would be wise not to take anything personally. If you leave personalities out of it, you will be able to see opportunities more objectively. – *Brian Koslow, at present author of guidebooks, USA*

unless they are very young. In case of widow remarriage, she should leave all her children to her deceased husband's family and has no right to claim over his property. If she remarries from her husband's house, her father-in-law would charge bride-price from her new husband.

The practice of divorce is very rare among the Inpui. Without any proper reason, a man does not have the right to divorce his wife though it is allowed under certain conditions. Some of the common prominent causes for divorce are abusiveness, alcoholism, infidelity from either side, mishandling of household affairs, or in some cases if the wife is barren or the husband is impotent. Whatever the case is, it is generally settled by the elders of the clans in the presence of both the husband and wife. If the elders of both families cannot reach an agreement then the village elders' **thampe**i would take up the matter and the husband's family would be compelled to return the personal properties of the divorced wife. Once the formal divorce takes place the husband loses all rights over his wife and she is free to remarry. Although she is allowed to keep her personal belongings she cannot claim the right to inherit both movable and immovable property of her husband. All her children born of their wedlock remain under the sole custody of the father and she has no right over her children. Even if the divorce is the fault of the husband, the wife is usually blamed by the husband's family for not minding her husband well. The status of a divorced woman is lower than that of a widow and she does not enjoy the same privileges as the widow. In the past, in case of divorce, it was a taboo for the two families to intermarry for up to three generations. At present, this practice has been abolished.

Traditionally, if there was a barren woman in the village, the older women would make a doll, give it an imaginary name to it and present it to the barren woman. This mock rite is called *nao-ba-inu*. Though it is a mock rite, the older women who understood the pain and feeling of the barren woman blessed her and pronounced a special blessing to get children. Although not ill-treated, barren women are stigmatized in some ways in the society. Many married women without children

“To find God is the greatest human achievement”. — *Raphael Simon, Today's Inspiration*

silently endure the blame throughout their lives for not being able to procreate offspring.

Status and Role of Inpui Women in Public Sphere

Women are highly respected and given a great deal of freedom. She mingles and participates freely in singing, dancing and entertaining guests in any social functions but they are not included in the decision-making process of the clan or village. Due to the patriarchal hegemony which remains predominant in Inpui society, women encounter inequality in public leadership. Although women are respected in the family and society and receive endless protection, security and love from their husbands and their brothers, they do not enjoy the same status as the men do in respect to the social authority and village administrative affairs. The social authority is constituted of males only. Men plan and make decisions for the community and women are only observers and doers; their opinions are not given weight and dismissed as just 'women's words'. Majority of men in Inpui society opine that women are not allowed in decision-making processes because of their weak mind and gossiping nature. Women are not allowed to attend village meeting in case of village conflicts or disputes. Even when allowed to attend conflict resolution meetings, they are not allowed to speak. They are considered ignorant and weak minded. Women's conditions also become worse when she has to meet the needs of her husband and when her husband does not know his responsibilities. Due to many social changes women are somehow free from all bondages in the family and society. We are getting positive responses concerning women's representation in the village council, union and church; but due to fewer proposals or less suitable candidates we could not reach the level.

However when situations like disputes and conflicts arise between the men folk, women's intervention and advices are sought. In such cases women are considered as peacemakers and mediators.

Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become your character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny. – Lao Tzu (sometime between 6-4 BC), poet, philosopher, author, China

Women and Education

Traditionally, the only formal institutions outside of the home were the dormitories. There were separate dormitories for men and women. The men's dormitory was called '*katang-inn*' and that of the young ladies was called '*rangaak-inn*'. In these places boys and girls were introduced to village social life, culture, custom and traditions. The girls were imparted training in art and craft, spinning, weaving, singing, dancing and maintenance of families in the *rangaak-inn*. Every village boy and girl starting from the age of seven or eight years old, whether high or low, rich or poor were compelled to sleep at dormitories every night till the time of marriage. It was the most important educational set up for the people.

With the coming of Christianity and the introduction of modern education among the Inpui Naga villages, this system of education has diminished. Instead, boys and girls have started to attend schools and dormitories find no place to stay in this changed situation. But in this modern education, women were not given the priority or importance although both boys and girls were given equal opportunity. The poor economic condition of the family has been a great hindrance particularly for the girl child. Parents feel that it is unproductive to send their girl child and prefer the girls to be at home to tend to household chores and to bring additional income for the household. In the Inpui society, agriculture is the main occupation and source of income and thus most of the parents are unable to send their children to schools because of the low economic standing of the household. It makes it difficult for them to pay tuition fees, buy books, uniforms for their children. In this case they have to make a choice as to whom they should send to school – son or daughter; their preference is for the former. This is because the son is seen as an asset and future bread earner of the family. The education of girl child on the other hand is seen as a waste of money because of the fact that she would be married off to another family.

It is disgraceful to live at the cost of one's self-respect. Self-respect is the most vital factor in life. Without it, man is a cipher. To live worthily with self and respect, one has to overcome difficulties. It is out of hard and ceaseless struggle alone that one derives strength, confidence recognition. – B.R. Ambedkar, India

Moreover the girl child being involved in the domestic chores has little or no time for her education. In most cases girls are not able to enjoy all the educational opportunities. Majority of illiterates are women. Literacy rate declines in the 30 plus age groups.

Nowadays, education has been given utmost importance in the society and parents are giving equal importance to both their male and female children. Like the boys, the girls enjoy equal access to education and in fact, in some fields, girls are performing better than their male counterpart. An increasing number of women have acquired education and have taken up positions as teachers, nurses, doctors and so on. Several have moved out of their traditional villages and migrated to different parts of the country and they do not find it necessary to abide by the traditional social rules which once were binding their mothers and grandmothers.

Education is the key and can be an effective tool for women empowerment. It enables the women to acquire knowledge for improving and empowering themselves in all fields. Therefore, there should not be any pessimism in the approach towards educating women.

Engagement and Marriage

The Inpui Naga Society is very rich in her civic customs. Marriage is one such institution of customary law which had been known even to the earliest man. The Inpui are very proud of their moral decency from time immemorial. Moral decency is their highest code of moral ethics. Among the Inpui Nagas, monogamy is the customary practice. This type of marriage is by and large the dominant and accepted form of marriage even in the present day; polygamy is extremely rare and is not permitted by custom or culture. Marriage is exogamous in which a man and woman of the same clan do not marry each other. In the olden days, boys and girls had little choice in marriage, because marriage is

Individuals have global moral obligations which transcend national obligations of obedience; they must sometimes violate domestic laws to prevent crimes against peace, justice and all of humanity. – 1950s 'Nuremberg Precedent' in *Global Law*

not an individual but a family affair. Arrangements were made by the parents. Child marriage was not and is not in practice. The appropriate age for marriage is in her early twenties but some marry even at sixteen to seventeen years. The Inpui Naga practiced three types of marriage:

Nupa Meingai (arranged marriage)

- *Suipaknu* (elopement) and
- *Kaipaknu* (forced marriage)

Nupa Meingai was the most popular form of marriage among the Inpui. In this type of marriage, the parents of the boy and the girl played a key role in getting the boy and the girl to accept the proposal but sometimes the marriage was arranged even without the consent of the girl. The elders of the clan and the parents do all of the decision making and women were not entitled to their opinion regarding wedding engagement and marriage ceremonies. After the final fixation from both the parties, the bride price is fixed.

Suipaknu takes place when the parents of the two lovers do not consent with the lovers. It can also be known as love marriage. This type of marriage has become a common phenomenon even in the present society.

There are also occasions when *kaipaknu* happened among the Inpui Naga. This kind of marriage takes place when the boy forcefully elopes with an unwilling girl. This is liable to serious consequences. It is up to the girl and her family whether to accept or reject the marriage. In case of rejection the boy will be fined.

Bride Price and Gifts of Marriage

The Inpui practiced bride price system known as *taman*. At one point of time in the past, usually the price for an unmarried young woman was Rs. 30; in case of a widow or divorcee, the price was Rs.10 and for

In the West, intellect is the source of life. In the East, love is the basis of life. Through love, intellect grows acquainted with reality, and intellect gives stability to the work of love. Arise, and lay the foundations of a new world by wedding intellect to love. – *Alama Iqbal, scholar, barrister, Pakistan*

a *takche* (a little aged woman) it was Rs.3. However, nowadays payment of bride price in cash is insignificant; but gift in kinds is prevalent although it does not amount to dowry system. The boy's family will also give the following to the bride's family - one *bapupwansin* (shawl for grandfather in-law), one *bapapwansin* (shawl for father in-law), and one *banupwansoi* (shawl or sarong for mother in-law). On the other hand, the bride will also bring with her the following to the bridegroom's family - one *bapapwansin* (shawl for father-in-law), one *banupwan* (shawl for mother-in-law) and one *basanpwansin* (shawl for husband).

The above mentioned gifts are the compulsory price of marriage. The bride also brings various shawls and sarongs/wrap-around skirts for in-laws and other relatives. The parents also gifted the bride with household articles like clothes, utensils, weaving looms, ornaments and other necessary articles for daily use at home. Besides, there are also many other subsidiary things and properties but which may not be compulsory

Social Treatment during Menstruation, Pregnancy and Childbirth

During the menstrual periods, "*Pwansoi Hungnu*", the men were not supposed to come near the women or touch their menstrual wastes as it was believed to bring bad luck in hunting, fishing, warring etc. There are certain things which were regarded as taboo for pregnant women: she should not see animals like tiger, snakes etc., lest the evil spirit would touch and hurt the unborn baby. Pregnant woman or her husband cannot kill snake because otherwise the baby will be born either dead or disfigured. Traditionally at the birth of a baby, the family would perform a ritual by sacrificing a big cock for the child's wellbeing. The meat of the sacrifice was taken by the child's mother and was not given to the boys as it is considered bad and will bring bad luck in hunting, war, etc. The mother defiled by childbirth was also considered unclean for six days after delivery during which she was prohibited from going

In order for us to bring reconciliation to what was a very difficult time, we first must have justice. We must continue to ask when the lives of our people will be given the same respect and value as others. There is hope for a better future, and for peace. But in order for us to live in peace, we must be able to live in dignity and without fear. – *Leonard Peltier, USA*

outdoors. Nonetheless with the coming of Christianity such customary practices are not observed anymore.

Status and Role of Inpui Women in Economy

From the economic point of view, women were the important sources of sustenance. She contributed positively towards the economy of the family by participating equally with men folk. She plays a significant role within and outside the family. She works in most operations of all sectors of the local economy. Women are responsible for household duties like cooking, cleaning, looking after the children and domestic animals, collection of vegetables, fetching firewood and water which the men did not help. In addition to the domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance, they also contribute equally in agricultural activities.

From time immemorial the main economic life of the Inpui Naga has been based on agriculture and therefore their daily routine is governed by the seasons and it is the women who play a significant role in the traditional economy of their society. They mostly maintained the jhum cultivation. While the men cleared the forest and cut trees before kindling fire, women were engaged in sowing seeds, regularly cleaning the weeds, harvesting, de-husking etc. Traditionally Inpui women earned their income from agricultural activities, forest produces, handicrafts and weaving. In fact every Inpui women knows the art of weaving. They weave shawls and other clothing for the whole family as well as for commercial purposes.

Nowadays, many women are engaged in different kinds of business activities and are working in both government and private sectors to supplement the family income. Most of the money earned is used for family maintenance and children's education. But the household chores and their contribution in agricultural activities were not considered as labor and regarded as things to be done by women and hence women's work were not given due importance and recognition.

<p>It is better to be hated for what you are; than to be loved for what you are not. – <i>Andre Paul Guillaume Gide (1869 – 1951), France</i></p>
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An Inpui woman does not enjoy equal status in decision-making matters regarding the financial investments and savings of the family. However, minor economic matters i.e. day to day expenditures for household requirements and their personal needs are generally taken independently by women.

In spite of their contributions, women are discriminated against with regard to inheritance of property. The Inpui being patrilineal, the youngest son inherits the father's property. The father can distribute his land and properties to his other children as he wishes but women are not entitled to any inheritance to the family or ancestral property. Even in the absence of a male child a daughter could not claim the property as a matter of right and the family property would go to the nearest male relative. Women own no immovable property unless they acquire it or their parents or brothers gift it to them. They inherit only movable properties such as loom, ornaments, clothes, jewelries, utensils, basket and other tools of manual work. The daughter may be given some property such as paddy when she leaves for her husband's house after marriage.

Presently the rules are gradually changing regarding inheritance of property by women. There are a few instances where in the absence of male heir, the daughter was granted inheritance rights by her father. On the death of her father, she inherited all her father's immovable and movable property. In such a case, at the event of her death, the property would not revert back - *meimangnu*, in which if a man has no heir the daughter's husband can inherit her parent's property. He would go and live in his wife's ancestral house and take care of the aged parents-in-law. However, if the husband divorces his wife he has no right to claim the property.

There is no wage discrimination in Inpui Society. Women receive the same wages ('*loman*') as her male counterpart. They are paid accordingly, depending on their work and skill. There are cases where women are

If you want to end the war then instead of sending guns, send books, instead of sending tanks, send pens, instead of sending soldiers, send teachers" - *Malala Yousafzai* (born 1997), youngest Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Pakistan

paid lesser as depending on the work which required greater skill and more physical strength.

The economic role of women has improved over the years; however, due to their low level of skill and training as well as lower rate of literacy they are concentrated heavily in agriculture, manual and casual work thereby low wages and income.

Status and Role of Inpui Women in Politics

In the traditional political system, an Inpui Naga village was ruled by the *Kraanmi* that had six divisions – *Thampeï*, *Ingaanchang*, *Inlak*, *Khangbwan*, *Khangriak*, *Kainu*, and *Katang*. The term *Kraanmi* literally means warrior or soldiers. The name *Kraanmi* does not however suggest any sort of political dictatorship. Every policy and decision are made consensually and carried out accordingly by discussion. The highest administrative power was held by the *Thampeï*, the village council which consisted of representatives and elders from all the clans. Its different political offices and process were exclusively dominated and occupied by male members of the society. In this, all adult males of the village could take part in the council but women were excluded from it and were not allowed to attend its meetings.

There is no taboo as such that denies women's participation but the patriarchal society did not provide any place for the public exercise of leadership by women or even membership in any decision making bodies. Though they always have a strong voice in the decision-making process in the family and home, they have no direct say in matters relating to common concerns in the village. Important decision making was not the proper role of women, who in this respect were certainly regarded as inferior to men and even if they volunteered their opinions were not given weight. There was more emphasis upon her domestic duties and maintenance of the family than her rights in a political sphere.

In the modern politics, no Inpui woman has ever contested in the state or district level, let alone in the village level, i.e., village council or village authority. For an Inpui woman to go up to the state or district

<p>The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings. - <i>Masanobu Fukuoka, scientist, philosopher, Japan</i></p>

level is still a distant dream even when they are still struggling to find a place in the village administrative affairs and its decision making process. Many Inpui women think of their political rights in terms of only voting in the general election. Women can slightly exercise their political power in choosing the political party and casting their vote in the general elections; however, most of them follow the advice of their husbands and even some of them are under pressure to accept the wishes of their husbands.

In the Inpui society, politics is viewed as an area where only men can exercise power, authority and control whereas women's main role is largely deemed to be in the household. The women are yet to be politically empowered either in the traditional or modern democratic political institutions and continue to suffer discrimination in the field of politics as well as in decision making. It is therefore, necessary to encourage women's entry into politics and equal participation in the decision making process to help them in their struggle against injustices and to strengthen democracy.

Status and Role of Inpui Women in Religion

The roles of the Inpui women in religious activities were no less significant than that of the men, not only in the household ritual and worship but also in the public festivals. Rituals in public arena were conducted by men and not women although all the household rituals and ancestral rituals cannot be completed without the help of women.

The Inpui are religious by nature but they do not have any name for their religion. However they called it *Apu-Apa Ririak* which means religion of our forefathers. This religion consists of various rituals, prayers, songs, dances, offerings and sacrifices. The Inpui believed the existence of one supreme God called *Rikrwang* which means king of all gods. He is believed to be the Creator and sustainer of the universe and worshipped with love and reverence. They also believed in the existence of benevolent spirits and malevolent spirits. Besides, they also believed in the existence of other deities like *takenri* - 'god of sickness', *raswang*

- ‘protector of the village’, *inthweiri* - ‘god of forest’, *sangkouri* - ‘god of good harvest’, *basaangri* - ‘god of the skies’ and many other such deities. The spirits and deities were worshipped with reverence and hope and were offered sacrifices with food and drink while some spirits are worshipped out of fear lest they bring harm and sickness to the people. The inhabitants of Haochong village worshipped a deity which dwelt in a temple called *risang*. The Inpui also believed in dreams, divinations and omens.

Rites and rituals were the only means of worship. There are different rites for different occasions. *Thampei* ‘village elders’ and *kathiam* ‘priest-doctor or shaman’ play an important role in worship rituals and act as priests. *Thampei* conducted all the important sacrifices in the village. The village *kathiam* with the consent of the *Thampei* can also conduct the sacrifices at festivals and other important occasions and in individual life. The birth, death and marriage rites were conducted by them. In some Inpui village, *tako* (eldest of the *thampei*) is the priest.

Women could not become priest but they play a very important role in religious activities. The mother following the father did all the household sacrifices and rituals followed by the children. There have had some women shaman who performed some kinds of rituals and sacrifices in the village but were never considered as priest. They were untouchable in certain fields for example “KALIAMNU” a warrior feasting where no women folk were allowed to prepare food and dishes; instead the men themselves made for their own and eat.

Karingei, festival of the living or New Year festival is celebrated in January. This festival is important for the newborn babies and children. There is a special tradition called *tuiponnu* on this day. The mother of takes a chicken or a dog, according to the number of children in her family and go to the village pond where she performs a rite called

“Cowardice asks the question ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question ‘Is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question ‘Is it popular?’ But, conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one’s conscience tells one that it is right”. – Martin Luther King Jr., USA

kathajaamnu. This rite is conducted for the security and protection of the children's souls in that year. She brings back the animal, kills them and prepares a special meal for each child in separate pots. This feast is called *tuiponbusaak*. After which the *nabit* ceremony i.e., piercing of the ear is performed. The piercing is initiated by an old woman with a pronouncement of a blessing.

Anbaanglaknu ritual is performed by the woman of the household in which she kills a young chicken, cuts open its stomach and puts chilly and slices of ginger and leaves it on the roadside to protect her family from *ta-aanna*, a blood sucking spirit. *Ramputunu* is another ritual performed by the woman of the household in which she acts as the healer of the family during sickness.

Thus, though Inpui women in traditional society played a significant role in religious rites and rituals, their importance were not acknowledged fully and women were not treated equal with men in regard to public religious ceremonies.

Women in Christianity

In the past, she failed to acquire all benefits of education much due to economic backwardness and social ignorance. Women shared abundant responsibilities and performed wide spectrum of duties both at home and outside, but their participation is accepted as normal. We are numbered in thousands but still we do not have much officers and employed persons. In religious matters, we do not have any ordained Minister or pastor or deacon even though there are some numbers of women theologians. According to Elizabeth Lady Stanton, "Women's place in the society reveals the level of civilization of the particular society." Now, we have come to know that in any situation everything becomes possible with women's presence and participation. We now have started raising our voice against social oppression, gender inequalities and domination, and also have started realizing that girls should develop a positive self image, and understand that their share of responsibility and their contribution are immense and valuable.

The biggest communication problem is, we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply. – *Unknown*

Women in traditional society were only confined to perform rituals for household deities and ancestral deities but not for ritual in the whole village. Along with the coming of Christianity and the introduction of modern education, Church has become an institution that gives common platform to both men and women. The position of women has considerably improved. However, even in the Church women have been excluded from leadership roles. The traditional attitude towards women has been maintained in the Church. The role of women in the Church has been limited by the male control of its administrative structure. The Inpui society is very conservative regarding women leadership in the Church.

In the Inpui Churches, the Pastor is the head and in charge of the administration. The other office in the local Church that carries authority is that of a Deacon. In all the Inpui Churches, the Board of Deacons is the main governing authority and decides all matters concerning the Church's affairs. The Board of Deacons is made up of the deacons, the Pastor, church secretary, treasurer and the clerk. Although Inpui Churches allow women preacher to preach to the whole congregation, they are not allowed to be appointed as Pastors, Assistant Pastors or even Deacons. Thus, women are excluded from the decision-making processes in the Church. However, for the first time in 2014, a woman member was inducted into the Board of Deacons in Yurembam Inpui Baptist Church. And also for the first time Haochong Baptist Church which is the biggest Inpui Church has appointed two women to the posts of Children Ministry Director and Child Evangelism Director in the year 2001 and 2002 respectively.

However Inpui women are given opportunities to serve in other ways in the Church in the form of Women Society where women look after the welfare of women in general. This is the one area in the church where women have, from the beginning, been able to play a leading role. Its president, secretary, treasurer and other dignitaries are all women. They are allowed to do all they can in the church ministry under the supervision of their president. There is a weekly women's fellowship

"Peace is not the absence of violence; Peace is the presence of justice, democratic in nature and one that upholds justice and truth".

meeting attended by all the women members of the church. Talent money distribution, handful of rice and contribution from each member are their sources of income. This fund is used to support the needs of the fellowship, donation for the needy and relief. They are actively involved in outreach programs, evangelism, fasting program etc.

The Inpui Naga Baptist Churches Association (INBCA) brings together all the Inpui Baptist Churches. Even here women are not given equal leadership roles or participation in the decision-making bodies. Executive Secretary and dignitaries of all other departments except the Women's Department are all dominated by men.

Christianity and modern education did bring about numerous changes in the condition of the Inpui women but it failed to break the age old traditional patriarchal character of the Inpui society. The subordinate place of women in the church is found to be due to several factors like biblical, traditional and cultural. Majority of men opine that they are not willing to accept women as leaders in the Church or Association and they often use the Bible Scripture to justify their exclusion from the leadership roles. The calling of only men as Jesus' disciples buttresses their stance and remains a typical locus for the exclusion of women from ministerial position by the Church.

It is necessary for the Church to re-examine and change the traditional attitude towards women. Religious leaders have a big role to play in eliminating patriarchal mentality and involving everyone irrespective of gender. Both men and women should be able to do anything for which they are gifted and trained. We should not allow culture to be an excuse for limiting women who have been gifted by God in various areas.

Conclusion

From this study, it is evident that Inpui women are esteemed by society but are given inferior status. Women in the traditional structure were discriminated in all spheres of social life. The status that men and

In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present. *Lao Tzu (sometime between 6-4 BC), poet, philosopher, author, China*

women enjoy in the society is socially and culturally determined. They believe such biased viewpoints as “man is superior to woman”, that many women prefer to be where they are, and they are not willing to come forward to take up leadership roles. They are cocooned by various social customs that they are made to feel that they are not capable and have not always been confident of their leadership ability. It is not by electing one woman into a leadership position that change is achieved. We cannot see the desired change unless the women themselves and men realize the need of such a change.

Although gender inequalities and patriarchal structures and notions continue to be accepted by both men and women, there have been many positive transformations in the positions brought about by the collective forces of Christianity and education. However, despite the fact that women have seen a noticeable improvement in their status, attitudes towards women continue to be influenced by the traditional socio-cultural ideas. Women are no doubt educated today and could earn their own living yet are still not the decision makers in social, economic, political and cultural institutions. And therefore, gender inequality and subordination of women continue to exist and are still far from being at an equitable position.

As Kamla Basin has rightly stated that in order to attain gender equality “it requires each one of us, man and woman, to look into ourselves and overcome our negative ‘male’ (being aggressive, domineering, competitive, self-centered) and ‘female’ (being submissive, fearful, difficult) qualities”.

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Be alone, that is the secret of invention; be alone, that is when ideas are born. –
Nikolai Tesla (1856 – 1943), Serbian-American

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Women Society Board Committee, Haochong on 5th July, 2014

Pouriang Khumba, Former Chairman, Haochong Village Authority on 5th July, 2014.

When you come upon a path that brings benefit and happiness to all, follow this course as the moon journeys through the stars. – <i>Gautama Buddha, India</i>

Role and Status of Women in Kharam Tribe

– Warneiyang Jaiche & Adam Kharam

Introduction

The Kharam tribe is one of the oldest indigenous tribes inhabiting Manipur state of India. The Kharams were recorded as early as 33 BC in the *Royal Chronicle* of the Maharaja of Manipur. The Kharams, in conformity with the folk songs sung on their traditional annual festivals, trace their origin to a cave, the exact location of which is not certain but believed to be somewhere in the south-eastern part of Manipur. Today, the people of Kharam are living in just 4 villages of Senapati district of Manipur.

The Kharam tribe has patriarchal social institutions and the line of succession is patrilineal. In this kind of social set up, the subordination of mother and children to the authority of the father is practically universal. However, the headship of the father does not signify that mother's role in the family is under the strict instructions and control of the husband. She is empowered to manage her home affairs.

The introduction of Christian faith has brought about radical changes in the Kharam society. It has to be acknowledged that Christianity has contributed a lot towards the betterment of Kharam women's status and position though this does not mean that they have taken a completely different shape. No doubt, today, in Kharam society, women are considered to have equal status with men. It is because it is a free and liberal society, where mixing with the opposite sex is open and free. In other words, they are free and have better opportunities than before in the community.

This essay attempts to underscore the status of women in Kharam community in relation to their social, economic, political and religious

Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict – alternatives to passive or aggressive response, alternatives to violence. – *Dorothy Thompson (1893-1961), journalist, USA*

matters. The essay will take into account both the past and present situations of women without which a complete picture of the status of women may not be possible.

Kharam Women in the Patriarchal Social Setting

The Kharam has a patriarchal social structure that is characterized by the notion of male superiority. The unbalanced gender relation in Kharam society is facilitated by a rigid dichotomy between the private and the public spheres represented by home and the domestic affairs in the former, and the outside world of governance and decision-making in the latter. Historically, the public image of Kharam society has been a male one, women's role being largely confined to the private sphere. While the public and political sphere remains a male domain, women are responsible for looking after the domestic affairs where they are indeed the mistresses of their houses. Such a social arrangement severely restricts the mobility of women in the public/political and social spheres rendering them politically incapable and making them even ignorant of many civic issues that concern them. Despite the much touted 'freedom' in the domestic sphere, when it comes to taking major decisions, the husband or father has the last say in the matter.

The socio-cultural system that systematically excludes women from the mainstream, keeping them less able and denied of equal opportunities, is based on and strengthened by the values embedded in patriarchy, the traditional power structure that operates at the core of the Kharam society, i.e. the village. The traditional governing system of the Kharam is through chieftainship, under the Village Council called *Katar*. Only males have the right to chieftainship and memberships in the village councils. Further, a traditional feature of Kharam tribe, i.e. the annual citizens' meeting known as *Kumpuirei*, comprises only the men folk of the village. Women are allowed to participate in such traditional gatherings but only for maintaining calm and peace in case violent fights erupt among the men folk. They are inactive participants in the meeting as if only the men are 'citizens', who can exercise the rights to decide and shape the polity of the society. Till date, calls for public

meetings elicit response only from men, with women generally shying away from them. It can be argued that the perception that only males constitute the 'public' is a logical outcome of the customary practices of female exclusion from traditional meetings and decision making institutions.

Role and Status of Kharam Women in the Family

The Kharam tribe is patriarchal; hence, father is considered as the head of the family; and the line of succession is patrilineal. The girls from their tender age are taught to be quiet, gentle and hard working responsible for performing all the entire household chores. The families' attitude toward the upbringing of the girls encourages the boys to be dominating, authoritative, and to have the disposition that they are to be served and waited upon. Even in access to education, the boys get better privileges than the girls even though both may have the prospect of achieving good academic results.

However, a girl is seldom married against her will; and in her husband's home the wife occupies a high position and her children are treated well. The Kharam mother exercises a firm hand in her family affairs. She is the heart and centre of the family.

The mother is the busiest member in the family as well as in the society. On the family front, both husband and wife are co-workers. They work and toil together. A typical Kharam mother wakes up before dawn and finishes her daily round of works like collecting firewood, fetching water, pounding rice, cooking food for the family and feeding the domestic animals, attending to the kitchen garden at times and weaving clothes on the loom. After all these background preparations done by the mother, the family is ready to go to their respective fields after taking the morning meal. Sometimes the mother returns home with a heavy load of firewood along with vegetables, fishes, crabs, etc. filled in her traditional basket. As soon as she reaches home, she would immediately start making preparation for the evening meals,

For a successful revolution it is not enough that there is discontent. What is required is a profound and thorough conviction of the justice, necessity and importance of political and social rights. - B.R. Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), principal architect of the Constitution of India and first law minister, India

and feeding the animals. After supper, she would flick cotton and spin yarn for weaving.

Domestic violence is not absent in the community. Wife battering is the most common form of violence. Often it is commonly accepted in the society and people do not normally intervene taking it as a private family matter. Having said that, it is a fact that incidences of domestic violence have decreased a lot nowadays due to increasing awareness on women's rights as well as Christian teachings.

Women are given special treatment during maternity period. Husband would feed the wife with nutritious food like fish and meat. Pregnant women are given rest from hard works. Nowadays, medical attention is one area being given priority. Menstrual period is noticed by husband and relaxation from work is given to the wife. Thus, in the Kharam community women are very much loved, cared for and respected. Harsh treatment to women by their male counterpart is considered as an act of weakness.

Kharam women cannot be ill-treated by their husbands and in-laws. In case of her being mistreated, beaten up or caused any trouble by her husband or in-laws, her brothers, relatives and clan would come to her rescue. The married woman is always consulted by her husband in all domestic and family affairs. They play their respective roles as husband and wife.

Girl Child in Kharam Tribe

Kharam tribe practice patrilineal and patrilocal system in terms of family lineage and marriage. Therefore, in general the Kharam people prefer sons over daughters. However, they do not discriminate against girls by way of going for sex determination tests and undertaking female infanticide. Girls are not abused, hated, or subjected to strict social norms. Girls are free to participate in social events, dances and other recreational programs. There is no dowry on marriage. Among the Kharams, the father of the bridegroom pays a bride price to the father of the girl. Widowed or divorced women are free to marry again.

<p>I suppose the most revolutionary act one can engage is ... to tell the truth. – <i>Howard Zinn (1922 – 2010), historian, playwright, author of the best-seller, USA</i></p>
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Her Work as a Child: In a typical Kharam society, girls participate in all types of work at homes and agricultural fields, along with their mothers. The socialization of the girl children is done with the objective of inculcating in them the virtues of good housewives and motherhood viz. obedience, politeness, and passivity. Boys are trained in the fields or pastures under the supervision of their fathers or in the educational institutions, while the girls are trained at homes under the strict supervision of their mothers. They are taught to take care of their homes, their siblings and their household works and thus they become pseudo-parents. If they have spare time in spite of all these activities and obtain permission from their parents then they may go to school.

Girl's Education: Education was neglected by the Kharams in the past due to their ignorance and the late arrival of modern education in their villages. They lived a simple life and were at the mercy of nature. Formal education was first introduced to the male members of the society; the female members received it much later. Nowadays, many parents provide equal educational opportunities to their sons and daughters. However, among poor families the rate of school dropout among girls is much higher than among boys. Girls getting opportunity for higher education is rare as compared to boys.

Various factors have been responsible for the low rate of participation of Kharam girls in higher education. Some of those proven factors are the socio-cultural system of the community, low economic conditions and the geographical locations of the Kharam villages which make access to educational institutions difficult.

Kharam Women in Socio-Economic Spheres

Kharam women are involved in many social activities of the village but comparatively they are more active in the home fronts. In the Kharam society, women are respected and protected and granted certain privileges.

Africa is a paradox which illustrates and highlights neo-colonialism. Her earth is rich, yet the products that come from above and below the soil continue to enrich, not Africans predominantly, but groups and individuals who operate to Africa's impoverishment. – *Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana*

When the men folk are away for war or for pastoral or any other business, the socialization of children automatically becomes the responsibility of the mothers. The Kharam society assumes the mother-centeredness of the families and also the prerogatives of women to take some important decisions regarding the families. The role of women in childbirths, funerals, festivals, etc is well known in village life. Women are carriers of traditional information in the absence of written records. They are crucial actors in the preservation and dissemination of such knowledge. They are not only competent food producers and home makers but are also the transmitters of rich local oral traditions.

In the present times, the Kharam society has seen establishment of many women organizations which actively involve themselves in various social issues concerning the Kharam society. They have done commendable services in eradicating social evils, peacemaking, fighting against atrocities and human rights violations committed by state armed forces or others, etc.

Kharam women are by tradition hard working and industrious which is looked upon with appreciation by the society. They start their day's work from early dawn till sunset. The older generation women, though un-educated, knew how to manage and plan out her routine work and activities in advance and complete the work within a time frame.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Kharam people. In the division of labor, men are assigned with fieldwork and women with both field and domestic works. During the off season of fieldwork, women are engaged in weaving clothes for the family as well as for selling purpose. She also stores food grains for the whole year or for months to come. She also brings in income by rearing animals, making handicrafts and selling vegetables. Without depending on her husband, the wife can run the family. The woman earns a major share of the family income as her husband is engaged in social, political and other affairs. Kharam Naga women are the producer, provider, sustainer and

manager of the home. However, women are paid fewer wages than men even for the same type of work in Kharam society even today which is a clear discrimination against women.

Kharam Women in Political Sphere

In politics women have little share. In the customary village council and present village authority set up, women are not given representation and are thus debarred from participating in the decision making body. She participates in the village administration only indirectly by influencing her husband, brothers and father.

In the customary village administrative set up, *Katar* (traditional village council) was the highest decision making body in which all married men in the village were members. The council was the supreme body having all authorities over judiciary (customary law), village security, social, political, administrative and religious matters in the village. The council was headed by 8 qualified persons traditionally known as *Tongtum Kariet* (New village authority system) chosen from among the members of *Katar*. No women could become members of the *Katar* and *Tongtum Kariet*. Presently, though all adults irrespective of males and females above the age of 18 are included as members of village assembly (*Katar*), women are still debarred from becoming members of Village Authority (*Tongtum Kariet*).

Although gender bias is prevalent in selecting village leaders, on one side the Kharam tribe has been following strong democratic system of village administration in which no hereditary system was practiced in the selection of the village chief (*Khullakpa*) and other members of village authority (*Tongtum Kariet*). Nowadays women are also equally given the right to vote in the selection/election of village chief/ chairman and other members of the village authority; but they are still not allowed to contest.

I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights. - Desmond Tutu (born 1931), retired Anglican bishop who fought against apartheid, headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa

In the village meeting/assembly as mentioned earlier, nowadays all adult members above the age of 18 in the village can take part. All forums under village authority including women society present their reports before the assembly. However, the proceedings of the meetings are dominated by males and women's participation in the discussion is still negligible.

Historically, women were also allowed to take part in the annual general assembly known as *Kumpuirei*. However, their participation was expected only for peace keeping in case of violent fights among male members when there is disagreements. Therefore, it can be understood that women's participation in decision makings of important matters was totally neglected and their presence was solicited only for maintaining peace and calm during the discussion.

So far, the Kharam Women Union has also not approached the All Kharam Tribe Union for inclusion of women in the All Kharam Tribe Union as a member. This could be due to lack of understanding or realization that women ought to be given the right to take part in the decision making processes.

Role and Status of Kharam Women in Religious Sphere

In the Kharam society, males dominate religious sphere. In both the customary rituals and present day Christianity, women are never appointed as priests. Both sexes participate in ceremonies, but men shoulder all the major responsibilities. Men mainly play musical instruments. Women do take part in singing and dancing but their movements are different from those of men.

Presently women constitute about half of the population and half of the membership of the Church. In spite of the fact that they are important to both the church and society, women are not acknowledged and are not given any important role to play and this hinders them from full participation in the church ministry. Though women contribute a lion's share for the betterment of the church, they are debarred and marginalized in ecclesiastical employment. Fully qualified and

What gets consumed, what gets created and the returns the creation yields: consider all before starting a task. – *Thiruvalluvar 461 (3-1 BC), Tamil Nadu, India*

trained women are often denied their ordination, leadership, or role in administration, policy-making etc. Women are expected to play assisting roles only. The women's role and status was low traditionally and remain so at the present. In spite of the significant contributions rendered by women to the life of society, women and womanhood have been subjected to sufferings and exploitation and even in the church there is a wide gap between men and women.

In ancient days, there were various forums in a Kharam village for performing certain functions during social festivals. Among such forums are *Lapi*, *Lapu*, *Nungak-Ruothar* and *Lomtaang*.

Women forum called *Lapi* consisted of only women who managed their own affairs regarding membership, regulations, financial and other responsibilities in times of festivals. The forum was internally autonomous and even *Katar*, the highest decision making body could not intervene in its internal affairs. One of its major tasks was to lead in singing and dancing in the festivals.

Nungak-Ruothar was the youth forum consisting of both males and females. The forum was headed by four leaders consisting of 2 men and 2 women chosen from among them. It had its own religious festival equally decided and participated by all the unmarried youths, both men and women.

However, women were never selected as priest or never allowed to perform rituals. Thus, religion in Kharam society too legitimizes gender hierarchy. The subordination of women in religious activities and the denial of their access to positions of religious leadership have been crucial in supporting the patriarchal order and the exclusion of women from the public forum.

Prerogative given to Women

In the Kharam society women are given the responsibility of selling cattle, poultry and other domestic animals once approved in the family. Here, women enjoy the upper hand over males. Normally, it is the

To educate the masses politically is to make the totality of the nation a reality to each citizen. It is to make the history of the nation part of the personal experience of each of its citizens. – *Frantz Fanon, Martinique*

prerogative of the wife to decide which animals to sell and at what price.

Inheritance Rights

Inheritance rights on ancestral family properties were exclusively given to the youngest son. Girls could inherit only such properties as family's plants having economic value like *Parkia* (*tree beans*), weaving materials, cooking materials and cultivation implements, etc. In the absence of a son, the nearest relative of the family used to inherit the property. No ancestral property was given to the daughter even if she was the only child of the parents. However, things are changing now and there are no such strict rules. It is the prerogative of the parents to decide who will inherit the family properties. A widow maintains the property of her deceased husband as long as she remains in the household of her deceased husband. But if she remarries the right of maintenance is forfeited from her.

Inherited property cannot be given to daughters but properties acquired during the lifetime of the parents can be given to their daughters. The customary law gives economic security to the unmarried daughters by allowing them to obtain one or more cultivable fields, wood lands, homesteads and any other property for their sustenance till death.

Also, women are not given the right to guardianship of their children in the case of divorce.

Marriage in Kharam Society

There are three types of marriage practiced in the Kharam society.

- Preferential marriage i.e. marriage of a boy with his mother's brother's daughter/cross cousin marriage.
- Love marriage i.e. selection of mates by concerned individuals and
- Arranged marriage by parents.

Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. – *Saul David Alinsky* (1909 – 1972), *community organizer, writer, USA*

One may select one's desired form of marriage.

Like many other tribal customs, the most preferred form of marriage is that of marrying one's mother's brother's daughter. This relationship helps in strengthening and maintaining cordial relationship between the families. The second form of marriage where the individuals are free to select their own spouses but from outside one's clan is mostly practiced among the Kharam people. In the third form of marriage, the parents would normally suggest to their son his mother's brother's daughter for their daughter-in-law or they would suggest alliance with other person as well and on getting the consent from their son, they pursue further for marriage. However, they do not impose their will on their sons.

Portrayal of Women in Folktales

In the Kharam society, there are lots of anecdotal evidences to suggest that Kharam tribe operates within the cultural framework of patriarchy. Women in Kharam folktales are represented stereotypically within a traditional hegemonic discourse – a discourse which 'naturalizes' the good woman as self-sacrificing, domestically agentive, powerless without spousal or parental permission, aspiration to marriage and a good hostess, and the bad woman as duplicitous, agentive over men and punishable for crimes and indiscretions.

Folk tales also portray what the society attempt to embody women with. Much of the folk tales reinforce the idea that women should be wives and mothers, submissive and self-sacrificing. Good women in stories are silent, passive, without ambition, beautiful and eager to marry. In the folk tales, passivity is the most valued and honoured attribute a woman can possess in life. It is not the female who can save herself from harm or an undesirable situation; it is the male who must save her.

Young women are often described as beautiful, pretty or fair than

Stand for something or you will fall for anything. Today's mighty oak is yesterday's nut that held its ground. – *Rosa Parks, USA*

older women. Beauty, associated with intelligence, ability, kindness, worthiness and morality, is highly revered in folk tales. Beauty is often rewarded, but at times it is also a source of danger. In a folk story ‘*Rengchanghoi*’, the lady described in the tale is “so beautiful that her equal could not be found anywhere on earth”. She was forced to run and be shielded away by her brothers because the tiger wanted to forcefully elope with her.

Some other folk tales portray the different aspects of women also: being admirable or abominable. The underlying messages in these folk stories convey the praise and adulation that people have for ‘female beauty’ which is not only external but also internal.

Conclusion

The traditional Kharam society shows that women have little or no say in the village administration and no share in the decision making processes. A woman’s domain is her home. She indirectly participates and shares her wisdom by influencing her husband, brother, father and her sons who represents in the village council. But with the change in times, the position and roles of Kharam women have undergone metamorphosis. There are remarkable progresses in uplifting the status of woman in the Kharam society. Some traditional attitudes towards women have lost relevancy as they are no longer practical. However, the home is the first area of concern for a Kharam woman. To be in tune with the changing time, women no longer are confined to the household chores alone but are looking out for more opportunities in the wider avenues of life. Women are striving to participate in the decision making bodies but there is a great need for motivation as it is a new venture. To change the mindset of the traditional ridden society is a herculean task. However, with the dawn of education, there is a sea change in the socio economic and political lives of the Kharam community. If the Kharam community want to keep up with the civilized society, gender equality is necessary. The crux of the matter is

that both men and women should not only have the rights but should shoulder the responsibilities of the society together. The talent and potential that God has given to women should be given a chance to be utilized for the growth and progress of the society. The Kharam women are also encouraged to approach their respective Village Councils or The Tribe Union for the inclusion of women in the decision making bodies. Likewise, the Kharam Tribe Union should also consider inculcating women representatives as its members.

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. - *Paulo Freire, Brazil*

Status of the Lamkaang Naga Women

- Sumshot Khular

Introduction

Lamkaang is one of the 16 Naga indigenous tribes of Manipur, India. Lamkaang has been known by many names. Traditionally, it is said that Lamkaang people were known as *Ksen*, which means 'red' people in Lamkaang. In fact, they were called 'red people' by their neighboring tribes.

In 1888, the Manipur State Government Gazetteer used the language name *Lamgang*¹ for the people. In the Royal Court Chronicle of the Meitei people of the Imphal valley, in a treatise called *Cheitharol Kumbaba* ('The Chronicles'), the Lamkaang were referred to as *Hiroi Lamgang* which means 'Lamgang boat maker' (Meitei *hiroi* 'boatman' from *hi* 'boat' + *roi* 'rower'). According to Meitei oral tradition, the Lamkaang, who inhabited a forested region in the hills, presented canoe-like boats to the nobility of Manipur, from which the moniker *Hiroi Lamgang* originated. The skills of the Lamkaang in fishing and canoeing were well known. Hudson (1911)² stated that in a village, not far from Shugunu (Sugnu), were boat makers for Meitei nobility. The villagers themselves assert that the name of their village means boat maker of dry lands. It is believed that the ancestors of Lamkaang were sea-borne people who lived beside a big body of water called *Truun*. This belief is supported by the sea products that Lamkaang still possesses and uses, e.g. marine shells, cowrie shells and other kinds of shells used by girls for adornment during traditional festivals. Today, the Lamkaang people conveniently use the conjoined term '*Ksen Lamkaang*' to refer to themselves.

The Lamkaangs are mostly based in 40 villages spread across Chandel district of Manipur. Additionally, some Lamkaang people are settled in the Senapati district of Manipur and in Dimapur, Nagaland. A small

1 Capt. E.W. Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur, Vivek Publication, New Delhi, 1888 (Reprinted 2000)

2 .C. Hudson, The Naga Tribes of Manipur, Low price Publication Delhi, reprint 1981

group live in Tamu township area in Myanmar as well.

Forms of Education

The concept of formal education is rather new to the Lamkaang people. In the traditional society, children and young adults were taught traditional social norms, beliefs, ecological knowledge and ways of social life through their daily practical activities and through oral communications. Traditional education and socialization was thought to be sufficient and was passed on from generation to generation. Males of the community were taught early on that they should be strong, be hunters and gatherers of food and be responsible in leading their families.

The Lamkaangs are organized along patriarchal lines and therefore the males are dominant and they occupy dominant roles. The youngest male in a family usually inherits the family's property.

Traditionally, children were taught household work from a fairly young age by their parents and grandparents. They learned skills such as weaving, basket-making, the use of handlooms, handicrafts, and working in the field. Weaving, however, was exclusively designated to the women who would weave different types of cloth on their looms based on the family's needs. It was considered essential for a girl to know the art of weaving '*Buu Kurkhong*', 'indigenous loin loom' and to master the skills involved. Girls were also taught traditional healing methods and how to take care of young and old members of the family as well as domestic animals.

Modern education and desire for a career outside home has changed the traditional role of women. Girls are increasingly getting enrolled in schools. This is in stark contrast to the time in the past when girls were discouraged from going to school. Today, many are pursuing their post-graduate studies and are getting into different professions and occupying influential positions in the society due to their education.

Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. – *Chief Crowfoot, Siksika, USA*

Furthermore, in the past, parents tended to marry off their daughters at an early age. However, the scenario is different today as most young women, backed even by their parents, prefer to pursue their career goals or higher studies first. Women are also more free to choose whom they want to marry.

Status of Spinsters, Barren Women and Widows³

Due to patriarchal setup, there is a bias against the spinsters and barren women in the Lamkaang society. Women in this status are looked down upon. They are not entitled to a share of meat given during any social function or customary ceremony. They are also excluded from getting any share of provision which married women are entitled to. Barren women are known by the pejorative word ***Tlangkhong*** which can be understood by the idiomatic phrase, ***mii arkal psen mehlarkal kepsenkma*** ‘not being able to stain the husband’s verandah with blood’. At the time of death, women with *Tlangkhong* status are not buried in the family’s common grave/tomb; instead, they are buried in a separate grave to signify their non-attachment to any family. The belief is to put an end to any barrenness from recurring in the family.

Despite the fact that discrimination against spinster also exists, as a tradition, spinsters normally receive some assistance from their families and the community in matters like cultivation, house construction, house repair, and hut construction in the fields, etc.

Social Treatment during Menstruation/Pregnancy/Childbirth and of Barren Women

There is no taboo observed during the menstrual cycle. However, there are certain restrictions and taboos to be observed by a pregnant woman and her husband during pregnancy such as:⁴

The wife should not go out at night alone

3 Interviewed Mrs. Sk. Sangnoong, Paraolon village (widow) and Mrs. Sk. Tonong, (now late) Thamlapokpi (Imphal) Ms. SK. Chandani, Ms. Th. Khivor, Thamlapokpi village

4 Interviewed Mr. Th. Beshot, (now late) Thamlapokpi village and Mr. Sn. Bunghon, Leinganching village

- She should not eat meat of ferocious animals such as tiger, bear, or monkey
- The husband is forbidden from some activities such as:
 - Hunting
 - Grave digging and attending funerals

Killing of any living being.

- Planting of banana saplings.

After childbirth there are no specific restrictions for man or woman. All the aforementioned restrictions and taboos are observed with the belief that violation of these would have ill-effects on the baby. (The Lamkaang tradition also does not allow the husband to kill snakes or lizards or to participate in construction of houses and *silkukyong* ‘catching of Mithun’).

Childbirth

In earlier times, a woman gave birth in her own house with the help of traditional midwife and other experienced women. One important taboo observed was that a person who had committed murder, theft and violated the socially accepted marriage practices like *khuukipthit* (clan endogamy) was not permitted to enter the house during delivery. This is not observed any longer these days. Today, wealthy families go to hospitals for delivery while many who cannot afford the expensive medical treatment in hospitals still practice the traditional method.

Special Feature of Naming Ceremony among the Lamkaangs

The naming ceremony in the Lamkaang society is very special, especially for a male child. The christening of a male child is done according to the mother’s maiden clan; each clan has different names. In other words, names are conventionally prefixed with certain words depending on the mother’s maiden clan.

- Sankhil & Suungnem clans bear names that start with ‘Reng’, ‘Tling’, or ‘Kam’ completed with any suffix. For e.g. Rengvaar,

Tlingtong and Kamneng.

- Dilbung clan starts with 'Bung' or 'Song' e.g. Bungpem and Songhon.

Khular clan starts with 'Sel' as in *Selvaar*, *Selngam*, *Selthang*, *Seltoi*

Kaangten clan has *Vang* prefixed to the name as in *Vangsul* and *Vangtong*.

- Surte clan begins with Raang as in *Raangleen*, *Raangshel*, *Raangngam*, etc.
- Leivon clan starts with *Set* as in *Sethon*, *Setnoong*, *Setoong*, *Setpool*.
- *Idaar*, Tholung and Jangvei clans have names that start with *Daar* as in *Daarting*, *Daarsel*, *Daarthot*.
- Silsi clan has names with *Khum* or *Khaal* as in *Khumsel*, *Khumtiing*, *Khaalvaar*, *Khaaldok*.

This naming system of the Lamkaangs accords special status to women as keepers of generations.

Kna Kthun (Ear Piercing)

In the Lamkaang community, a baby's ear piercing ceremony is performed to mark the arrival of a new member of the family and to ward off the evil spirit from taking the infant's life. This takes place within 7 days after the birth of the baby. It is done with a porcupine spike which is considered sacred. Traditionally every Lamkaang is expected to wear earrings for ceremonial purposes.⁵ Today, this practice is no longer socially imposed, and is not observed as often as in the past.

Teaching Ways of Life to the Young Girls

Traditionally, Lamkaang woman's learning and socialization begin at early childhood as she learns all household chores and responsibilities. She learns how to clean the house and utensils, weave garments, husk and pound the rice, carry water and firewood, wash clothes among other things. She would normally be taken to the jhum fields and taught how to cook in the field, how to do the different types of jhum related

5 Interview with Mr. D. Shetwor, Chief, Keithelmanbi village.

works such as digging the field and preparing seeds for planting and harvesting. She is taught how to preserve and keep seeds for the next season, and how to store them in certain ways. Women are considered the '**keeper of all seeds and grains**'. For example, every time grains, rice or other seeds are to be taken out from the granary for sowing in the fields, the mother of the house performs some specific rites. In a similar way, after harvesting, the new harvest is brought into the barn only after the mother has performed the rituals.

Today, the changed attitude of the parents has given young Lamkaang women a better opportunity to gain access to higher education. One of the challenges our young girls and women face is the medium of education- reading, writing and speaking in languages like English, Manipuri or Hindi. Since these languages are not the mother tongues of the Lamkaangs, it hampers their learning. Today, increasingly, we find more Lamkaang young women taking on higher studies than their men counterpart.

Marriage System in the Lamkaang Community

If a man falls in love with a woman and intends to marry her, the man's parents have to perform a ceremony called *Pao Kipthleng* (proposal to the girl's family). If the proposal is accepted, the man has to undertake *Snukloo* (*marriage by service*)⁶ in which the man stays at his in-laws' house for a period of three years and renders his services for free. During the three-year nuptial rite the husband must slay a pig measuring five fist in girth every year (measured directly behind the forelegs). At the completion of three years a big pig is slaughtered by the man to mark the end of the customary services rendered to the bride's family. The pig will be cut into two equal halves and one-half will be eaten and shared with the bride's parents and her friends, while the other half, known as *eephor* (bride's portion) will be given to the bride to take it to her matrimonial home (husband's) where it will be consumed. Apart from this the bride is also expected to take with her some gifts for the in-laws. She is then welcomed and blessed. This is usually done

6 A traditional ritual where a man has to stay at the bride's place to serve his father in-law's house for 3 years. This practice is now obsolete.

during the *kphaal* (marriage solemnizing ceremony). *Kphaal* is a form of solemnizing the marriage between a couple that is already a married couple but who have not performed any traditional marriage rituals by which they are accepted by both the families to affirm their marriage. For some couples who have no parents to support them or who are unable to perform this, they can be allowed to do it whenever they are able to do so even after their children have grown up.

Saa Kdang Phungsaa

After the Lamkaang tribe embraced Christianity, the traditional form of marriage is largely discontinued. However, certain forms and practices still continue such as: ‘*Cha Kupsou*’, meaning engagement tea (it has its roots in *Paokepthleng*), and taking of ‘*saalool*’, (meaning the flesh from the neck of a ceremonial animal) to be given to the bride’s maternal uncle(s) and also nearest kin-uncle in the clan. The sharing of the meat portion is a sign of family bonding, where the ones who receive the meat are bound to look after the bride in both good and bad times.

Another continuing feature is the giving of ‘*saakhuu*’ (the hind legs of the ceremonial animal) to the bride’s maternal aunts before parting. Like *saalool*, *saakhuu* is a way of honoring the person who receives the gift with happiness and joy.

Yursaa is a special meat arranged for the women belonging to the bride’s clan. This customary meat is given out to all the women of the bride’s clan in the tribe. This practice is meant to strengthen the relations amongst the women of the same clan and acknowledge that one of them is married.

The ceremonial animal(s) and other expenses for the wedding feast are the responsibility of the groom’s family and relatives. The bride’s family and relatives in return have to arrange household items such as weaving appliances, farming utensils, fire stand, and woman’s baskets. A particular item called ‘*pluu*’ which is an encased basket made of tightly-knitted canefor keeping clothes are essential for a woman for carrying varieties of traditional shawls like *tkarksen*, *tkarkpool*,

pyaalbuuh, *kniktxiil*, *vausen*, *tkarkvom*, *tkar-myaarksenknik*, *diphuun*, and ornaments like *kep*, *haar*, *ardei pthii*, *saisang*, *changbom*, *nachii*, *thluumthler* and other items which women are required to wear in any traditional dance and festivity.

Who can be Chosen as Marriage Partners amongst the Clans

The existence of four exogamous clans or '*sumkhors*' helps to maintain a regular exchange of spouses. The major consideration before negotiation for any marriage is that the boy and the girl should belong to different *sumkhors*. Traditionally, a man who seeks his mother's brother's daughter for marriage or alternately from her mother's clan is referred to as '*Mnuyur*'; it is a much preferred practice. However, if a man fails to marry his mother's brother's daughter, he is referred to as a '*Raodee Kthun*', which literally means breaking off the chain. Though at present, it is not practiced anymore, in the past, when a boy attained adulthood it was customary for him to visit his mother's brother's house regularly to court his cousin(s).

The various forms of courting are: *Pao kipthleng* (proposal), '*Chaakpsou*' (engagement), '*Luu k'hoong*' (marriage) and '*K'phal*' (marriage confirmation feast for the couple who eloped). In some cases, even when the couples have been married and are already having children, they may not perform the *kphal* if the couple has no one to bear the expenses.

After the coming of Christianity marriage ceremonies became much simpler. '*Chaakpsou*' (engagement) would be followed by solemnization and a reception feast, and the couple would proceed to their matrimonial home (the groom's house) the same evening. Ceremonial slaying of animal(s) for meat has become optional too, left to the wish of the marrying parties.

In case of divorces the village council usually intervenes. Certain facts are indispensable in executing judgment. The grounds for divorce

Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate. – *Edward Said (1935-2003), Palestinian-American*

include who is divorcing whom and why. Strict rules of punishment and fine exist for those who breach the matrimonial bond. The fine consists of payment in the form of pig depending on the amount one is being fined or it could be that a person has to pay certain penalty for a period of years; it all depends on the type of breach of customary law and how the decisions are made.

Bride Price

The Bride-price is known as '**Mann Ktloo**' or '**Snu Kloo**' in the Lamkaang community and the son-in-law is called '**K'maak**'. He is expected to serve his in-laws for three years as the bride-price and perform the Kphal ceremony for three consecutive years whenever he can.

Leadership & Decision Making Process

In earlier days Lamkaang women played a major role in the traditional healing system. They were highly honored for their knowledge. They were consulted for any kind of health related issue in the community. Women also played an important role in the religious affairs of the community as they performed rituals in ceremonies.

However, in terms of decision making in the community, it was the male elders of the village led by the village headman who took decisions. Women's opinions were not taken into account. They were mere followers of decisions taken by men. They were not allowed to attend or pass through the ongoing community meetings as it was popularly believed any decision overheard by a woman were bound to fail. Women are seen to take part in student's union which can be an inroad to join the other bodies like '**Kver Kunpun**' or councils in villages.

Economic Status of Women

Women are the main breadwinners of their families. Their agricultural activity (mostly jhumming) involves multi-cropping, where paddy, millets, vegetables like yam, pumpkin, cucumber, sweet potato, gourd,

cabbage, potato, and spices like garlic, sesame (white or black, round or flat types), tapioca, ginger, turmeric, etc. are expertly cultivated without wasting any arable land. When they have surplus, they share it with their neighbours. Some would normally sell them at the market to manage the kitchen requirements like buying salt, kerosene, dry fish, and other items which are not easily available in the village. Women also look after the domestic animals like pigs, chickens, dogs and cows.

Property Ownership Traditionally, women were not allowed to own land or a house. However, things have changed in recent years. If a woman is able to construct her own house she is the rightful owner and nobody can take away her acquired property. Earlier, if a family did not have a son then all the land and house would be taken over by the uncles or paternal cousins. Nonetheless, there were a few exceptional cases of women who were given property by their parents.

Inheritance of Moveable and Immoveable Properties

Since time immemorial Lamkaang women are given the right to own moveable properties like *Yaamluong*⁷ and *Sum*⁸, and these were highly prized. These were also given as the bride price or as prized gifts by parents to their children. Women could also own cattle and other valuable items in the house. But they were restricted from land ownership as land belongs to the community and custom dictates that a wet field with *patta* (land right/land record) is to be inherited by the son(s). A widow is entitled to use her husband's lands and house during her life-time. If she re-marries she loses the right to inherit her husband's property. In recent years, there are increasing instances of women owning lands given as gifts by their parents during marriages or when they themselves bought one.

Daily Wages Status/Salary

Nowadays, in any MGNREGS or '100 days of work' initiated by the government both men and women receive equal wages. However, apart

7 A traditional gong used in any ceremonial rituals and is a priced possession of the Lamkaangs

8 A traditional gong smaller in size used as a musical instruments in customary ceremonies

from this there is clear difference in wages given to men and women as women are paid lesser than men. For example, in farming a man gets Rs. 200/day while a woman gets Rs.150 per day. Also the kinds of work that women do are always the ones that are paid lesser. For instance, for works like timber logging or carpentry, a man gets Rs. 300 – 500 per day depending on the complexity of the work. Such work is usually considered inappropriate or unsuitable for women.

Political Life of Women

Since the Lamkaang is a patriarchal society, women could not be part of local governance. In any village council women cannot be sitting members. However, women can voice their concern(s) via their husbands in any major decision making in the village councils. Interestingly, the men would normally consult their wives at home and share their wives' opinions as their own in the council. In this way it can be said that women do participate indirectly in the village council meetings and there are examples of how certain crucial cases were settled amicably because of the indirect intervention by women.

In the last Manipur State Assembly elections a Lamkaang woman candidate contested for the first time. This is a clear example of women's competence as equal in the field of politics and as a leader. This helped in changing the perception of women leadership in an otherwise traditional society.

Voting Rights of Women

Women restricted from exercising their right to vote in the past and almost no Lamkaang woman exercised direct voting rights in village council elections. The main reasons behind the non-inclusion of women in traditional village council elections date back to the time when no outsider was allowed to partake in the meetings of the village council. In this category of 'outsider', women who originally came from another village through marriage were included.

If you want to know your past, look into your present conditions. If you want to know your future, look into your present actions. – *A Chinese Proverb*

Leadership of Women

Some Lamkaang Naga women in olden days were '**Kdiimnu**'—women traditional healers – and were much respected and honored. They were naturally gifted and often more capable than their male counterparts '**Kdiimpa**'. Post Christianization, there are hardly any trained women and men who continue this practice, and it is dying out slowly. In local Lamkaang churches, the profession of pastor is reserved only for men. Women are included in church leadership only in the capacity of deaconesses. In traditional setups like the Lamkaang Snulop (Lamkaang Women Union) women leaders are highly respected and their words count. However, the Lamkaang Naga Kver Kunpun (Lamkaang Naga National Council or Lamkaang Naga Elders' Union), a pan Lamkaang apex organization, still do not have any woman representation. In the Lamkaang Kurchuuknao Kunpun (Lamkaang Student's Union) women coordinator's posts have been created; women candidates can contest for any post in the students' union. With many educated young women now involved in resolving social and cultural issues, the future for Lamkaang women even in village council leadership looks bright.

Religious Participation and Role of Women

The Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association (LNBA) is one of the first Christian associations in Manipur to have ordained a woman Minister (Reverend), Ms. D. Bongsot, a Bachelor of Divinity (BD) degree holder from Serampore University. She and Ms. Kim Vaiphei were ordained and recognized by the Manipur Baptist Convention.

Rev. Bongsot served the Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association (LNBA) as its Women Secretary. She is also presently a translator for the Bible Society of India (BSI). Though she is allowed to preach and teach in churches, several important ceremonies such as administering marriages, christenings and funerals are denied to her. This is also an indication of inequality between men and women in Lamkaang society.

It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar. - *Edward Said, Palestinian-American*

This shows women need to still struggle for their rightful places even in the church administrations. We are confident it will not be long to see more women in different areas of administration in Churches and Villages councils in the near future given that many women are more capable than men.

Women Healers and their Status

One can say that women enjoyed better status in relation to men in the animist-era than now. Women priestesses were much honoured. They were called as '*Kdimnuu*' or healers. They were quite influential in the community. The *kdimnuus* could perform any or all rituals that men could. And they would also receive an equal share of thanksgiving from the people or families whom they treated. A specially cooked meat *Riitiin* would be offered to her. Upon reaching the *Suungkoom*⁹, it would be divided into seven portions for the spirits. This was done in order to dissuade the vicious spirits from attacking them. They were respected and held high in the pre-Christian days; they were depended much upon by the community due to the special skills they possessed. They were given recognition in any community ceremonies and festivals. They also trained younger women on how to be skillful or to ascertain on whom the spirit will want to rest to carry on the work they do. All this changed after Christianization. Today, we have women who do some kinds of healings with the use of traditional medicines and herbs but they no longer have the status of the 'Kdimnuus' as all have become Christians.

Guardianship of Children

The father has the primary responsibility to bring up the children. In any event of separation or divorce of the parents, the father is the primary custodian of the children. There are some instances of agreement between the wife and the husband and/or between the two families for the children to be given to the mother's care. In such cases, the father pays for child care expenses. However, if the mother has

9 A traditional fence of the village which is no-longer visible in modern village settings as such border fencing is not being built.

sufficient means the role of the father is ignored.

Lamkaang Snu Lop Formation (The Lamkaang Women's Union)

The Lamkaang Snu Lop (Lamkaang Women Union) was founded in the year 1995.¹⁰ The union was founded with the theme: "Love, Integrity and Peace"; and the main objectives were to create awareness on women's rights, education, promotion and preservation of traditional values and cultures of the Lamkaang indigenous people; and to build bridges across communities and work for peace in the region.

The first leaders of the union were Ms. Sk. Rebika as its President and Ms. Kh. Shilwar as its Secretary. As of today the Lamkaang Snu Lop has 3000 members comprising of girls from the age of 6 to old aged women. Today, the union also conducts programs like seminars, workshops and trainings to enhance the knowledge and skills of the members. The members of the Lamkaang Snu Lop take active parts in the affairs of the community.

Conclusion

Better education and exposure to the outside world have made Lamkaang women more active and accepted to take leadership roles in the community. Their status has ascended along with it. Their opinions are now heard, respected, and many have become part of important deliberations in the community.

The purpose of writing this article was to show how the Lamkaang women have risen from the traditional cultural life that restricted their social participation to becoming fully prepared and willing community leaders.

Some examples of Lamkaang women occupying leadership positions in the tribe and the district/state are:

Rev. Miss. D. Bongso, Translator, Bible Society of India

- Ms. S.S. Olish contested the State Assembly Election in 2013, 2017 as the first woman to contest in state electoral politics amongst the

Lamkaang women.

- Ms. Sumshot Khular, Vice President of the Naga Women Union and Planning Committee Member in Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association (for the first time Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association (LNBA) has a woman in its Planning Committee).
- Ms. Th. Regina and Ms. Dilbung Promila, the Women Coordinators of the Lamkaang Students' Union.
- Ms. Sk. Sophia, Mission Secretary, Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association.
- Ms. Lv. Lakshmi, Women Secretary, Lamkaang Naga Baptist Association.

Given equal opportunity in higher education, women are doing well in higher learning as well. Some examples are;

- Ms. Anjana Sankhil, first Doctorate amongst the Lamkaangs.
- Ms. Jackey Khular, First Advocate amongst the Lamkaangs
- Ms. Stella Khular got the first rank in the Manipur Board Exams 2013, with letter marks in three subjects.



Lamkaang Reelruu Dance being performed by Women which is supposed to be a male dance-Lamkaang

Privatization is a neoliberal and imperialist plan. Health can't be privatized because it is a fundamental human right, nor can education, water, electricity and other public services. They can't be surrendered to private capital that denies the people from their rights. – Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías (1954- 2013), politician, military officer, elected President of Venezuela, Venezuela

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Informants

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- Interview Mrs. Sk. Sangnong, P. Raalringkhu (Paraolon village)
- Interview Mrs. Sk. Tonong (l), Thamlapokpi (Imphal)
- Interview Ms. SK. Chandani, Thamlapokpi (Imphal)
- Interview Ms. Th. Khivor, Thamlapokpi village
- Interview Mr. Th. Beshot (l), Thamlapokpi village
- Interview Mr. Sn. Bunghon, Dulksenloon village

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[There is] a mistaken belief that [the word Indian] refers somehow to the country, India. When Columbus washed up on the beach in the Caribbean, he was not looking for a country called India. Europeans were calling that country Hindustan in 1492.... Columbus called the tribal people he met “Indio,” from the Italian in dio, meaning “in God.” - *Russel Means (1939-2012), actor, rights activist, prominent member of American Indian Movement (AIM), writer, USA*

Diminishing Gender Gap among the Liangmaais

- By Kawichamthiu Charenamei & Enoch Newmei

Introduction

As I take you for a quick overview of the gender differences in the Liangmai society, it is worth noting that adequate study has not been done on this community earlier. Therefore much of the data gathered for this study is through questionnaires and personal interaction with elders in the community. The Liangmaais inhabit the states of Manipur and Nagaland in the Northeast India. They are spread across the districts of Tamenglong and Senapati in Manipur and Peren district in Nagaland. The population of the tribe is about 60,000. The etymological meaning of Liangmai is, *kiliangkhatmai* (*kiliang*: a sector in a village, *khat*: one, *mai*: people), meaning a sector of the village that stayed back at Makuilongdi, their ancestral home.¹¹ Liangmai Naga folklores imply that their ancestors came from the extreme north migrating along the river, crossing the *duika* (white waters) before they came to Makhlang (Makhel). After Makhel, they settled at Makuilongdi (in Senapati district, Manipur).¹² Munhu Nguibo was the first chief of the village of Makuilongdi who was succeeded by his son Kadingbou and his descendants came to be known as the Liangmai.

The name of the Liangmai tribe as has been known always but as recognized today as 'Liangmai' was modified by the Government of India as recent as the 9th January, 2012. Earlier, it was known as the Katcha Naga in Manipur, which comprised not only the Liangmaais but also the Zemes. Likewise, the Liangmaais are also known as the Zeliang in Nagaland which comprises both the Zemes and the Liangmaais. Besides, the Liangmaais also belong to the collective group, the Zeliangrong which comprises the Zemes, the Liangmaais, and the Rongmeis and are also known by this name.

The Liangmaais had a concept of the Supreme Deity, *Charawang* (*Chara*:

11 Namthiubuiyang Pamei, The Trail from Makuilongdi (Tamenglong: GCF, 2001), 16.

12 Pamei, The Trail from Makuilongdi, 3.

God, *Wang*: King) or *Tingzinpu-i-Ra* (*Ra*: meaning God). Although they believed in the Supreme Deity, they also believed in the spirits of nature: the hills, rivers, rocks, and trees which contained resident spirits. They believed in life after death, and that the dead go to *Charuidih* (*place of the dead*). The Liangmai dialect is important to the Zeliangrong since it was believed that the spirits spoke Liangmai, and all the rituals and incantations were performed in Liangmai.¹³ The community is an independent, egalitarian, classless society. The main centre for training and teaching on the customs, community values, crafts and warfare was *Khangchiuki* (Morung), a male youth dormitory, and *Liuchiuki*, a dormitory for young girls, each of which was hosted by a rich family. It was the duty of the young men of *Khangchiuki* to protect their village and to passionately protect their women and children. As you go through this article, you will see that the attitude of men of the community towards their women stems from the concept that men are the guardians of women. Through this reading you will find that women are not valued equally as men; but as you read along you will also find as to why men do so.

Social Standing of Liangmai Women: Past and Present

Education of Girls: Traditionally the Liangmai learning Centres were the dormitories - 'Khangchiuki' for boys and 'Liuchiuki' for girls. Women were taught weaving, women's tasks, folk songs and folktales in the 'Liuchiuki' which were education considered necessary for life. But with the coming of Christianity and modern education, women were once not given priority in education though not banned totally. Why? Because, girls were considered to be others' property (*maikibuipui*) and were not considered worth investing on; it was considered sufficient for them to just learn to read the Bible. They felt that even though girls were given good education, they would ultimately settle down for household chores. Instead, they were preferred to be trained in weaving and similar household chores. However, in the present society, women and men are given almost equal importance. And in fact there are as many educated women as men.

Marriageable Age for a Girl: In the past, women usually got married

13 Pamei, *The Trail from Makuilongdi*, 33.

at the age of about 18-35 years, although some married as early as 15-16 years. Usually when proposals came at the time when they were considered most desirable, girls would be given for marriage. But in the present age, girls even as young as 13-14 years also frequently get married as a result of teenage pregnancies. Due to this, eloping has become a common phenomenon which is an evil in the society. However, most women as a common norm marry within the age of 20-30 years.

Marriage System and Ceremony

Marriage: In the past, a rich family would marry off its daughter with a gift of land called '*ata-charam*', cattle, and household items like kitchen utensils, her weaving materials and shawls. The family and community would show her great affection and honor and make her happy and comfortable by having a feast together before she left home for marriage. But there were instances of women from poorer families going empty handed also. So the system of women bringing gifts to the bridegroom was never actually imposed. And then after marriage, if the newly wedded woman came and took something from the field of her husband's kinsmen even without any permission, she would not be charged of stealing. For it was considered that if she had need of the field, she had the right. Even now this system is still followed.

In Liangmai tradition, choosing the bloodline for marriage was an arduous task. It was generally considered that bloodline flowed longer than the rivers, and so a meticulous search for a pure bloodline had to be made before any two people married. Many young lovers who did not conform to the elders' guideline for marriage chose rather to die together than live separated, thus leading to many suicides. In those days, most marriages were arranged purely by the parents and elders although there is no denying the fact that there were instances of love marriages as well. But nowadays, marriages are not decided solely by the parents alone but with the consent of the children. Another trend is that many young people frequently elope without the consent of

In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations. — *An Iroquois Saying (circa 1700 – 1800), North America*

elders. In cases of eloping, the bride usually goes empty handed and without any celebration involved.

In the earlier tradition, when a girl's hand was asked for in marriage and an agreement was made with the bride price (*chamanlubo*) settled therein, it was considered that the girl already belonged to her husband, and no more to her father's house. The bride price which was paid by the groom's family was to be equally shared by the bride's kinsmen. Not even her parents got a better share of it, for the intention of fixing a bride price and sharing it was precautionary where, in any case the girl was widowed or divorced, she would be taken care of by her kinsmen. When the day came for the bride to be brought to her husband's house, the bride's family would slaughter a huge pig and exchange meat with the groom's family. If a man took a second wife while the first one was still living with him, he was required to pay the bride's price once more to the family of his first wife. This practice is called '*manson*'. In the present scenario, the two families would plan and work things out together after a mutual understanding.

Beliefs Regarding Consanguinity

It was considered that marrying someone amongst the kin groups increased the occurrence of deaths. Marriage within brothers and sisters were considered a taboo and not good for the offspring. A father-daughter relationship was not at all permitted within the Liangmai community and a man who committed such a taboo was excommunicated from his village. An act of separation was carried out against him where a bundle of grass (*tagai*) was lit and parted; the portion which was extinguished was given to him and the lit portion was taken by his kinsmen. This practice of separation was called '*Masum hang janbo*'. It means they are no longer kinsmen. Exchanging brothers and sisters (among the kinsmen) in marriage was also considered not good and devoid of blessings. A brother taking the wife of his deceased older brother was permissible but taking the wife of a deceased younger brother was not

<p>What you see is what you make. What you see in a people is what you eventually create in them. – <i>Ben Okri, Nigeria</i></p>
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allowed and believed to bring ill will. A man's relationship with his daughter-in-law or a woman's relationship with her father-in-law was also not considered good.

Divorce

Divorce is a rare case in the Liangmai society. A man did not have the right to divorce his wife without any proper reason or do whatever he pleased. But he could divorce her if she was found in any case of adultery or theft. In such a case, the man was supposed to accompany his wife back to her father's house and her bride price would have to be refunded to the husband's family. Even now much of the decision of the '*Apaiky*' or Customary court is based on these traditional marriage laws.

Issue of Guardianship over Children

In the past, when a husband died, the wife could remain in her husband's house and bring her children up or she could return to her home and remarry. The system of equal distribution of the children between both the partners was hardly practiced. By tradition, the children would take up the line of their father. This practice holds true even today. Many widowed women take up the responsibility of bringing up their children, struggling and toiling all alone, doing all kinds of odd jobs to make ends meet.

Single Women, Divorced Women & Widows in Liangmai Society

The single women with reserved and quiet attitude were more in demand by the Liangmai men. The men generally never liked women who never felt shy and thus avoided them. If an unmarried woman was not properly cared for by her family, it was believed that the family would never have a good fortune.

Hair Dress of Single Women

When a girl reached adolescence, she was required to crop her front

All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, passion, desire. — *Aristotle, Ancient Greece*

hair to a fringe. It was a sign of her virginity. Single women, who had already married, or had any sexual relationship with men were required to part their hair in front and were not supposed to crop their hair like virgins. If anyone of them dressed her hair like one of the virgins, she would be considered as having loose morals and not respected in the society. All the married women were supposed to roll their hair or bind them.

Treatment of Widows and Divorced Women

In the past, widows were extended support and help by the village whenever and wherever they needed, for instance, in the field or when they wanted to build their houses. The widows were respected and cared for by the community by giving them provisions of food or by providing them fields to cultivate crops or by exempting them half the amount whenever contributions were collected from the villagers. Moreover, they were allowed to take all the inheritance of their husbands. On the other hand, it was a hard life for the single unmarried women (who had crossed marriageable age) and also for a divorced woman. They did not enjoy the same privileges as the widows. Although they were not ill-treated by the community, life was hard and sometimes they felt embarrassed in the society. But now things have changed and many single women are self-reliant, living independently and very influential in the society.

Superstitions and Beliefs in Regard to Menstruation, Pregnancy & Child Birth

Menstruation: In the past, there were beliefs that girls must not let anyone know their first menstrual flow, otherwise when they got married they would have miscarriages in their first pregnancies. The men were not supposed to come near women during their menstrual periods '*khoupun*'. The women were required to carefully dispose of their menstrual blood or else it was believed that if any man happened

Mindfulness is Buddha's word for meditation. By mindfulness he means: you should always remain alert, watchful. You should always remain present. Not a single thing should be done in a sort of sleepy state of mind. You should not move like a somnambulist, you should move with a sharp consciousness. - '*Osho*' Rajneesh (*Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh*) (1931-1990), *Spiritual Master, India*

to touch that by mistake he would become clumsy and easily wounded in war and hunting.

Pregnancy: During pregnancy, a woman was required to abstain from food like '*khaorajan*' (meat of cat and dog family) and also '*makhuipoi*' (honeybee larvae). She was forbidden to eat '*khaorajan*' because it was believed that if she ate them, her child would have wild temperament like those animals. It was seen that eating '*makhuipoi*' would make her infant bite during breastfeeding. It was good for her to keep away from crowd as much as possible. She was not supposed to hurt or kill anything during her pregnancy. She must be as gentle and kind as much as possible.

Although there were strict rules about observance of their diet, at times pregnant women were not tenderly cared for. There were many a cases of pregnant women continuing work in the field or in tedious household chores even when they were in the advanced stage of pregnancy or even when they were in labor. There were even instances where women gave birth on the way to the field or while returning from the field. And even worse, within a few days after giving birth they would return to their fieldwork.

Child Birth: There were also many beliefs and superstitions connected with childbirth. There was a practice of removing moveable household goods from the house during childbirth because it was believed that in case of a still-birth (*nahthibo*), all the equipment/objects inside the house would become unclean. And whenever someone used the unclean objects, he or she would become clumsy leading to accidents and untoward incidents in the family. As soon as the baby was born, one of the oldest midwives would shout '*aleng*' meaning 'it's mine', and claim the baby for her; otherwise they believed that evil spirits would have a claim on the child. The old midwife would then use a '*taniupek*' (kind of bamboo grass) to cut the umbilical cord from the placenta. It was also seen that if the neonate died within five days, it was considered

We have raised an issue that is already in the Bolivian constitution, that water is a universal human right. And we asked the United Nations to recognize water as a human right. - Juan 'Evo' Morales (born 1959), popularly known as Evo

still birth. It would be buried under the mother's bed (*nabhungnbaibo*). If the child lived more than five days, it would be considered a live birth. For 3-10 days after the birth of her newborn the mother was required to stay indoors '*nahbangky*' and not to eat the forbidden food. During this '*nahbanky*' period her male kinsmen from her father's house '*Papiu-pagiumai*' were also not allowed to see her; otherwise they would become clumsy '*goubo*' and lose their skill in hunting and warfare. It was believed that men should not to sleep with their wives, for about three months after the childbirth or else they were more likely to get hurt during war and hunting. Men who abstained from sleeping with their wives during such period were regarded well.

Every time a child was born, there was a ritual '*tajumgyibo*' where a cock with very colorful hues was sacrificed for the child's wellbeing. The meat of the sacrifice was taken fully by the child's mother. Those attending her were provided separate meat. After child-delivery, the mother was given special diet and for about two months, her neighbors and friends took care of her '*Manahthenbo*', and provided her with meat and fish to help her regain her health very soon. As long as the baby was in infant stage, the parents would not go far into the jungle, travel, or cross big rivers, climb trees, or cut big creepers. They believed that in case the taboo was not strictly observed, the baby would have frightful dreams at night and would not sleep well; it could also bring harm to the baby. It was a painful fact that many women died during child birth. This was known as '*puimaishid*'. If the woman died inside the house, the family would relocate to another place and such death was viewed with much fear.

Barren Woman: If a woman did not bear children, she was called '*nahkampui*' which means 'a woman with no offspring'. When she died she would not have '*n-niu*', a memorial erected for her. Now people are aware that infertility could either be from the man or woman, and so this system is not followed anymore.

Spring passes and one remembers one's innocence. Summer passes and one remembers one's exuberance. Autumn passes and one remembers one's reverence. Winter passes and one remembers one's perseverance." - Yoko Ono, Japan

Some of these traditional practices regarding menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth are still followed even now although much of these practices have been discarded after conversion to Christianity. Due to modern medical awareness and knowledge, now expectant mothers are properly cared for and given rest from difficult tasks. Their lives have also considerably improved due to the accessible medical care.

Proper Treatment of Women

The society had very good regards for women. For instance, in the family, the mother's seat was not to be occupied by any other member of the household. It is a sign of respect and honor to the mother. The children revered their mother. It was believed that those who did not pay respect to their mothers would not live long. If a woman was sexually harassed by another man, it was the duty of her husband to punish the culprit. However, if a woman was not able to cross a river on her own or escape from fire and she was carried by another man, then her husband had to accept that and not think of her as being loose or immoral.

When a woman died, the members of her father's household could come to her sons and grandchildren and ask for '*charaahman*'¹⁴. Whatever they requested was to be given by the family. It was believed that if they did not fulfill the requests of their mother's family, things would not go well with them in the future. The male members (*Papiupagiumai*) of the household were supposed to remain in constant touch with their women (*chamimai*) who married out of their house. When there was a feast or whenever they brought a game (wild animal) home, they were supposed to share it with their women, whenever possible. The older women were given the hind leg of an animal, the younger women received the front legs. The men folks were cautious not to make their

14 Charaahman- Probably this practice of taking '*charaahman*' is confined only to Liangmais. It was the custom of the nephews to approach the family of their paternal aunt (father's sister) for '*charaahman*'. '*Charaa*' means bones, '*man*' means price, i.e., the bone-price. Tradition says that once upon a time, a man called '*Dammang*' who loved his wife so much, slept with his dead wife's corpse when she died. So when the woman's family got to know about this act, they condemned the act and asked a price for her bones. Since then, they began to take '*charaahman*'.

women feel sad, for it was believed that it was a very bad thing to bring their women to tears by their words or deeds.

Women in Leadership Roles and Village Administration

Traditionally, women did not find leadership roles and positions of power in the village administration. But in the present society, women are beginning to play active role through Women Front and contribute a lot in the village administration. Women's organization has become one of the most active and influential social groups; and now women also are starting to hold offices in the Village Authority, thus creating a platform for them in administration. It is also being considered to bring in more women into administrative roles even in the apex organizations. Women are increasingly becoming well-learned and showing greater progress than their men counterpart in education, and therefore they are more frequently and readily given leadership roles and taken into the offices of decision making not only in the village administration but also in the church and in the society in general. Each village is an autonomous unit in itself. The village is administered independently by a council which proportionately represents each and every clan of the village and is headed by the village headman. The representatives are no other than the leaders (elders) of their clans. Since a woman is not an heir to her father's house, her representation to the village council is out of the question.

The Liangmai Naga Council has three organs:

- General Assembly which comprises all members of the Liangmai Tribe including the Village Chairmen, Secretary of each village, President of Tribe Women and Youth Organizations, Chairpersons of Literature, Arts & Culture and Sports and Five Village Chairmen selected by the Liangmai Naga Council (LNC)
- Central Executive Body which consists of LNC Officials, President of LNC's Wings of Women and Youth, Chairpersons of Literature, Arts & Culture and Sports and Four Zones and Five Chairmen selected by the zones.

Those who lack compassion have no eyes; who truly have eyes can't lack compassion. – *Thiruvalluvar (3-1 BC), Thirukkural 577, poet, saint, Tamil Nadu, India*

- Central Core Committee of the President, two Vice Presidents, General Secretary, Five Secretaries and one Speaker.

The Liangmai tribe is patriarchal in nature, but there has been a lot of changes in the position of women in the society which is brought about by the need of women to work together with men in the aftermath of the army operations in the area when the area was declared 'disturbed' and during the Naga-Kuki clash in the 1990s, which was further strengthened by the awareness of human rights and modern education. Thus, women have become the mediator and they go in the fore front when physical appearance of men is in danger. This calls for legitimization of women representation in the constitution of the village, at least two from Liangmai Women Baudi and two each of women representation at Village Authority Council.

Young people of today's generation want women to be included in the Liangmai Tribe Council as well as at village level. But not much is coming out from the women's side due to their lack of awareness of the issues and problems of the society; there is also a sense of insecurity for them to come out of the cocoons, for the feelings of suppression have been deeply rooted in the minds of the women for centuries; lack of road connectivity and transportation and so on also contribute to women's problems.

Today, Women Baudi/Society in each village is a source of strength for women community. Women are starting to hold office in village authority councils; they are selected by a resolution of the village authority council and not as clan representatives since only men can represent the clans at the authority council.

In the past, women did not have any voice in decision making or any part in administrative roles or in the village court '*Apai*'. Only when there were irreconcilable fights between the men folks, then women were roped in to put an end to them. In such a situation a woman would place her staff between the two warring parties and shout, "*Era*

A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people. – *Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, USA*

npuimai tazam phungmai ye, haitu phungkenmai tazamdoumisulo!”, meaning “whosoever goes beyond this, receives the wounds”. No one was supposed to go beyond this. In the past, women’s voices were considered as ‘*Npuinah lad*’ (words of women and children as clanking noise only) and they were generally considered responsible only for child bearing and rearing. They did all the necessary household work like cooking, making rice beer (*jaolangbo*), spinning cotton and weaving clothes, gathering vegetables from jungle, fetching firewood and water, hand-pounding of paddy as well as fieldwork like weeding, planting and harvesting. The Liangmai women’s life was one of daily hard labor but a tedious one. Though the men folks did all the tasks that required greater strength like cutting, logging, digging, hunting and warfare, the women were the first to get up from bed and attend to the entire hard domestic tasks and the last ones to go to bed.

Authority of Women in the Family

Traditionally, in the Liangmai society women played a huge role in the domestic household activities, in taking care of the children and in the maintenance of all the household needs. They were very dependent upon their husbands for food, shelter and standing in the society. Men brought things home and women took care and made use of what men brought home. Men’s duty was mainly concerned outside the house. They were responsible for shouldering the burden of finance and conflicts relating to the family.

In the present society however, both women and men are actively involved in works outside homes, and both play an active role in bringing income for the family. They work together in matters relating to education and marriage of their children, and division of property among their children. Nowadays, there are also lots of instances where women are playing a greater role than their husbands in running their homes. For instance, many women who are in business, cultivation,

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies. - Martin Luther King Jr., Baptist minister and activist, USA

daily wage earning or in government services bring home as much as the men or sometimes even more. Yet, they would still be required to take up the household and domestic duties which most men neglect. In many homes where the husbands are not very responsible (esp. alcoholics), the wives play active roles in correcting them by repeatedly entreating them to change their way of life and also earnestly praying for them.

Economic Standing of Liangmai Women: Past and Present

Property Ownership and Inheritance

In the past, Liangmai women were not given any rights to inheritance. The right to inheritance belonged to the men. It was considered that woman shared the inheritance along with her husband. But in case a person had no male offspring but only female offspring, then he could decide to divide his property among his daughters or even give it to the male relatives of his. There were a few cases where the land was inherited by the daughters. Much of the system has not changed even to this day.

Share of Women in Family's Moveable and Immovable Property

In the past, woman did not have any share as such, except for the weaving tools, the kitchen utensils, the bamboo baskets- '*kaluang, nkha*', etc. that belonged to her. But, for instance, if her husband made any mistake requiring reproach like rape or murder, and the village elders decided to bring his house down (*chakibibo*), whatever household goods that they were able to take out of the house belonged to the wife. And whatever was left over and not destroyed also went her. It was solely her property. When a woman came into the house of her husband's family, she did not have any separate share as belonging to her. They together share all the property that belonged to them. But if she happened to bring a gift of land from her parents, this could not be gifted or sold out without her parents' consent. And in cases

Sometimes it's better to be kind than to be right. We do not need an intelligent mind that speaks, but a patient heart that listens. You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger. - *Gautama Buddha, India*

where her husband divorced her, without any fault of hers, whatever she brought as her gift would belong to her, and whatever she and her husband earned together as a family was to be divided equally among them. This system is followed even today.

Women's Share of Income and Position of Wages in the Village Setup

Traditionally, in the Liangmai culture, women and men did not have separate wages as such. They were both paid accordingly, depending on their work. When someone took up a task of greater skill and difficulty, he/she was paid better wages, for e.g., a woman weeding grass was paid lesser than a man cutting logs and stones. In the recent past, the wages of the women was Rs. 130/- and that of a man was Rs. 200/-, but this was also depending on the job expected of them. At present, the average wage of both men and women is Rs.200/-. There is no difference in salary arrangement between the two in the past as well as in the present system. The wages differ only based on the tasks involved.

Political Standing of Liangmai Women: Past and Present

Political Rights of Women: Traditionally in the Liangmai Naga culture there was no system of electing one single ruler. The Village Apaiky would govern the village administration; the eldest in the Village Apaiky would be the Apaipi or Chief. Women were not part of the Village Apai. Even in the recent past, women did not get involved in political elections. The husbands decided the parties and leaders of their choice, and women were just passive followers. But nowadays, women are actively involved in politics by choosing the parties and leaders of their choice and exercising their voting rights. However, in many instances, women are still highly influenced by their husbands or male folks.

Patriarchal System: In the Liangmai society, men, the fathers or husbands, were the heads of the households, and they are the ones who have control over land, cattle, household goods and family affairs

Are you really listening ... or are you just waiting for your turn to talk? – *David R. Montgomery (born 1961), Department of Earth and Space Sciences in Seattle, USA*

and also matters relating to religion and society. The society considered that God had created men to be stronger and more dominant than women. And so, men concentrated on the tasks that required greater strength, like earning income and protecting his family, cutting stones and woods, hunting and defence. Women, on the other hand, concentrated on the tasks that made homes places of rest and comfort to raise children. Even today, the same tradition follows that men are the heads of the households although they would consult their wives and children on matters concerning family and the society.

Religious Standing of Liangmai Women: Past and Present

In the traditional Liangmai religious setup, there were female shamans '*phaimiu*', who were known to have contacts with the gods and who could interpret dreams and were believed to possess extraordinary spiritual powers. Although there were female shamans, strangely women were never appointed as priests '*singku*' in the past. This continues to this day. During public rituals, the female shamans were never given the main lead. But at home the women folks took the main lead to pray and invoke blessings for their children, especially during occasions such as child birth. Therefore, in the past, even in matters of religious affairs women had a significant role to play in the community.

Even now in the Christian era, women play a significant role in the church. They take lead in 'fast and pray' programs and worship services. There is no differentiation between a woman and a man in this regard. Irrespective of gender, anyone who is capable is given responsibility. However, women are not given ordination in the Liangmai Churches till today.

Recommendation

The paper recommends the following to address the problem of gender gap among the Liangmais:-

- Participation of women in decision making processes in the

Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself. – Hazrat Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi, Turkey

family and in the society including Village Councils and apex organizations like LNC-M, LNBA (M), etc...

- The implementation of Domestic Violence Act 2005 in the community.
- Creating awareness about and claim for Rights of woman and child.
- Influential participation of women in socio-economic, cultural, religious and political affairs.
- Induction of women in defense forces and policing.
- Participation in protection and conservation of land and natural resources and wildlife.
- Participation in preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

To break from status quo and become change agents for the betterment of society.

- Protection of women's inheritance rights.

To strive for quality spiritual life and to pursue the inner beauty of life.

- To strive for quality education and to take active part in tasks requiring greater mental skills like science and technology.
- To actively exercise women's rights in negating evil and unlawful activities in the society like alcoholism, corruption and immorality.

Conclusion

The Liangmai women have a distinct place in the socio-cultural, religious and economic life of the society. Like in many other communities, women in Liangmai society were also given a status below most men. Traditional society assigned women only with domestic duties like cooking, weaving, spinning cotton, nursing the family members and

When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace. –
Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970), rock guitarist, singer and songwriter, USA

looking after their children. The woman's status was considered lower than that of man and she was expected to submit to her man. But that did not necessarily mean that Liangmais considered their women as lesser beings and treated them below their dignity as in some traditions. Women were not abused and exploited; rather men did everything for their well-being and protection. There were neither tortures for dowry as in other societies nor any abusive circumcisions or mutilation of a part of female body in the name of gender, nor sexual abuses, rape and murder of women. The male in the family believed that the women and children needed his protection and that he was their protector, their father or husband as well as a mentor. It was felt that it was a man's dignity to treat the women well. History has to be also viewed in the light of the many wars that have been fought for the sake of women, whether it was to preserve their dignity or to win them.

Whatsoever, the discrimination of women existed, and this seems to have stemmed from the fact that in those old times, when life was more of physical activities, women were necessarily dependent upon their men-in warfare, in hunting and especially when the jungle had to be cleared for cultivation. From this arose a feeling that women were dependent upon men and so also her mental faculties seemed weaker to those of men as she was confined only at home. It thus turned out as a practice that she was treated as ignorant and her words were not taken into consideration at home and in the village councils. She was considered physically and emotionally dependent on her husband or father or brothers and hence, in decision making.

However, there is a great shift with the coming of the new economic order and modernization; Liangmai women are beginning to enjoy more special privileges. Many women are receiving good education and more and more women are beginning to take part in decision making and leadership roles in the community.

This study tries to suggest that in the past the Liangmai women were given a lesser status not as a result of an active suppression or subjugation stemming from thoughtless male dominance with a conscious effort

to undermine women but rather due to problem of not giving due recognition or importance to women as a matter of inattention.

A Brief Profile of Liangmai Naga Tribe

The tribe is now recognized as Liangmai by the Government of India since the 9th January 2012. They are also still referred to as Zeliangrong or sometimes as Hamai in Manipur. In Nagaland, at present they are recognized as Zeliangs (Zeme, Liangmai). The populace is distributed mainly in Tamenglong and Senapati districts in Manipur and in Peren district in Nagaland. The population as per the latest census is 64,608 (48,373 in Manipur and 16,235 in Nagaland), of which 33,218 are women. In Manipur, the apex social and religious organizations are Liangmai Naga Council (LNC) and Liangmai Naga Baptist Association (LNBA) respectively. In Nagaland, they are Liangmai Council (LC) and Liangmai Baptist Aruang.

There have been a few persons from the Liangmai community who hold doctoral degrees in secular field, mention of which can be made of Dr. Hunibou Newmai, Dr. Ajailiu Niumai, Dr. Ch. Widinibou and Dr. Wichamdinbou Mataina. The first to have completed a post-doctoral degree from the community is a woman, Dr. Ajailiu Niumai, who is serving as an Associate Professor in the University of Hyderabad. We also have few doctorates in the field of theology, namely Dr. David Wijunamei and Dr. Peter Thiumai, a doctorate in Herbal Medicine, Dr. Pouchunbou Niumai and an honorary doctorate, Rev. Dr. H. Newmei.

The apex body of the Liangmai women's organization is Liangmai Pui Baudi (LPB) which was established in the year 2008. The first President is Ms. Withuilung from Tamei headquarter with the other office bearers as Vice President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer. The motto of the organization is "Women- *The binding-rope of a venture*" meaning women are tie that binds people together, and therefore the role of

I would say that I'm a nonviolent soldier. In place of weapons of violence, you have to use your mind, your heart, your sense of humor, every faculty available to you... because no one has the right to take the life of another human being. – Joan Baez (born 1941), well known for her engagement on social justice, USA

women is crucial in any given venture.

Women have begun to take active part in politics. Ms. Savitri holds the post as a member of Autonomous District Council, Tamenglong. These days much of the election campaigns are also influenced by women organizations and actively participated by women.

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It is within my power either to serve God or not to serve Him. Serving Him, I add to my own good and the good of the whole world. Not serving Him, I forfeit my own good and deprive the world of that good, which was in my power to create. – *Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time, Russia*

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You can study God through everything and everyone in the universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue of church. But if you are still in need of knowing where exactly His abode is, there is only one place to look for Him: in the heart of a true lover. – *Shams Tabrezi (1185-1248), Sufi mystic, Iran*

Mao/ Ememei Women in the Contemporary World

- Dr. Lorho Mary Maheo

Introduction

The Mao/Ememei is one of the oldest indigenous tribal communities of Manipur, inhabiting the northernmost part of the state with highest concentration in the Senapati district. As listed in the Souvenir *Lui-Ngai-Ni*, 2010 (The Naga Seed Sowing Festival) there are 51 Mao villages with a population of approximately 1, 15,032 (Memai Council, 2013-14).

History of Origin and Migration

As there are no written records available, oral traditions preserved in the form of folk songs and folk tales comprise the sources of information about their origin. Different myths and theories explain the origin, migration and settlement of the Maos. From time immemorial, the Maos have been keeping a strong belief that the Nagas originated from a place known as *Makhrefii*, the present Makhel (*Makhre*-secret, *fii*-place) about 5 kms away from the AH-1, near Tadubi under Senapati district. Shimray, in his *Origin and Culture of Nagas* states that “*As to their origin, and dispersal, the various tribes of the Nagas have now accepted Makhel as the original place from where they dispersed themselves*” (Shimray 1985:26). He further mentions many historical facts such as stone monoliths and sacred trees planted to substantiate their belief about the history of their origin. The stone monoliths such as *Okhe*, *Ora*, *Omei*, and also *Marabu* (Peepal tree), *Chiitebu* (wild pear), etc. stand till today to substantiate the distinct practice of stone erection of the Nagas wherever they settled as opined by Shimray. Judging from various aspects and factors, some of the writers further conclude that from Makhel they (Nagas) migrated to different directions and to various places where they are living today which are well depicted by the stone ‘*Tamara Tsu/Chu*’ found at Makhel. With time, population

O God! If I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold (grudge me) not Thine everlasting beauty. - Hazrat Rabi'ah Basri, Iraq

increased to a great extent leading to congestion at the place they were dwelling. This situation compelled the people to look for new places for settlement. It is believed that before the dispersal, a '*Chiitebu*' tree was planted at the present Shajouba village and a monolith '*Tamara Tsu*' erected to commemorate the journey to different directions. Further, it is said that *Shiipfowo* received and carried on the father's legacy and remained at Makhel. The progenies of *Shiipfowo* as mentioned by William Nepuni (2010:5) are *Ememei*, *Lepaona*, *Paomata*, *Chiiluve*. According to Dr. Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India, the Mao language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Mao language, in its rich and highly developed form is preserved and handed down orally through ballads, folksongs, adages, folktales and folklores.

Position of Women

Women constitute half of any country's human population. They are the opposite half of human population, the other half being men. They are the mothers, daughters, wives, sisters and sisters-in-law. Women are, in a sense, the social conscience of a country (Parvin, 2005:1). Without women, society will not sustain for long. In other words, society will continue to develop and progress only if equal status as well as equal opportunity is accorded to everyone irrespective of sex, caste, creed, etc. Women's perspectives are invaluable. Taking advantage of the roles that they are expected to play, women can make unique contributions by offering suggestions from their perspectives. To understand women in the present context one needs to look at the positions that they occupy and the roles that they play.

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, '*Status*' has been defined as the condition or position with regard to law and '*Rôle*' as a function or office assumed by someone. Status of woman is affected by certain macro-forces such as economic development, political participation, and ideological overtones. It is also shaped by the norms and values society lay down with regard to woman's behavior. There are numerous prescriptions, sanctions, and constraints which

Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), theologian, Germany

overtly or covertly determine the behavior of a woman. Social status is commonly thought of as the position of an individual in his/her society. In this connection one needs to understand that in a society an individual holds a multiplicity of positions, and, secondly, the social status or position of an individual is not a static condition. According to Majumdar and Madan, “*The status of women in all types of societies, but particularly in the patriarchal, is determined by various types of taboos that are attached to women generally. These taboos might be protective, or preventive or productive.... It would be a scientific error to approach the women of a society with a rigid bias to the view that they have either a low or a high status. Such dichotomies are generally misleading, and certainly so in this case. There can be so many intermediate statuses, and there can be polarity, though it may not be so striking*” (Majumdar and Madan 1986:147-48). Thus the status of women in the Indian context and particularly in the Naga society is not simple to define. To understand the Mao women in the contemporary world, it would be appropriate to analyze the Mao women from different perspectives.

Social Standing:

As a Mother: A mother's place in the home is that of the caretaker of children especially during the tender years. A married woman who cannot bear children (barren) is socially looked down on even in the past as she cannot help in the growth of new generation of people. Although barrenness is not manmade, due to lack of knowledge, the blame or stigma usually falls on the barren woman. This sometimes becomes the cause of divorce or polygyny in the Mao society. A mother who could produce a number of sons gets social recognition. This speaks volumes about the strong patriarchal system prevalent in the Mao society wherein a woman after marriage cannot retain her lineage title. Her son(s) become the heir(s) of his/their father and recognized descendants of the family. The title of her husband's lineage is to be adhered to except in rare cases wherein they adopt another lineage title if they migrate to another village owing to some grievous reasons. In a family, the father is considered as the two legs which can make a person

Three things cannot hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth. - Gautama Buddha (sometime between 6 – 4 BC), sage, born in Nepal, lived and taught mostly in India

stand or move from place to place and the mother as the two hands. Even if the two legs are crippled, the hands can still be made to work, but if the hands have gone paralyzed, the tragedy is felt even more. Here it means to say that the loss of a mother has greater impact on the running of a household. It could also indicate recognition of the crucial role played by her which could be a positive way of looking at the position of woman. There are a lot of taboos or prohibitions laid down for a pregnant woman which she subtly or unconsciously follows in the name of tradition as she continues with her daily hard work even in the last stage of pregnancy. Some of such are: she should not cover any hole(s) or else her child will be born dumb; she should refrain from eating delicious or mouth-watering food(s) lest the child becomes greedy or has saliva drippings; she should not eat any conjoined fruits or vegetables or both to protect against multiple childbirths; she should not steal lest the child turns out to be a thief later; she should not linger alone in quiet places so as to avoid evil spirits attacking the child in the womb; she should not kill particularly the snake lest the child may take the habit of flickering his or her tongue as the snake does. Strong adherence to the tradition is still very much in vogue as well as encouraged till date especially by the elders of the society.

As a Daughter: Daughters in the family do not get the same importance as sons do. Parents do not welcome the repeated births of girl children if daughters are there already. The Nagas in general being a patriarchal society, a male issue is needed to continue the lineage. Nonetheless, a girl child is aspired for if they already have a number of sons. The only daughter in the family gets certain attention/privileges but in general she is not given much preference by the society. In this regard one of the male respondents very promptly said that girls belong to others meaning that after their marriage they will have to leave their maternal homes and no longer be a part of their families/clans. This speaks volumes about the mindset where gender bias continues to prevail in the present day.

As a Wife: A wife is considered subordinate to her husband. Decision making is considered the sole right of the husband. Wife's role in a

Regard heaven as your father and earth as your mother and all that lives as your brothers and sisters. – *A Native American proverb*

family is to provide warmth, security and emotional support which are considered essential for effective socialization of the young. She is expected to hold the family together. In short, she is the cohesive force within the family, towards the lineage/clan members and towards the society at large. This positive role or contribution of women in bringing about and maintaining better relationship among clan members and within society at large should be acknowledged and strengthened by allowing them to participate in decision making processes.

As a Sister: In the Mao society, brother and sister have a long lasting affectionate relationship. According to an instance cited by Xavier when a boy goes out of his home, he is seen off by his sisters with his luggage being usually carried by them. He interprets this as a sign of love and affection towards the brothers (Xavier, 1998:41). However, this could also mean a lower status attributed to women, a case of exploitation even. On the whole the status and role of a sister remains high after her marriage to a man of another clan or lineage in the Mao society

As a Daughter In-Law: A female after her marriage leaves her family of orientation and joins or forms another family which is known as the family of procreation. Her status is dependent on her ability to bear the responsibilities entrusted to her. Marriage to the eldest son in a family enhances her position. Nowadays Mao women who are economically independent enjoy greater liberty in her family as well as her surroundings indicating a changing trend similar to other developing communities/ countries.

Women in Social Aspects:

Public Functions: Since time memorial, women are the keepers, preservers and sustainers of culture and tradition. Unlike in the past when the circle and number of social interactions were rather limited and endogamous in nature, in today's world there are a number of functions which are organized in a more widespread nature. Women are now regarded as important transmitters and carriers of tradition. This is evident from their adherence to traditional costumes while

If you are planning for one year, grow rice. If you are planning for 20 years grow trees. If you are planning for centuries, grow men. – *A Chinese proverb*

attending social gatherings be it marriage, funeral service, erection of memorial stone, etc. despite the adoption of modern ways of life. They play the important role of keeping the cultural tradition alive throughout generation.

Marriage: Marriage is essential for procreation and through procreation an unbroken line of family is maintained. Traditionally, in Mao society, tribe endogamy and clan exogamy were adhered to, for it was believed that they would be devoured by a tiger if there was any breach of customary marriage practices. Today tribe endogamy is losing ground but clan exogamy is still strictly followed. Marriage by engagement and elopement were prevalent. In the past arranged marriage was rather very elaborate. It involved a lot of procedures which were expected to be followed meticulously. From the time of engagement till the completion of five days of marriage i.e, after their marriage was consummated, a number of omens had to be sought. If any of the dreams was not good it was generally treated as a bad omen and the marriage was either postponed or called off. For instance, *Ora dziiphi* literally meaning non recognition and consent from God as mentioned by Matia (2003:28) was in vogue in the pre-Christian days. With the coming of Christianity, such elaborate and meticulous arranged marriage practices are no longer observed.

There is no specific age for marriage among the Maos though the age at marriage was generally lower in the earlier days. However, recent studies reveal that the average age of the Mao girls is 22.7 years and that of boys is 25.6 years (Maheo, 2004:55). Women who produce a number of sons are considered assets to their husbands' clansmen, a pride for themselves and are accorded higher status. In the past, a customary practice '*Opi mothu bobvii chiinoe*' was followed in which girls shaved their head before marriage as a sign of virginity. This practice is believed to discourage attention from men folk enabling them to concentrate on the work assigned to them especially in the head hunting expedition. Such customs are no longer in vogue now. In the present days, the trend of marriage among the Maos is more of westernized form which has been brought about by the acceptance

of the Christian faith. Practically, the original form of traditional marriages, especially in matters relating to the marriage ceremony and formality of marriage, is no longer in practice among the Maos.

Divorce: The term separation is more appropriate in the Mao society as chances of re-union are high. Reasons for separation are many. In earlier times, the Mao people looked for omens during the trial days of marriage, i.e. within a span of 5 days of marriage and if they found the omen to be bad or not favorable such as extinction of fire from the new hearth or damage caused to the oven, unfortunate death among the close kin of either side of the marriage partners as well as unnatural death of any domesticated animals, etc., separation was bound to occur. Such practices are no longer followed today. Other reasons of separation may be infidelity, barrenness or other irreconcilable problems. But it is the women who get the most blame and bear the brunt of it while the men are in one way or the other showed leniency by society saying '*men are men*'. Due to lack of knowledge, if the wife is barren or unable to give birth to a son the blame is put on her. A very interesting practice which continues to prevail till date is that when separation or divorce takes place, generally, some close relatives are sent to bring back the woman. But she is not obliged to yield to their request. However, when her own husband, either alone or along with his close comrades, go and request her to return home, the Mao custom compels her to return even if it is against her wish. But she is free to leave the house the next day. The liberty to leave the following day could indicate certain acknowledgement of her independence. However, such is the obligation which the Mao women have that leaves an implication that men are superior to women. This speaks volumes about her subservient nature imposed by customary practices. If divorce takes place because of infidelity by either side of the marriage partners, the women are usually left with nothing to fend for themselves except for the clothes that she is wearing while such severe punishment are not meted out to men even if they are the wrong doers. Although the crime of adultery or fornication involves two sexes yet it is the women who were meted out

Men have three ears – one on the left of the head, one on the right of the head, and one in the heart. – <i>An American Proverb</i>

with severe punishment without giving equal or fair share of judgment.

Gender bias is very prominent in this situation. Like the mainland Indians, who do not easily accept the divorcee back into her maternal home, even the Maos too have certain inhibitions in accepting her back lest it causes hindrances especially to the other siblings who have not settled down in marriage. In such cases the divorcee generally sets up a separate or new hearth to avoid inconvenience to her family. Mention can be made here that remarriage was a common feature in the Mao society even in the past.

Widow: Status of a widow is definitely considered low by almost all societies. However, widowhood by fate is treated with sympathy by the Mao society. A widow as mentioned in Singh and Maheo (2010:137) may derive maintenance out of her deceased husband's property so long as she stays at her husband's family. But when she misbehaves in words or deeds during her stay at her husband's family, she is never tolerated kindly. On the other hand she is turned out thereby, and as a result she has to forfeit her husband's property that she inherited. The Mao society tends to treat her according to what type of a person her husband had been. If the deceased husband happened to be a good man, people tend to show more sympathy/compassion on her. But if her deceased husband happened to be someone whom society disapproved, people tend to even jeer at her for no fault of hers. One of the major differences between a widow and a widower is that the people at large encourage a widower to remarry however old he may be. But the society at large discourages widow remarriage particularly outside their clan or lineage. The plight of widows as listed by one of the SHGs (Self Help Groups) speaks volumes about their status. They are less valued, counted, prestigious, capable, worthy, respected, concerned and cared for, or heard of; also, they are less considered by the people in general and the influential women in particular. The Mao society practices junior levirate in which if her husband dies the younger brother marries her. However, such a practice is not mandatory. A widow is free to remain single and take care of her children.

<p>Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another. – Alfred Adler (1870-1937), <i>Psychologist, Germany</i></p>
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Single Women: The Mao society at large, do not favour men and women alike who lead a single life or remain unmarried. In the olden days generally, it would be the most unfortunate man or woman who remains unmarried. Generally compared to unmarried male, an unmarried female becomes a mockery. Her status is considered low when compared to issueless couple. Among the Mao it is customary to kill a cow (*Opra*) and offer the beef to everyone who attends a funeral. But if the deceased is an unmarried female, male members abstain from the meat. This practice continue to prevail till 1930s as is evident from the instance of a handicapped woman called *Ariijji Takhra*, of Punanamei village who was forced to marry so that on her death the *opraso* can be readily accepted by all. Situations have changed with the coming of Christianity. A number of women have chosen to lead a celibate life and joined different religious congregations as Nuns/Sisters which are a common feature among the Roman Catholics. Contrary to the earlier treatment, these women are given due respect by one and all.

Inheritance: Among the Maos, the rule of ultimo-geniture prevails. The society being patriarchal in nature, even in the absence of a male issue in the family, the ancestral property is never given or shared among daughters /sisters as they have no right to inherit parental property. It is the nearest male kith/kin who claims the ancestral property. Narendra (1995: 70) has also pointed out that women get their maintenance but have no share in the family property. However, immovable property which is bought or purchased by parents themselves can be given away to daughter(s) as gifts if they so desire. But society does not encourage this practice even as it often leads to property dispute between the husband's family and the maternal family.

Economic Sphere

The contribution by women and children are not to be undermined for they play a major role in augmenting the family resources. It will not be wrong to say that the Mao women enjoy maximum liberty in the management of kitchen affairs. It is her duty to manage resources and maintain sufficiency. Efficient management is praised by all. No matter

You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. – *Anne Lamott (born 1954), USA*

how efficiently a woman manages a family she is never made a part in the decision making. She has to abide by her husband's decision. Hence, the autonomy in the management of kitchen affair is her domain while decision making is a man's domain. Many women rear domestic animals and there are few instances where men seek permission from the female owner to sell or slaughter such animals indicating her economic independence. But financial constraints demands sacrifice of her source of income. Traditionally, barter system was prevalent which does not require much mobility and it was generally carried out by men. Today selling of agricultural products is a woman's domain and main source of income which ultimately leads to peace and stability in the family. Besides selling of agricultural products, today the Mao women have taken a leading role in the business of floriculture. There are a number of families today that have been sustained by the income generated by wife alone. Economically, independent women enjoy greater liberty in her family and neighbourhood. This is indicative of the changing trend. But despite her economic independence she still remains subservient to men owing to the strong patriarchal system prevalent in the society.



A Flower Show being organized at Mao Song Song Village paying its tribute to Mother Nature, 2015

Political Scenario:

Traditional Village Administrative System: Since time immemorial it has been a taboo for women to enter the Naga political arena and it is particularly so in the Mao village level. Women had and have no right to plead in the village administration. The traditional system of administration in each Mao village was a democratically self-administered entity. It was known as *Chiihe Chiilomei* formed by clan elders prior to the British period. This was followed by the Village Councils after the British took over the reign. The administration rests in the hands of the Chief/King (*Movuo*) assisted by a Council of clan elders. As pointed out by Maheo, (2012:206) no woman took part in the tribal traditional administration or decision making processes. However, women's role in peacemaking can never be undermined. If we look at the Naga society, women at different levels played a vital role in fostering peace. Among the Tangkhuls, in the bygone days *Pukhareilas* known as ambassadors of peace by Lucy (1998:23) played vital roles in saving lives of men. Xavier (1998:39) has also mentioned that in the case of a pitched battle between two warring groups, if women come in between with leaf or clothes and wave, the fight has to stop. *Phoro* i.e. winnowing implement is also used to stop the feud. This indicates that although no specific portfolio is assigned to women, yet by her wit/wisdom she plays a pivotal role in fostering peace in the society. In situation where the Chief/*Movuo* dies while his son is still a minor one, the wife i.e., the queen, undertakes certain responsibility and observes the *gennas*¹ till such time the incumbent post is installed. For example, in Punanamei village, *Ariijii Movuo* died early in 1940s and his wife *Kaikhra* became the caretaker till her grandson *H. Chakho* was inducted to the post of the Chief of the village. She handled the village affairs in a very peaceful and harmonious manner.

Modern System: In the modern political system, although the involvement of women is advocated, yet there are still very few takers. Hardly any

Peace is more than an absence of war. It is an environment, within which every individual can realize her or his fullest creative potential, within which technological achievements are balanced by complementary moral and ethical advancements.
— Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing, China

woman would volunteer to take up such bold step unless the women are being forced upon. Till date no Mao woman has ever contested in the parliamentary or assembly or district level elections. *K. Henia*, is the only woman who served from 2003 to 2005 in the *Mahilla* wing (BJP) and from 2005 she served as a district councillor till 2008. From 2011 till date she is serving as the President, NPF Women Wing. *K. Matia* also held the post of Speaker of Rabunamei Village Authority Council for a term from January 2009 to September 2012. She was proposed and accepted to be the Speaker of the Council by the village elders with consensus on seeing her capability and competency. During her tenure she led every session by reading appropriate scripture passages and with prayer. The presence of a woman has helped in maintaining peace during the village assembly and transactions could be carried without much hindrance. The very induction of a woman in the village polity can be viewed as a positive change in the attitude towards women taking more public roles. Women can be a channel of change in the society. They can contribute immensely to the society if given a fair chance.

The Formation of Women Organisations

Though not directly, women's organizations at present are taking part in political and social movements towards emancipating the society from conflicts particularly armed conflicts. As a result of adoption of Christianity vis-à-vis education received, women are making headway in different fields. Now every Mao village has got women society wings both at the societal and church level. The formation of the Mao Naga Women Welfare Association (MNWWA) - the Apex body with its Head Quarter at Tadubi can be cited as an example. Cleanliness and proper sanitation were the top priorities of the first few educated Mao women who organized themselves into small groups to motivate fellow women and they made some tangible and concrete headway. The effort which started as cleanliness drive both at home and in the village culminated in the formation of the Mao Women Society which became official in the autumn of 1958. The first Association held its meeting at Kalinamei village, participated by those few educated and

dedicated Mao women with the following aims and objects laid down during the meeting:

- To create the sense of education for the women in particular.
- To make the women aware of various health aspects.
- To develop the sense of protecting women's dignity and rights.
- To educate on aspects of self sufficiency.
- To educate on women's duty at home and in the society.
- To uphold moral values and to eradicate social evils.

The association was officially registered with a Regd. No 115 of 1962-63. The first President and Secretary were *Heni Chiipfohra* of Rabunamei village and *Mathibo Kaini* of Songsong village respectively. The Golden Jubilee records of the MNWWA of Mao women, maintain about 20 presidents and 18 secretaries who carried forward the banner of the association to this day.



Presidents and Secretaries of MNWWA (1958-2008)
Golden Jubilee Celebration at Tadubi

Looking into the main activities of the Organisation, the contributions made by the womenfolk are tremendous. Some of them are listed below ²:

- Holding of general conference annually with talks and deliberations focused on welfare.
- Trainings on handloom and handicrafts, preservation of fruits, different styles of cooking etc are given from time to time.

The Women Society has played an active role in controlling the evils of alcoholism and drug menace by organizing *Nisha bandh* for even smoking in public places. It was initiated in the year 1979 and carried forward. In the year 1981 a Joint Action Committee was formed together with the Mao Students Union. The liquor prohibition program was made top priority by conducting surprise checks at vulnerable points/ areas besides imposing Rs. 500 fine/penalty to the defaulters including the vendors. The difficulties encountered, the stiff opposition made both by the buyers and sellers as well as those upholding the traditional cultural practices, etc, are worth mentioning. The sacrifice made by women to achieve the goal is tremendous. They were subjected to verbal accusations and physical assaults due to which many refrained from participation. However, in due course of time more women joined in the march for many of the families suffered or were affected by it in one way or the other. Many women got inspiration from the leaders who had dedicated their service for the betterment of the society and did come forward after experiencing the havoc created by people in a drunken state of mind. Alcoholism continued to be a nuisance and despite ugly confrontations with the abusers, the drive against anti-social activities continued and the achievement gave them satisfaction which they cherish till today.

Another important achievement of the women is educating the people on the health aspects at the primary level by enforcing construction of separate sheds for cattle as well as other domesticated animals and also encouraging construction of low cost latrines. How women's initiative has led to peace and harmony in the family, in the neighbourhood, village and society as a whole can be understood in the following paragraph.

An attitude that destroys peace and justice on Earth: "Your tradition, tradition. My tradition, law." – *Anonymous*

In the past, almost all the domesticated animals were left free to roam and litter in and around the villages and to be gathered by their respective owners in the evenings and let loose again the next day. No proper care either in the form of food distribution or housing/shelter was given for these so called domesticated animals. There were frequent deaths of the animals which was a great loss to the owner. At the same time burying the carcasses of the dead animals caused a nuisance to the villagers. The nearby vegetable gardens could not be properly cultivated as many of the animals strayed into the gardens. A lot of disputes used to arise when neighbours' animals ventured into others' vegetable gardens or into the place where paddy was kept in the sun for drying. Besides, the droppings were causing a lot of nuisance to the people. It was after in-depth discussion that a resolution was passed to keep the domesticated animals under control by constructing sheds for them. Initially there was a hue and cry when the women organization took the resolution. It is said that a lot of opposition came from different corners to oppose tooth and nail to it. However after much persuasion, the resolution bore its fruit; for today the village roads are free from the droppings and proper sanitation which was constructed at a low cost dramatically improved. The pigs when reared indoors produced a better yield hence the economic condition too improved considerably. Also, the fowls were managed in a similar manner to a great extent. With economy becoming better there were less fights or quarrels leading to peace and harmony in the family and the society. In short better rapport was established and cordial relations came into the picture. The Mao women's initiative in economic uplift and cleanliness drive gave a huge impact to the society.

To enhance the family income as well as to give the opportunity to families to sell their products and enhance their income, sales day was held twice a week at Mao and Tadubi in 1981 and continued for some years.

Not just Christians and Jews, but also Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and the followers of many other religions believe in values like peace, respect, tolerance and dignity. These are values that bring people together and enable us to build responsible and solid communities. — *Alcee Hastings, USA*

- In order to preserve the rich cultural heritage, competition on folk songs, folk tales and indigenous games were organized from time to time. Prizes were given away to motivate the participants.
- Conservation of forest was another important task taken up by the women to protect the environment.

Income at individual level was generated through floriculture. The viability of dry flower project for commercial purpose with a view to augment income generation was realized and this project was solely undertaken by women and is still very vibrant today.

Protection of women's rights and dignity is yet another important aim of the women in view of the atrocities meted out by the army. Instances of torture, detention and confinement to custody have been reported.

No mercy is reserved even for pregnant women as shown by report of an incident at Kaibi village. At Kaibi village a women was made to deliver her child in public. In May 1969 a woman named *Mahriili Asosa* from Kalinamei village was hit on the head with an iron rod when she protested against the flirtation of personals of the Indian army with her daughters. Many a times they were molested or chased by the soldiers posted at *Pfukhro*. A number of women took to heels when their modesty was outraged by these soldiers. Another incident worth highlighting is that of what happened on 12th July 1969 during the *Saleni* festival period. According to Mao customary practice all males would remain in confinement and would not venture outside their respective village on the day of the final purification rites of the males. On that day some womenfolk went to visit their potato fields at *Chibitsii* which is about 5 kms away from Mao Gate to collect yam and other vegetables. One C.R.P.F personnel who tried to molest a woman working in the field was caught by the women themselves and handed over to the police along with his service rifle containing only four bullets in the magazine. On the following morning the women were summoned to the site of the incident by the police, where the C.R.P.F commandant was present. The commandant tried to deceive

<p>Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned. – <i>Gautama Buddha, India</i></p>
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the women saying that a transaction of Rs 1500 has been made to the Women Society and a compromise reached so as to withdraw the case against the soldier. The women retorted by asking whether he was ready to settle for that amount if it was his daughter. They further emphasized that although they were mere cultivators they would not stoop to immorality even if lakhs of rupees were offered to them. Amidst railing pressures and demands the sensible women decided to hand him over to the law. The case was tried in the civil court in *Lamphelpat*. It dragged on for two years draining all the resources, time, energy etc. The women spent so much time and resources attending the court hearings with great difficulty. The case was finally and successfully won by the women in 1971 and the culprit was given deserving penalty. Besides these, women have strongly voiced against similar atrocities and the culprits brought to book. Another glaring incident which has made the army to realize the importance of the customary law was in 1982 in which another C.R.P.F personal was caught red handed for an attempt to rape a woman. This time the women took a firm stand with the moral support of men. Some of the women leaders gathered together to meet the concerned officer-in-charge to demonstrate their protest in this connection at *Tolebu*. However, due permission was not granted and moreover the officer was well guarded. Peeved by such careless attitude the womenfolk in unison managed to break through the door. But by then the concerned officer had escaped from behind. This act further infuriated the women. Their pleas went unheeded. After much persuasion the officer was made to understand the ground reality. The womenfolk then demanded the customary laws to be implemented keeping in mind the grievousness of the crime. At last the Army officer was made to yield to the women's demand and accordingly it was penned down that the present camp post at *Tolebu* be transferred and the culprit fulfil the customary practice i.e. any defaulter has to repay it with an unblemished cow to sanctify it. This was totally unacceptable to the Officer for to him, a Hindu, the cow was revered and held as deity. He pleaded that he would agree with any other except that demand. Finally after mutual understanding the case

<p>Don't reject the crooked road and don't take the straight one, instead take the one travelled by the ancestors. – <i>A Cambodian Proverb</i></p>

was settled and the paper in which the demand to be paid in the form of unblemished cow was torn off in front of his eyes to prove that the case was settled. A portion of the money which they received as penalty was given to the victim while the rest was utilised in meeting the cost incurred in the process. And the army camp was ultimately removed from *Tolebu*. This was another major achievement of their chartered demand for which the people greeted it jubilantly.



Some of the heroic women who fought for women's chastity
(1969)-Golden Jubilee Celebration

Another instance took place during the *Peace Rally* in the form of Human chain which was carried out by women under the aegis of the Naga Woman in 2000 when ***Cease Fire 'without territorial limits'*** was deleted from the clause. In this, the army who misused their power by carrying arms under cover in civil dress were apprehended and that too by the women themselves at Tadubi. After inquiring the motive behind such act and under whose supervision/order, it was finally revealed that the post command ordered so. A commotion ensued because of this as the women folk without any arms were resorting to the most peaceful means of demonstration while the government was resorting to breach of the peace. Soon after, a group of army in combat dress came to the spot and they fired their rifles several times on the ground so as to threaten the women and also to disperse the crowd. Many in the process were injured and they were taken to Kohima Naga Hospital for treatment. The Human Rights team from Kohima also came to assess the situation. One of the bullets also hit NPMHR's vehicle. It then took an ugly turn later for which an immediate removal of the Army Check

Post at *Tadubi* was demanded. One of the key informants on this issue was that of *A. Athia*³, a nurse by profession who was asked to blindly sign on blank paper. But she refused to yield to the army's demand. She firmly stood to her witness' stand and subsequently as pressure from the public became more intensified the Army Check Post was finally removed. With regard to upholding the dignity of women a reaction to another harrowing experience encountered by *A. Athia* opened the eyes of the higher authority; it was in relation to the erection of barricade in the security zone for women entering into the Treasury Office and SBI, Senapati way back in the mid 1980s. She recalls how on that day seeing the security personnel frisking the females in the open while being watched by the men-folk moved her to anger. She did not allow the lady security personnel to frisk her saying that only prostitutes allow others to touch them. Commotion began and she was taken to the then S.P Mishra. Having heard her stating her intention boldly and aptly in upholding women's dignity, the police personnel swung into action and no sooner tin barricades were erected for frisking females. Thus it is seen that we women, either collectively or individually, can contribute immensely for the emancipation of our own as well as the society. Till date the Women Body is actively involved in maintaining a congenial environment for the society.

Women in Religious Domain

The role played by women in religious sphere is near to nil. Yet it is interesting to note that women in the past performed the role of priestess in a Mao family. There are certain rites and rituals which remain incomplete in the absence of woman of the household e.g. *Feast-of-Merit*. Banee (1995:425), writes that the role of women during the feast-of-merit is rather significant in observing the *gennas* and other formalities. It is the wife who blesses the vats of wine before being distributed to the villagers for consumption.

How rites and rituals are meticulously observed by Mao women can be seen further from the following discussion. If less attention is given to such observations it is feared that this may lead to poverty.

When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace. –
Jimi Hendrix, USA

Hence women of the time paid due attention as per the customary norm. During the paddy seedling transplantation it is the women who perform the rituals. Generally as per the customary practices it is only after the traditional festival locally called *Chiijiini* held in the month of June that transplantation of paddy begins. For this on the day of the first transplantation, the women cut two tender twigs of a local tree known as *Omosii izii* and two tender shoots of a local grass i.e. *Eva izii* which are placed about 1 ft distance apart on the edge from where the transplantation is to begin. On the leaves and grass a small amount of rice with two small pieces of meat which are kept aside after the celebration of *Chiijuni* festival are packed in a plantain leave *Ole bviilo* and placed with a small gourd of rice-beer in the middle. Towards evening the wine from the gourd is poured out over the twigs and shoots and taken home with a prayerful wish that the new plantation may yield rich harvest.

Also at the first harvest, it is the wife who performs the ritual by cutting two stalks of paddy to be placed at one of the corners of the threshing ground. The grains from the stalks are removed and carried home. These few grains are then put in the empty barn. For some, the sheaf of paddy is placed at the prepared threshing ground. Once the threshing of paddy is over, she takes it and puts a grain from it in each barn with a prayer of blessing so that the *Rojii* i.e. the path ahead will be obvious and clear for the family. Also another important ritual performed by women only is *Belu koto* meaning ‘*blessing for the prosperity*’. It is a ritual performed just before the removal of paddy for the first time from their filled granary. As also mentioned in Maheo (2012:206) every year during the month of *Belu* (November) the wife goes to a particular stream and draws water in a gourd and sprinkles the water so collected in the four corners of the granary. This is generally performed in the wee hours of the day during which they are to observe total silence. Having removed a small amount of paddy in a ritual basket for the first time, she pounds it/husks it and cooks it for her own. Also whenever,

<p>I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forget their use. - <i>Galileo Galilei, Italy</i></p>

some amount of paddy has to be taken out for consumption from the barn, it is generally done by women. Removal of paddy is again done in the wee hours of the day. The mother gets up early and wears the shawl kept for this. She closes the door so that no outsider enters the house till the activity is over. She sits in her kitchen hearth seat for about a minute and then goes to the barn. If she is unable to perform the task alone any member of the family can assist her. Having removed the required amount with the help of a measuring basket she returns to the seat for a while after which her shawl can be taken off. It is observed that it is women who constantly seek blessings for the welfare of the household in particular and for the society in general. Though such rituals related with transplantation or harvest are no longer performed yet rituals related with removal of paddy from the barn is one which is still observed by the elders. In fact, in most of the indigenous societies, rituals form the basis of most activities and this is clearly observed in the Mao agrarian society. The meticulous rituals to be adhered to and the responsibilities shouldered by the Mao women are immense yet the statuses they enjoy contradict it if observed in reality. Today the meticulous traditional mode of observing the various rituals may no longer be practiced yet the air of sacredness and veneration that prevail in all her dealings pertaining to conservation of wealth – be it at transplantation or harvesting of paddy and other vegetables which are grown and harvested by the sweat of her brow is still deeply rooted.

Woman and Church

Mao women today undoubtedly hold no important official post in the church. For instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, Pope, Bishops, priests, catechists etc. and among the Baptists, Reverends, deacons, pastors are all men with the exception of one lady pastor. Yet the role played by the womenfolk is immense. Prayer, which is considered a necessity for ushering peace and tranquility not only to the individual, family, etc. but to the society at large, is effectively stressed upon by the womenfolk. They frequently organize prayer meetings sometimes

We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love ... and then we return home. – *An Australian Aboriginal Proverb*

accompanied by fasting at different levels. This has definitely brought peace as well as solidarity not only to the family but to the society at large. The Prayer Centre at *Mowzhu* is one such centre where continuous prayer and fasting are held regularly and currently it is headed by the first lady pastor, *Kahre Matia B.Th.*

In the present day, we also have a number of Catholic nuns who have chosen to dedicate their lives in the service of God and her people. As per the *Naga Catholic Theological Digest* publication (2013) there are over 85 Mao nuns serving in different parts of the world in different capacities. These groups of Mao women have sacrificed their lives for the welfare of God's people and they are the root agents in bringing about change and development in many far flung areas. Besides these dedicated women, there are a number of women rendering free services to the society at large in various capacities. In addition to other responsibilities entrusted to them significant number of lay women leaders are taking active role in the service of God and man-kind which has earned them recognition.

Conclusion

The Mao women, be it in the socio-political or religious domain, play a very significant role. The economic benefits of their efforts are undeniable. Status of women is affected by certain macro-forces such as economic development, political participation, and ideological overtones. Hence customary laws such as the allotment of parental properties only to sons should be done away with. There are numerous prescriptions, sanctions, and constraints which overtly or covertly determine the behavior of a woman. A girl is expected to be docile, non-aggressive, self-effacing. But given the situation where army atrocities are rampant such ideological value attributed to women cannot be retained. The fight for peace as well as justice has to continue so that all human beings remain free from any form of bondage. International women's day which was observed for the first time on March 8, 1911 and continues till date has yet to create an impact on the Mao

<p>Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace. – <i>Albert Schweitzer, theologian and philosopher, Germany</i></p>

society. If the Mao society has to move forward the Mao women has to be paid first attention. Although the Mao women work shoulder to shoulder with men, traditions till date bind her to remain in the age old customary practices which need to be redefined. In spite of their immense contribution the customary practices relating to negative sayings, dos and don'ts on the Mao women continue to persist. For instance, *Ochiime! kashiiko mazhiho; ochii kazheko mazhi le!* i.e. women being compared to a leaking roof. Besides, women are restrained from climbing trees or cutting men's hair or crossing over a man's leg to show that they are inferior. On the other hand, men are restrained from doing certain acts like he cannot leap under the weaving loom nor touch women's weaving articles only to show their superiority. If a woman climbs the roof top of a house, house top *genna* is imposed indicating that she has violated the customary practices. At this juncture the Mao women find themselves at the cross roads i.e. between the deeply rooted customary practices and the fast changing patterns of life. Such trivial prohibitions mentioned above should be discouraged as such practices perpetuate the subjugation of women. No doubt, the Mao women are not lagging behind in many aspects in this contemporary world. Their contribution in the socio-economic sphere as well as religious domain is rather immense. However, there are several clear indications of the fact that women continue to be discriminated in this fast changing world. Women, in short, have no right to a political authority in the Village Council, but they can be agents of bringing peace in the society. In the entire Naga political movement, it can be rightly said that Mao women braved maximum struggle owing to their proximity to the armed forces which are stationed along the AH-1 where many of the Mao villages are located. The Maos in general and the womenfolk in particular have to bear the brunt of various army atrocities, conflicts, etc., a few instances of which have been highlighted. The Mao women did play a major role in the struggle for development of the society. That the women's movement or group participation has gathered strength and brought positive change to the society is observed from their activities. In this fast changing time, the status of women in general and that of

Those who lack compassion have no eyes; who truly have eyes can't lack compassion. – *Thiruvalluvar (3-1 BC), Thirukkural 577, poet, saint, Tamil Nadu, India*

the Mao women in particular needs to be strengthened for the overall growth and development of the society. Education of women created a huge impact on the society hence it needs to be further stressed upon. The overall women's status need to be improved upon. This can come about only when we, women as individuals or group are ready to shoulder the responsibility ourselves. Women should not remain as beneficiaries but be partakers along with men. However, women can be empowered only when they are made to participate actively in the political and administrative decision making process; concretely in the form of inducting at least two women members in each village council. Women also need to take up the challenge of balancing domestic responsibility with public roles in this fast changing world. What men get as their right we, women have to fight for it. Men folk too need to change their attitudes towards their better halves if the society has to climb high; for society will flourish only if equal opportunities as well as responsibilities are shared. Let us all adopt the motto- *'Please do not walk ahead of me or behind me. Instead let us walk together. That we are the two sides of the same coin to be respected and saved by our children.'*

Recommendation

- Gender bias/inequality need to be rectified for equal participation of men and women in the decision making processes and for the progress of the society. Since the Mao Naga Women Welfare Association (MNWWA) had approached to the Ememei Council, the Mao Apex body for its participation in the decision making processes such as Village Authority Council, Ememei Council some ten years back, the MNWWA should pursue for its implementation as an important agenda.

For man the lineage title could be changed when migrating to another village. If this is so women can also inherit lineage title as customs and culture are not static but can be changed in the course of time as per convenience. The Mao women should approach the Mao Apex Body in asserting her status.

If you expect the blessings of God, be good too His people. – *Abu Bakr Siddique, the first companion and caliph of the Prophet Muhammad*

Though the rule is such that parental property inheritance is traditionally given to sons alone the same should be shared with the girl child in the family. The MNWWA should take the responsibility to make this materialize.

- Organizing Empowerment Program for both sexes can help to understand the importance of women in the society. Hence such event should be encouraged from time to time.

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Deficiency of faith on your part entails faithlessness on the part of others. – Lao Tzu (sometime between 6-4 BC), poet, philosopher, author, China

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¹Abstaining from one's normal work

²Interviewed a group of 12 women at Mao Baptist Church, Imphal.

³ Interviewed on 5th July 2014 in the district Hospital, Senapati.

Photos-Courtesy to William Nepuni

Alcoholism and Women in the Maram Society

- Kanga Dishung

Introduction

The Maram is one of the Naga tribes located in the Senapati district of Manipur. The Maram tribe shares boundary with the Mao and the Angami in the north, the Poumei and the Tangkhul in the east, the Liangmai in the south west, the Zeme in the west and the Thangals in the south. According to the 2001 census, the tribe has a population of 37,000 distributed in 42 villages. The Maram tribe is a scheduled tribe under the constitution of India and is categorized as a primitive tribe.

The history of the Maram tribe is interlaced with episodes of friction and resentment, chivalry and heroism, bloodsheds and explosions. The People are hardworking and self-reliant by nature. The ownership of land could be by individuals, families, clan or community. The main occupation of the people is agriculture, and rice is the staple food. They practice both terraced and shifting cultivation. The entire culture, social life and politics of the Maram people are centered on the agricultural cycle. Maram Khullen is the original village of the people and is significantly marked by the existence of three major divisions: (i) Lamkanamai (Khulakpa Sagei), (ii) Magaibungnamai (Mathak Sagei), and (iii) Kagamnamai (Makha Sagei). All the other Maram villages are offshoots of this original village over the years. The political administration of each village is headed by the hereditary chief; however, the functioning is purely democratic in nature.

Accumulated habits and customs manifest in the social lives of the people. Social life and community plays an important role in the life of the Maram Naga tribe. However, being a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal society, the role of Maram women is confined to running the household. She nurtures the children, brings firewood from the forest and does the cleaning, cooking and weaving work, besides cultivating

Your own Self-Realization is the greatest service you can render the world. – *Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), saint, Tamil Nadu, India*

in the garden or in the field. But when any serious matter arises in the family, the final decision is taken by the husband.

Queen Apei Hinga

In Maram society, in spite of being patriarchal, one of the unique features is that when the king dies, the wife is accepted as the head of the community and given the title “Queen” and she resumes the responsibilities of her deceased husband until the time the son is crowned the king.

When Sagong Karang, the King of the Maram, died in 1953, his wife Apei Hinga became the Queen and she held the title for 47 years till she died on 27th August 2010.

The reign of Apei Hinga is best remembered and revered for her contribution to the Maram society that made the people enjoy certain liberty to make their living easier which otherwise was strictly bound by the traditional norms and regulations. However, such liberty given to the people was not detrimental to the identity of the Maram people. For example, in the past, cultivation was done following the lunar calendar and people strictly adhered to it. During the season for plantation, until the royal family performed the ritual, no one was allowed to start the plantation. Even when monsoon set in, plantation could be delayed until the king’s family performs the ritual strictly following the lunar calendar. When plantation got delayed it led to poor harvest for the year. This restriction was removed by Apei Hinga allowing the people to perform all agricultural works according to their conveniences. Only a few pagans follow the old system now.

In another instance, the festival, ‘Mangkang’, which was celebrated mainly by the Maram women normally in the month of April, was strictly celebrated only at a place called “Makha Sagei” every year. During the festival, the women showcased their talents and vivacity. On this day, the women were taken care of and given special treatment.

Free expression is the base of human rights, the root of human nature and the mother of truth. To kill free speech is to insult human rights, to stifle human nature and to suppress truth. – *Liu Xiaobo; the only winner of a Nobel Peace Prize who could not receive it personally because he is imprisoned for his activism, China*

In the morning hours, the girls would go to the spring ponds and do the cleaning and washing while the men-folk prepared special lunch of delicious dishes for their sisters and mothers. Towards evening, after lunch, the unmarried women including young girls beautified themselves, dressed in traditional attires and gathered in a particular place from where they moved towards the main place singing and performing in unison in front of all the villagers. It was inconvenient to celebrate the festival by gathering at one particular village only. Hence, Queen Apei Hinga allowed “Mangkang” to be celebrated in any convenient place. Today, the Maram Women Union took up “Mangkang” to a larger platform and is now celebrated on a wider scale after every 3 years. The annual celebration is done at the same place and time as in the past.

Queen Apei Hinga also gave attention to the development of the community. She emphasized on empowering the people through education. She encouraged the people to pursue education.

The most significant contribution made during her reign was reducing the discrimination against and suppression of the Maram women thus enhancing the position of the women in the society. Earlier, in the Maram society, the death of a woman during childbirth was considered a bad omen. The body would be taken out of the room using wood so as not to touch the body and not through the main door but by breaking the side wall. It was tabooed to touch the dead body, and if touched, the person was regarded unclean. All the properties of the house would have to be discarded if a woman in labor died inside the house.

Therefore, a woman's labor time was crucial for the Maram people. If the women-folk who were present there to assist the delivery of the child sensed that the woman might not survive, they would quickly take her out of the house and leave her there to die. And women dying at childbirth were not given proper burial. The funeral rites for such kind of death were not usually performed by the local priest; people

Everyday people straighten up the hair why not the heart. – *Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, physician, revolutionary, author, guerrilla leader, diplomat and military theorist, Argentina*

from other tribes in the neighbouring areas were hired to bury the dead body. Such practice is known as *M'bungkatai*. This custom *was* abolished by the queen and is no longer in practice now. At present, Maram women are given proper care and treatment during childbirth.

In recognition of the commendable works she had done for the betterment of the society in general and for the upliftment of women in particular, Queen Apei Hinga was given the “Best Mother” award by the Naga Women Union (NWU) during a conference in Ukhrul.

Traditional Food and Drinks of the Maram People

Traditionally brewed rice beer called “*Jousang*” is a special beverage prepared by the Maram women, from a kind of sticky rice known as *Makirii* which is very rare, by preparing and using the sprouts of the *Makirii* itself as yeast. *Jousang* is prepared by powdering the soaked sticky uncooked rice and then mixing it with the powdered yeast. Then hot boiling water is poured on the mixture in a wooden container known as *Kokchii* and the concoction is kept for a few days (3-4 days) until well fermented and ready to be consumed. The preparation of the *jousang* is time consuming as one has to powder the rice manually; moreover, *Makirii* (a type of sticky rice) is scarce.

In the recent past, a new type of rice beer, “*Rosii*” was introduced into the Maram society from outside that has become very common as it is cheaper and easier to prepare. *Rosii* is prepared by mixing yeast to the cooked cold rice and then wrapped with banana leaves and kept in a bamboo basket for a few days to ferment; it can also be directly kept in any pot to ferment.

In addition to these two drinks, the people have started selling locally made distilled liquor and ‘Indian-made foreign liquor’ to generate income. It appears that earning of easy money in such manner have encouraged squandering and immoral behavior among the people in the society.

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day one can hear her breathing. – Arundhati Roy, novelist, environmentalist, human rights activist, India

Jousang and the Maram Society

Jousang to the Maram society is not just an alcohol beverage; it has its importance as food, festive drink, ritualistic item, a means of social bonding and identifying kin groups, a material used for legal agreement or conflict resolution.

As a Food

Jousang is used before and after every meal and is considered healthy.

Festive Drink

Every festive occasion is associated with *jousang*. In some festivals, there are specific time and norms for preparing *jousang* which has to be strictly followed. It is a taboo for menstruating women to prepare *jousang*, to be used as a festive drink, as it would be considered unclean.

Ritualistic Item

In every ritual, *jousang* is required; without it no ritual is complete. In some, the person for whom the rituals are performed is allowed to consume only *Jousang* for the entire ritual process. Mothers who have newly delivered babies are required to take only *jousang* for five days.

A Means of Identifying Kin Groups:

During the time of *kang-hi* (harvest festival), children are sent to the relatives' house with jars of *jousang* and are asked to address them accordingly as aunty, uncle, grandpa or grandma. This is how children get to know their relatives.

A Material of Legal Agreement/Conflict Resolution

After every meeting to resolve conflict and after having reached an agreement, the process is not complete until all the members present have drunk *jousang* together. It symbolizes that the conflict has been resolved.

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. – Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), politician, human rights activist, diplomat, US delegate to UN, USA

Alcohol Abuse in Present Day

Jousang has been indispensable to the Maram tradition and culture, but in the present times, the whole cultural values attached to it have lost their meanings and it has become a drink purely for entertainment and pleasure. It has also further lost its distinct name and has been identified together with the larger category, “*Ajao*” which includes all locally made, Indian and foreign liquors.

All *Ajao* (alcohol) is considered now a socializing agent, a festive drink, a drink of high class get-together, an essential requirement for any social party. In a marriage, the party is not complete without serving *Ajao*.

The consciousness about alcohol as an abusive substance is a very recent phenomena. In the traditional Maram society, alcohol abuse was never a cause of concern since people used *jousang* as a regular food item in the form of diet, energy giver and appetizer and never taken in excess. Therefore, the society lived with integrity and alcoholics were rarely found.

Alcohol abuse and rampant drinking started recently when some people in the community began to stay idle. For instance, many of the school dropouts do not go to the fields but stay home and gather together to drink almost the whole day. In the absence of proper guidance from the parents who are uneducated, the children are unable to cope up with the prevailing situation – the shift from the traditional culture to a modern culture – where education and government jobs created a new class of people who set themselves apart from the old system of farming and began to enjoy a higher lifestyle. Of late, the literacy rate of the community has increased but the practice they have been indulging in, for quite some time now, is difficult to be given up yet.

Alcohol has become a bone of contention between various sections of the Maram community. On the one hand, because of the disgusting living condition of some of the people involved in excessive drinking, alcohol has become synonymous with nuisance to the society, while

The compassionate, who care for all other lives, do not fear for their own lives. –
Thiruvalluvar (3-1 BC), Thirukkural 244, poet, saint, Tamil Nadu, India

on the other, consumption of alcohol is associated with entertainment activity of the elite group of the community, a new lifestyle considered essential for social recognition. Geared up by entertainment media, the trend of social partying with the use of alcohol and loud music began to be considered as high standard activity luring young women to join the group. This trend got in as a fashion which has divided the community along the line of class based on education, profession, peer group, etc and thus has encouraged one to be identified with one of the high groups/classes. Against this backdrop, many of the youths of today's generation including women have begun to imitate others and started consuming alcohol to fit into the higher class.

Women-Folk and Alcohol Brewing and Selling

With the growth of the so-called class in the society, the demand for alcohol has also increased. Though initially, alcohol brewing was not commercialized, some of the women took the opportunity of the high demand and so, they not only brewed rice beer but also began to sell Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) and locally distilled liquor. The sale of alcohol began to attract more women as it was more profitable than working hard in the fields. With more women involved in liquor brewing and selling, the quantity of production increased which leads to more consumption.

Under the influence of alcohol, there is a tendency for the drinkers to create problems in the family and society. The impact is more on women and children. A habitual drinker is least concerned about his responsibilities towards the needs and requirements of the family. The hard-earned money is spent on drinking, affecting the family's economy which in turn affects the education of the children. There are cases where the girl child has to give up her schooling to support the education of her male sibling. Domestic violence has also increased victimizing women and children. In some instances, this resulted in women having miscarriages. Excessive use of alcohol not only affects

I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole. – *Malcolm X, a human rights activist, USA*

the economy but it also shortens the lifespan of the users thereby increasing the number of widows and orphans.

In the Maram society, women involved in brewing and selling of alcohol are not appreciated and respected. Some women got attracted to this profession for want of easy and quick money while others took up due to lack of other options for livelihood. Whatever the reasons may be, most of the women are unaware of the larger implications it has on the Maram society and how women eventually become the victims.

The following is a case study of a woman wine vendor.

I am Mrs. Dila, 30 years old from Maram Khullen. I am a widow and unemployed, living with my daughter. I was selling wine for our survival and my daughter's education. My monthly income ranges from RS. 10000-20000/-. Before selling alcohol I was a cultivator where I found difficulties to meet my daily livelihood and my daughter's education. I have been selling alcohol for the last 3 years. This is an incident which took place on 31st August 2012. It was in the evening when I was getting ready for our dinner. A customer came in asking for wine. I told him the wine got over. I didn't want to entertain customer as it was getting dark and time for my daughter to start studying. Even after my repeated request he did not leave; he rather caught hold of my hand and pushed me towards my bed. I shouted at him but he didn't listen. As I continued to shout for help my neighbors rushed in to my rescue and caught him and handed him over to the women society. He was expelled from the village.

Selling alcohol is not an easy task as I always thought it to be. It involved a lot of risk and negative attitude from the society. I took up selling alcohol not by choice but by compulsion as the survival become so demanding. But doing so, I came across a lot of problems. So, I gave up selling alcohol and I am now running a second hand shop. The income that I get now is not half of the income that I used to get before but I am able to live a happier life with my daughter.

With time, alcohol abuse has become rampant because of which most of the families have begun to experience its consequences. Mortality rate has increased, family problems have increased and women have begun to shoulder the entire family burden while the men-folk take to drinking, neglecting all the family responsibilities.

Maram Women Union

The new trend in which the afore-mentioned social problem was crippling the society became a concern for the women-folk. In 1992, a group of women led by Mrs. Kala Carmela, founder of the Maram Circle Women Association took up the initiative to ban alcohol; it was supported by most of the Maram women. This initiative led to the consciousness of the strength that women-folk could exhibit when they come together. In this scenario, in 1994, when the Naga Women Union called for women's representatives from all the Naga tribes, the consolidation of the Maram Women took place and this eventually led to the formation of the Maram Women Union, with Ms. Rn. Hannah as the founding president, and Mrs. P. Kina Lucy as the general secretary. The first ever Maram Women Union conference was held at Lairouching on the theme "Work with Patience" on 19th January 1995 with the objective to promote culture and heritage. In addition, it was felt necessary to continue with the alcohol prohibition. The Maram Circle Women Association, a unit of Maram Women Union, became the forerunner of alcohol prohibition in the society. The women organization began to strongly implement the prohibition by door-to-door checking, destroying seized alcohol, imposing fine and also declaring names of the people selling them.

This concerted effort entails women taking stronger positions in the society, making use of public spaces, and conducting frequent gatherings and meetings among the women group. All these slowly began to empower the women thus making the organization stronger.

Limitation of Alcohol Prohibition Campaign

The women group has been, by and large, successful in reducing alcohol consumption through the campaign. However, it could not succeed in controlling alcohol consumption completely as the women group needed the support from the Village Authority, Student and Youth organizations, etc. which was hard to come by. In addition to this, unfortunately, some women did not give full support to the whole initiative.

<p>If you are neutral in a situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. – Desmond Tutu, Anglican bishop who fought against apartheid, South African</p>

The other greater challenge is the Maram culture and tradition which does not prohibit drinking of alcohol. Another challenge is the lack of consistent campaign as the leadership of the women group is time-bound and keeps changing.

Favoritism is also another stumbling block for the success of the campaign. There has also been constant conflict when leaders and public figures of the society are caught involving in violating the prohibition imposed by the women. Leaders and public figures presume that they should be out of the purview of such prohibition and therefore take it as a personal insult. Women imposing prohibition also try to avoid this category of people as they would need their help and support in some way or the other. However, the general public sees this as favoritism, therefore, making it harder to impose the prohibition.

Conclusion

Alcohol has taken its toll on the Maram people. Alcohol related mortality, family problems, poverty, etc is on the rise; and therefore, collective effort is required to encourage prevention and treatment efforts and to reduce the economic effects of alcohol abuse that the society can no longer afford. There is a greater need for the entire community to intervene and support the women folk who have been trying for the last three decades to put an end to alcoholism or at least bring some kind of harm reduction to the entire Maram people.

The different steps taken up by the women groups have proven little impact to control/stop alcohol consumption. There is a need for new ways and strategies to make the campaign more successful.

One of the women opines, “*We have sufficient land and natural resources to provide us for our livelihood. But due to lack of awareness and information on the impact of alcohol in the community and the different livelihood options that are available in our area and lack of human resource development, we continue to use alcohol production as a source of income.*”

Violence is not something that happens only at gunpoint. It is present whenever the human dignity of an individual is oppressed, ignored, or abused. – Ronald C. Arnett (born 1952), Professor in Communication Ethics and Rhetorical Studies, USA

Status of Maring Women

M. Toshilpha Seiyao

Maring is one of the oldest tribes of Manipur found in the south-eastern part of the present state of Manipur (India) bordering Myanmar (erstwhile Burma). They speak a dialect of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages and their population is about 70000. They mostly inhabit Chandel district of the present Manipur state and are found settled in approximately 94 villages but are also found scattered in other districts like Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Imphal East, Bishnupur, etc.

Terminology

The term “Maring” is derived from the word “Meiring” or “Meiringba,” which means “the people who had been keeping the fire unquenched.” Legend has it that the ‘Maring’ or ‘Meiring’ or ‘Meiringba’ obtained fire from the traditional way of making fire called ‘Meihongtang’ using dry wood with bamboo strips and dry bush/grasses. The fires thus produced are considered “Sacred” (Meikhring) and were set up at sacred places like village altar, village gates and dormitory. The belief of the Maring people in keeping the sacred fires unquenched was that they kept vigil on the villagers, village or community from the evils or evil spirits and from their enemies. This practice was continued till the dawn of Christianity in Maring land. Thus, the historical accounts of the forefathers as to how and why they called themselves ‘Maring’ or ‘Meiring’ or ‘Meiringba’ which are actually derivatives of the sacred fires they produced have been handed down orally from generation to generation.

Social Structure

The Maring social structure comprises of 4 (four) major clans namely (i) ‘Charang’ from the root clan ‘Rangmei’ or ‘Purangmei’ (ii) ‘Dangsha’ from the root clan ‘Khalserung’ (iii) ‘Makung’ from the root clan

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. – <i>Nelson Mandela, South Africa</i>

‘Kungkarung’ and (iv) ‘Tantang’ from the root clan ‘Tangkirung’ or ‘Tangkrung’. These four major clans are further divided into different sub-clans. There can be intermarriage among the four major clans.

In The Society:

Family:

Maring family is generally composed of a married couple and children with their grandparents. The Maring society is a patriarchal society and the husband is the head of the family who holds a very high status in the society. He is the one who takes decisions from the least to the biggest or most crucial matters for the family; women do not have much say in the matters. In the Maring society, the girl child/woman is mainly expected to do all the household chores and take care of children in the family. Even outside of home, in the primary or secondary sectors, womenfolk are always there sharing equal stake with the men folk. For example, they fully participate in the cultivation work, right from the beginning (cutting trees for jhum cultivation) till the end (harvesting crops and then transporting and storing them). Having embraced modern education many educated Maring women are now working in different states of India in different professions and thus supporting the parents and family members.

Village:

Women are involved in almost all the social activities of the village such as cutting/levelling house construction sites, collecting house construction materials (bamboo, thatches, etc.), gathering firewood for cooking, fetching water, ushering and serving public gatherings whenever there happen to be village functions or religious ceremonies, etc.

The Maring women are also responsible for preserving and promoting the rich culture and tradition of the community by way of carrying on the work of making or producing their rich traditional dresses

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence; adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars ... Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. –
Martin Luther King, Jr., leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, USA

and ornaments and wearing them. Almost every Maring woman has the know-how to weave various clothes like shawls, wrap-around for women-folks, wrap-around for men-folks, etc., which are richly patterned and designed according to their culture. They make different clothes for different age groups and different occasions.

Maring Women In The Customary Laws:

In the Maring society, womenfolk are put under the purview of various customary laws especially in matters of marriages and relationships:

Marriage:

Both monogamy and polygamy are found to be prevalent in the Maring society. Besides, it is found that among the Maring people, differentiation of status is intimately connected with polygyny (one man marrying many women). The first wife enjoys the highest position. She is considered superior to other wives (second wife or concubine). No formal ceremony is performed in the case of later marriages. The junior wives or non-major wives are not entitled to any separate house. In the case of levirate (marriage of a woman with her husband's younger brother when her husband dies), the deceased brother's wife will enjoy the right of a formally married wife. None of the junior wives could claim the rights of inheritance in such a situation as it is recognized on the basis of seniority.

Nu-Trun:

Nûtrûn is another peculiar tradition of the Maring people practiced till today. This is a practice in which the groom leaves his parents and live together with his wife's parents for 3 (three) years in the wife's village. This happens mainly due to the fact that the wife's parents have no son/ male child to inherit family's properties.

After all the process for the *nûtrûn* is settled, the man/boy has to stay at the house of his wife for at least three years, all the while helping

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. –
Nelson Mandela, former President and philanthropist, South Africa

his father-in-law's family as *nûtrûn* duties and shouldering the responsibilities of the family. Both the husband and the wife can also work/earn and save (cash & kind/properties) for themselves for their future, post *nûtrûn* period. But so long as they are in *nûtrûn* period, they cannot be counted as a separate family apart from the girl's family in the society/village. But as soon as the couple is freed/released from the girl's family they will be counted as a separate family in the village/society with all the responsibilities that a family in the village has to shoulder.

Betrothal and bride price:

In the Maring society, Marriage negotiation is an elaborate customary practice. Formalization of marriage takes three years. During the period of these three years, pre-marriage ceremony has to be performed three times. On the final pre-marriage ceremony, bride price is given symbolizing the final performance for marriage to be solemnized. On that day a feast is arranged at the house of the bride by the groom's party. If the girl (after the completion of all the formalities) runs away with another boy, violating the agreement, a heavy fine consisting of three *mithuns* of not less than three years old, three pigs, three chickens, three jars of rice beer and gongs of six *kāps* is imposed on the new couple. If the new husband belongs to the same clan as the betrothed, the fine is usually reduced to one-third. In addition, the boy is usually required to pay a fine of two gongs - one of seven *kāps* and the other of six *kāps* to the betrothed boy, so as to prevent him from demolishing his house. If such case happens after marriage by elopement, the imposition of fines doesn't take place.

The bride price is valued in terms of gong measuring seven *kāps* or *mithun* of not less than three years old, a sum of Rs.30/- (Rupees thirty) along with Rs.6/- (Rupees six) as a price for being fed with mother's breast milk. The gong may be replaced by cash in case of unavailability of gong with the given specification. In recent years a *mithun* along with an amount of Rs. 60 (Rupees sixty) is generally accepted as the bride price.

Harm descends on those who harm others; hence, those who wish not to be harmed, do no harm. – *Thiruvalluvar* (3-1 Century BC), *Thirukkural* 320, poet, saint, Tamil Nadu, India

Divorce:

Divorce was strictly prohibited and if it ever happened, punishment was imposed upon the concerned person according to the customary laws of the Maring people. However, divorces, although very rare, do take place in the Maring society. When any of the parties to the marriage violates the sanctity of matrimonial rules, then the other party may ask for divorce. If it is found that the grounds on which divorce is sought for are reasonable and well founded, an order for the dissolution of marriage tie is generally given. The grounds on which divorce can be sought are adultery, desertion, mutual consent, etc.

Custody of Children:

All children born to a couple belong to the husband or his clan and can be claimed by him as his heirs, in case of divorce. The wife may have the custody of un-weaned children for care and nursing but they are to be returned to the father after a lapse of one or two years or even more.

Thru-Lhuk:

Thr lhúk is the restoration of a woman to her parental family after the dead of her husband. When a daughter/sister of a man or a family is married to a man from another family or clan, and the couple remain without any issue (childless) for sometimes/many years and the husband dies leaving the barren (childless) wife with no other brothers/relatives of her husband to marry her or look after her in her diseased husband's family the woman's family can restore her back to the parents' family.

Inheritance:

The Marings follow a system of primogeniture in matters of inheritance and succession. The eldest son inherits the parental properties – both movable and immovable and it is his responsibility to give shares to his younger brothers. And if the family does not have a son (to be heir), the nearest of male kin can inherit the properties of that family. Traditionally, women are not entitled to inherit any immovable

If two men claim your help, and one is your enemy, help him first. – *A Hebrew Proverb*

property of their parents but they are given properties like ornaments, clothes, etc. However, on the generosity of her father, she may get a share of land at the time of her marriage.

Status of Widow:

There is no bar either for a widow or a divorcee to marry for the second time. A widow or widower may remarry soon after the death of the spouse, or a divorcee may remarry immediately after the divorce is granted, if he or she wishes. But it is preferred if he or she marries after a lapse of a year from the death of the spouse.

A widow with a son is treated as family. However in the absence of a son, she may be exempted from paying certain taxes and from physical activities of the village. A formal declaration has to be made to the villagers for the exemptions which are due to the non-existence of male descendants.

A widow on remarriage has to abandon all her claims to her deceased husband's properties because the said properties cannot be passed over to any other clan. In the Maring society, a widow is permitted to marry the brother of her deceased husband and in that case, she can retain all her deceased husband's properties and the properties would also accordingly remain in the same family. In case a widow, after the death of her husband, refrain from remarriage, she can sell her deceased husband's properties in consultation with clan members of her deceased husband.

If a widow who has minor kids remarries, she may take her minor children to her second husband's house for their upbringing with due approval from the deceased husband's relatives. But she and her second husband cannot claim the children to be theirs.

Women in Decision Making:

The Maring villages have always been autonomous with its own political as well as administrative set-up like any modern day nation. Each village is ruled by:

Don't gain the world and lose your soul, wisdom is better than silver or gold. – *Bob Marley (1945-1981), Rastafari singer, peace justice activist, Jamaica*

- The *Khulpu*,
- The Chief Priest called *Khullak* from the Charang clan and
- The Chief of the village who is from the *Dangsha* clan and is helped by the village council members.

The council members were elected/nominated from different clans who were understood to be able, courageous, intelligent and most of all, men of wisdom. The council members were –

- *Mantri*, who is the village secretary,
- *Meilhampu*, who leads the villagers in time of wildfire within the jurisdiction of the village,
- *Ruprak*, the Chief of Army,
- *Soupuly*, the second in command of the Maring warriors,
- *Wangkhairaks*, the seed sowers and
- *Changrui*, who help the village elders and village authorities as ushers in the village.

The frequent engagement of the Maring people in wars against one or the other kingdoms/villages made them highly honed in warfare. In the olden days the sole responsibility of the village council was to protect and safeguard the villagers and land. Thus, traditionally, Maring women did not participate in administration of the village's affairs.

However, it may be noted that even if womenfolk in the Maring society didn't participate in the decision making body they shared equal moral as well as practical responsibility at all level in the upkeeps of their respective family and community.

Conclusion:

Today, the Maring tribe is a whopping 70,000 strong people recouping every loss in terms of lives as well as social stability and developments that they endured due to their frequent wars against the provocative

We must learn to live together as brothers, or we are going to perish together as fools. – *Martin Luther King Jr., Baptist minister and activist, humanitarian, USA*

but mightier Meitei kings many years ago. The Maring people have wriggled out of the clutches of the jaws of death. They believe that they will no more fall again as it indeed is a deliverance by the Almighty God upon whom they have unflinching faith.

Time changes, so does the outlook of the human being in general. Having realized the futility of witchcraft/sorcery, the Maring people literally started mass movement towards modern education in the early nineties. No doubt, being a late entrant to modern education they have been enduring expected as well as unexpected blows and damages in the sphere of human resource development. So, the Maring women-folks have nothing much to blow own trumpets on their excellence till date. However, the fact that the innate quality attributed to the early Maring womenfolk of being hardworking, modest, trustworthy, responsible, sincere, faithful, etc. still could be seen in every Maring girl/woman today and is the source of hope for the Maring tribe in the days to come. Though the toll of being late entrant to modern education could be vividly seen today, it is beyond doubt that the Maring womenfolk can make up for all the losses incurred due to their past mistakes sooner than later .

The womenfolk's role in the Maring society is incredible. Their activities headed by the Maring Napuiya Yinglam (MNY) in the secular field and the MNBA Women Department in the religious field have been the main factor thus far for the social upliftment of the Maring women in particular and the community in general.

Though few, the Maring women's concern for humanity is beyond the boundary of their families. Association of the Maring womenfolk in the church as deacon and in the Apex Naga Organizations like the United Naga Council (UNC) and the Naga Women's Union (NWU) through some dedicated Maring women are the living proof. The incredible leap in education – secular as well as religious - of the Maring women today is giving more of a solidifying hope for the Maring women folk towards building the Maring family and society in particular and the Naga as a whole.

When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace. –
Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970), rock guitarist, singer and songwriter, USA

The Status of Women in Monsang Society

- Renie Wanglar

The roles and status of women all over the world are generally determined by social institutions and norms, religious ideologies, and class positions. It is impossible to depict the roles and status of women in a single statement. This is not an exception in the society of the Monsang tribe of Manipur too. An attempt is made here to describe the economic, social, political and religious status of Monsang women.

Introduction:

Monsang is an indigenous community of Chandel District, Manipur. The name “Monsang” was coined by neighboring communities after the name of the Chief of Ruwngpuwtung who was called ‘*Mosang*’¹. The people however, are known to themselves as “Sirti”. Monsang is one of the recognized Scheduled Tribes of Manipur. There are seven villages inhabited by the Monsang tribe viz. Liwachangning (Changning), Heibunglok (Changnhe), LiwaKhullen (Mileen), LiwaSarei (Sarei), Japhou, and MonsangPantha.

The Monsangs have a rich oral tradition which is passed down from generation to generation in the form of folk-songs, folk-tales, etc. According to the oral tradition, people were considered to have emerged out of a cave onto the earth. During their emergence, some of the people were killed by a tiger that was lying in wait near the cave. To kill the tiger, the people sought help from “*Puwraang*”/hornbills and “*Berih*”/silverbills with promises of fabulous gifts. Lured by the prospect of reaping rich gifts, these birds distracted the tiger with their dances. During that moment, brave warriors led by a person called “*Thumpungpa*” came out of the cave and speared the tiger to death. After the tiger was killed, the people followed a wagtail to a place where water was in abundance and started settling there. Thus, Monsang

Where is the justice of political power if it executes the murderer and jails the plunderer, and then itself marches upon neighbouring lands, killing thousands and pillaging the very hills? – *Kahlil Gibra, poet, artist, writer, Lebanese-American*

people started their first settlement on the earth.

Monsang society is a patriarchal society. It is divided into two distinct moieties – *Simpuwti* and *Rinnheti*. *Simpuwti* has seven lineages viz. *Ngiriiti*, *Thumlhiti*, *Kiiriiti*, *Chalhati*, *Rhanglumti*, *Eenlha Bungeerti*, and *Sherbumti* whereas *Rinnheti* has seven lineages viz. *Rohinti*, *Wanglarti*, *Thesongti*, *Hongamti*, *Shongsirti* and *Khartuti* and *Khartu Bingpiti*². These two moieties regulate marriage in the society. Marriages can occur interchangeably between the lineages of the two moieties but it is taboo within the same moiety. However in 1978, the Chiefs and elders of the Monsang villages proposed to permit intra-moiety marriage, owing to the declining population which offered fewer marriage options. But not all the lineages agreed to the proposal; so, marriage is still restricted between *Rohinti* and *Wanglarti*, and between *Thesongti* and *Hongamti*³. Accordingly, marriage between some lineages within the same moiety became socially acceptable. But marriage within the same lineage is still prohibited.

Village Administration:

Traditionally, villages are administered by village councils. The village council comprises members made up of male representatives from each lineage. As a result, women are not included in the council and thus, do not take part in the administration of the village. However, there are instances (such as village general meetings) where leaders of women society and widows are invited and given a platform to voice their opinions, grievances and make suggestions about various problems and issues relating to women in particular and the village in general.

Family Status:

Family is the smallest but one of the strongest social unit in the society. The Monsangs have a distinct system of naming their children called the non-numerical Kin Enumerative system. They have sets of masculine and feminine names.

	Masculine	Feminine
1 st born	Moti	Tinu

2 nd born	Koti	Tonu
3 rd born	Beti	Shangnu
4 th born	Angti	Penu
5 th born	Thumpa	Thumnu

In case there are more than five male or female siblings in a single family, the KE series for both masculine and feminine are repeated and marked with a suffix */-nuh/*.

	Masculine	Feminine
6 th born	Monuh	Tinuh
7 th born	Konuh	Tonuh
8 th born	Benuh	Shangnuh

As Monsang society is patriarchal, the lineage passes down within a family from the father to the children. However, a woman still retains her maiden surname even after marriage. She enjoys the privileges and rights of her particular clan and the clan she is married to, in all related customary functions.

In Monsang society, the birth of a girl-child is never unwelcome, rather it is considered as the arrival of wealth and prosperity in the family. From childhood, she is trained and encouraged to become a capable woman. As a result, Monsang women enjoy unequivocal decision-making in their families. They take decisions in the family with regard to the education of children, daily management of the house, and have much mobility.

Women also take sole decisions in passing down the female-specific family heirlooms –ornaments such as ‘*Rothii*’ (worn by ladies on the neck), ‘*Kolencho-Haar*’ (bracelets), ‘*Lashung-tumbuw*’ (material for weaving), ‘*Bekang-jekhi*’ (baskets), etc., and others that she had brought along with her when she got married. These are passed down from

A friend of God must have affection like the Sun. When the sun rises, it is beneficial to all irrespective of whether they are Muslim, Christian or Hindu. – *Hazrat Khwajah Muinuddin Chishti also known as Gharib Nawaz (1142-1236)*

mother to daughter. However, decisions related to property, land and marriage of children are still dominated by men-folk.

During '*Juwtii*' (engagement of a girl to a boy), all the females belonging to the girl's clan, both married and unmarried, receives a specially prepared meat called '*Juwrsha*' and all the mothers of the clan receives '*Manuwsha*'.

During a successful hunt, the eldest aunt (maternal aunt) of the hunter is entitled to a portion of the meat (left hind leg); the right hind leg to the elder/younger sister of the hunter. The neck portion along with the ear-lobes is given to the mother. However, if the male members do not get any kills during the hunting, the sisters usually perform a ritual by offering him chicken and '*Juw*' (wine) now replaced with tea.

Marriage:

Marriage is an elaborate process and can take place interchangeably between the members of the two moieties of *Simpuwti* and *Rinnheti*. In the past, it was incestuous to marry within the same moiety, and was strictly prohibited. In case a boy and a girl belonging to the same moiety elope and decide to live together, they are forcibly separated and are also subjected to rigorous penalty. A child born out of such relation is also killed. Nowadays, it is permissible to marry within the same moiety except those between '*Rohinti* and *Wanglarti*', and between '*Thesongti* and *Hongamti*'.

In the past, families might arrange marriage of their children without taking the consent of their children (*JuwrIkhuw*) or a boy's family might ask a girl's family for their daughter's hand if their children decide to marry (*Aminthang*). During these engagement processes, the girl had little say and all decisions were taken by her parents. If the parents of both the boy and the girl agreed to have them married, the boy's family held a formal engagement function by offering either a rooster or a pig with wine (wine is now replaced by tea) to the girl's family. That stage was called '*Juwtii*'. After '*Juwtii*', the husband went to stay at the wife's house to serve his in-laws for three years. That period of stay of the

When the rich think about the poor, they have poor ideas. – *Maria Eva Duarte de Peron, served as the First Lady of Argentina from 1946 until her death in 1952, Argentina*

husband at his in-law's house was called '*imaah-itu*'. During '*Imaah-itu*', the husband's family had to offer pigs, rice and wine three times, the stages of which were known as "*Chatha, Thangphiin and Mharsha or Min*" respectively. '*Min*' was the final offering made by the husband's family, and included the additional offering of a gong. After '*Min*', the husband might leave his in-laws' house with his wife and children if any⁴.

On her marriage, a woman was given various gifts like clothes, ornaments, weaving and farming equipments. Nowadays, she is gifted with furniture, jewelry, vehicle, and even land on her marriage. These gifts are the sole ownership of the woman.

Nowadays, Christianity has influenced the traditional marriage system and not all the stages are followed. But whether a marriage is held in the traditional way or in a Church, it is the right of the woman to be married at her home/ village.

A married Monsang woman has to find her place in her new family as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, as well as a sister-in-law. She is expected to manage the house and in some families, look after the fields as well. Though she is entrusted with many responsibilities, customs and traditions demand that she treat her husband as master and head of the family.

Divorce:

In the Monsang society, divorce is rare and heavy penalties are imposed on the parties involved in divorce. If a man divorces his wife, the wife is entitled to take back the articles given to her at the time of marriage. She is also entitled to receive half of the properties earned jointly with her husband. The children, if any, are to remain with the father. The man is further required to pay a pig and a jar of wine to the village.

If a woman seeks divorce from her husband, she is not entitled to take back the articles given to her at the time of marriage. She can take back

<p>In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of. – <i>Confucius, Educator, China</i></p>
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the articles if the man had not performed *Min* or if she can compensate for the value of *Min*.

Polygamy is also strictly prohibited. Should a man marry another woman without divorcing his wife, the wife's relatives impose upon him a penalty of one pig and one '*Juwbeer*' (*Jar of wine*). This penalty is customary and is known as '*Derpha*'. Besides '*Derpha*', the man has to divorce one of the women, and is not given any post in the village council.

Monsang Women as Guardianship of Children:

Monsang being a patriarchal society, children get their clanship from the father's lineage. In cases of divorce, the father is the custodian/guardian of the child. In case the child is below three years, the mother takes the responsibility for the care and nurture of the baby till the age of three years. During this period, she is given '*Nejuh min*' which is payment for nurturing the baby. After the child attains the age of three, the father takes custody of the child. But nowadays, it is not uncommon for a woman to take sole custody of the child. This has mostly to do with the competency of women to look after children as well as the emotional bond that exists between the mother and the children. However, the child/children continue to inherit the clanship of the father.

In cases of Monsang women married to other tribe and divorced, she is accepted to return home. Her parents or relatives are obliged to give her land but if she is not given land by her parents/relatives, she may ask land from the village council. In case she brings along her children, she has to seek guardianship of her children from one of her maternal uncles. She then, has to perform a customary function to entitle her child/children with her maternal uncle's clan. In this way, the children are accepted into the fold of Monsang society. In case a woman bears a child out of wedlock and is not married by the man, the mother can

A nice definition of an awakened person: a person who no longer marches to the drums of society, a person who dances to the tune of the music that springs up from within. – Anthony de Mello (1931-1987), Jesuit priest and psychotherapist, India

facilitate the child's adoption into a chosen clan in accordance with customary laws.

Status of Single Monsang Women & Widows:

It is the responsibility of the male siblings to look after a single woman in the family. She lives under the care and comfort of her male siblings and are usually not allowed to live on her own. Nowadays, a single woman has the right to maintain a separate house-hold and may be recognized by the village authority.

In cases where the single woman is the lone child of the parents, she may inherit the parent's property which may later on be inherited by the nearest male family member who takes upon the responsibility of looking after her in her old age.

A widow usually takes up the responsibility of looking after her children and continues to remain in her home, even after the death of her husband. The husband's clan members are consulted for their consent in all important matters especially relating to the marriage/divorce of her children. In cases where a widow returns to her parental home, she has no right over her children nor can the properties be claimed by her. A widow cannot dispose the immovable property (house, paddy-field, jhum-field, etc.) without the consent of her husband's family/ clan.

In case a widow remarries, her entire rights on property and custody of her children are given up to her husband's family members/ clan. Socially, a widow is not much looked down by others but is considered weak in the society, and therefore enjoys some consideration. Nevertheless, she takes up the responsibility of the family like any other married women in the village.

Monsang Women in Rituals:

During settlement in a new site, a woman belonging to the *Hongamti* clan is given the right to husk paddy, for the first time, in the morning. Harvesting of the season's crop must also start with the plucking of a

The great secret of true success, of true happiness, is this: the man or woman who asks for no return, the perfectly unselfish person, is the most successful. – *Swami Vivekananda, West Bengal, India*

branch of paddy by a woman belonging to *Rinnheti* moiety, preferably a woman of *Rohinti* or *Wanglarti* clan.

In the past, common burial grounds were maintained separately for the different lineages. During the burial of a natural death, offerings consisting of sticky rice, plain rice along with the meat of dog's leg and chicken meat are also buried. The preparation of the offerings is done by the oldest woman of a moiety. The woman must belong to *Simpuwti* if the dead person is a *Rinnheti*, and if the dead person is a *Simpuwti*, the woman must be a *Rinnheti*.

Nowadays, Monsangs are all Christians. Women are also given posts in the Church as allowed by the doctrine of the different Christian denominations (E.g. Deaconess, Church Board member). Rev. K. Shangkhir Elizabeth who was the first nun among the Monsang was ordained as a Reverend by the Catholic Church. Ts. Thumdin, who was the first theologian among the Monsang Women, was also the first to be ordained as the Pastor of Japhou Bazaar Church of Monsang Naga Baptist Churches Association (MNBCA).

Education of Monsang Women:

With the advent of Christianity, the need for education was felt among the Monsang people and in the beginning, only a few boys had the opportunity to go to educational institutions. Girls were then, not given the same opportunity as the boys. The absence of educational institutions in the immediate or nearby vicinity at that time also discouraged families from sending women to far places. They were then mostly confined to the farm and household works.

Nowadays, girls are also given equal opportunity in education. As a result, girls have excelled well and are faring much better. There are now many successful Monsang women employed in Government and private sectors. Some run and manage their own businesses and a few run educational institutes.

Monsang Women in Organizations:

Women in each village have an exclusive women-only society and fellowship. The former deals with social activities while the later, with Church activities. These societies have their own respective apex bodies at the tribe and denominational level. These societies helped women in honing their organizational, managerial and leadership skills. During the Autonomous District Council (ADC) election in 1972, Mrs. Ts. Shelvi of LiwaKhullen (Mileen) village contested from the 9 Pantha (then Tengenupal) constituencies in Chandel District.

Girls are also given opportunity to take leadership roles in the village youth clubs and fellowships, as well as at the tribe level along with their male counterparts.

The apex body of the Monsang women society at the tribe level is called “*Sirti Sanuw Ruh*”. It is constituted at the village level by women societies. *Sirti Sanuw Ruh* (SSR) was earlier named as ‘Monsang Society Women Union’. The then ‘Monsang Society Women Union’ was formed during a general meeting of all the Monsang village women societies on the 26th of May, 1979 at Liwachangning village. It was chaired by Mrs. W. Rarpin and the proceedings were recorded by (Late) Mrs. Ts. Florence as the recording secretary. During the meeting, (Late) Mrs. Ts. Florence was elected as President (1979-1983), Mrs. Ts. Toningamsing as Vice-President, Mrs. Ng. Rita as the General Secretary, Mrs. Th. Harmila as Vice-Secretary, and (Late) Mrs. N. Dinha as Treasurer. During the initial years, (Late) Ng. Mono, ex-MLA, was the advisor of the Union.

The Union, with its head office at Japhou village, worked to uplift the status of Monsang women and served under the motto “Ever Onwards in Unity”. During the tenure of Ts. Nirmala as the President (1983-1991), the Union was registered under the Registration of Societies (Act XXI of 1860, No.4709 of 1983 with the aim to strengthen the Union in its growth. Its growth was further facilitated during the President ship of Ng. Nirotin (1991-1996).

The earth is not thirsty for the blood of the warriors but for the sweat of man's labour. – *A Brazilian Proverb*

The Monsang Society Women Union is now officially renamed as “*Sirti Sanuw Ruh*” (SSR). The first conference of the SSR was held at Monsang Pantha village in 1999 under the presidency of Mrs. Ts. Phamdung (1996-2004). In 2009, under the presidency of Mrs. Renie Wanglar (2004 -2013), the second conference cum silver Jubilee was held at Liwa Sarei village under the theme “Excel with Culture”. The Conference showcased its rich traditional custom and ornaments and other indigenous artifacts. Folk songs, folk dances and indigenous games were exhibited.

The aims and objectives to uplift the status of Monsang women in all aspects are being carried forward by the present President Ng. Lucy (2013-2016).

Sirti Sanuw Ruh conducts various awareness programs on the importance of education and rights of women. It aims to eradicate violence against women and the girl child, and has been advocating equal representation in village administration, religious and other decision-making bodies of the tribe. It also works to uphold moral values and eradicate social evils such as drugs and alcohol abuse, etc. In addition, SSR works to preserve, promote and revitalize the rich cultural heritage of the tribe. Moreover, various workshops, seminars, and training programs to empower the women economically are conducted from time to time.

On the 30th December of 2009, the apex body of the tribe SUR (Monsang Tribe Union), in its general assembly appointed Mrs. Renie Wanglar and Mrs. Sh. Roshila as members of the Amendment Committee on the 2nd Edition of the “Regulation of the Monsang Tribe Custom and Usages”, which was released on the 19th of October, 2013. During the general election of SUR for the term 2013-2016, Mrs. Renie Wanglar was appointed as a member of the Election Commission. The Monsang women represented by the *Sirti Sanuw Ruh* Executives are given equal opportunities in decision making at the tribe level.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. – *Martin Luther King Jr., Baptist minister and activist, USA*

Conclusion:

Over the years, the status of women in Monsang society has considerably improved. Gone are the days when women were mostly confined to their home and the fields. The importance of the role of women in the society is now greatly felt. Women are now not only regarded as the pillar of the household, but of the society as well. The swelling in the number of women in the field of education is an indication of the change on the status of women. Though women are yet to fully gain a footing in the administration of the village due to customary laws, the opinions of women can now be felt reverberating in the meeting halls.

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Acknowledgement:-

- Ng. Lydia
- Sh. Roshila.
- Th. Oliver.
- Koninglee Wanglar.

Ng. Gilbert, without whose support I would not be this far



Victory breeds hatred. The defeated live in pain. Happily the peaceful live, giving up victory and defeat. – *Gautama Buddha (sometime between 6 – 4 BC), sage, born in Nepal, enlightened teacher, India*

The Changing Status of Women in the Moyon Society

- Dina Serbum

Introduction

The Moyon tribe is one of the indigenous and recognized scheduled tribes of the state of Manipur, India. The Moyons inhabit mostly in the South-Eastern part of Manipur cutting through the central part of Chandel district towards the North-East and South-East along the southern zone of Indo-Myanmar road of National Highway No. 39, which is now called the Asian Highway No. 102. When the Trans-Asian Super Highway comes into existence, Chandel district will be one of the gateways to South- East Asian countries.¹⁵

The Moyons belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of race and speak the Tibeto-Burman, a branch of the Sino-Tibeto group of language¹⁶. Although comparatively small groups among the tribal communities in Manipur, the Moyons have their own distinct identity, rich traditions and cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. 'Bujuur' is an indigenous name of the tribe but they are popularly known as Moyons. The term, 'Moyon' was given to them by the outsiders as clearly indicated in Ningthourol Lambuba.¹⁷ It was recorded that a certain traveler known by the name Poiraiton, who was a contemporary of Pakhangba, and his wife disguised as hill-men passed through one of the Moyon villages. Unfortunately they were so hungry that they sold their Moithap (a spinning instrument) to get food. Henceforth, the people came to be known as Moiyol or Moyon. It was derived from the term 'Moithap Yollami' meaning 'sold Moithap'. They were called in the past as 'Mueeyol' by the British officers.¹⁸

15 <http://chandel.nic.in>

16 Moyon Naga Conference, 1937-1937 Souvenir of Golden Jubilee, 9th-12th Feb. 1987, Komlathabi, Manipur, 1987

17 O. Bhogeshwor Singh (ed), Ningthourol Lambuba, Imphal, 1967, P.272-273

18 Pemberton RB, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, Calcutta, First Impression 1835, Second Impression 1966, P.58

There are seventeen Moyon villages in Chandel district, Manipur. They generally live in small scattered areas. Geographically the Moyons are surrounded by the Marings in the North East and by the Anals and Lamkangs in the Southern parts. The Moyons live side by side with the Monsangs. Some of them also settle in the border area of Burmese Union (Myanmar). Other neighbouring tribes are the Chothes, Taraos, Aimols, Kukis and Koms.

The original village of the Moyons is *Khungjuur* (Khongjon), a historical village related to the history of the Moyon people. The great legendary King of the Moyons, Nguwruw Kuurkam once ruled over the land. He was known to the Moirang King as Konggam Ningthou alias Shamsaang Shakphaba. He was brave and skilful in the art of warfare. His kingdom roughly extended from the Kabaw Valley in the east to the south-eastern hills (now Chandel district). The Moyon's oral history has no account of any conflict between them and other kings of the time. But his reputation was certainly a great threat to the then Moirang king. Both the Moyon and Moirang kings were not strangers. Out of fear of being attacked, the Moirang king thought it best to attack the Moyon king first at any time and place of his choice. Accordingly, the Moirang king with his army advanced till 'Phenchong' (the present Chandel district headquarter), where he succeeded in enticing the Moyon king to fight him at a spot where a concealed trench was dug. King Kuurkam was betrayed and treacherously put to death. Thus, the life of Moyon king and his glorious kingdom came to an end. Following the defeat and death of their king, the demoralized and insecure Moyons started fleeing in many directions. In fact, it signified the beginning of disintegration and assimilation of the Moyons to other communities. *Khungjuur* (Khongjon), the capital village was eventually deserted completely.

Traditionally it is believed that after the battle with the Moirang king, the escaped Moyons mingled with other tribes hiding their identity. It

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character. If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world. - *Confucius, philosopher, educator, China*

is also said that the majority of the Moyons fled to different areas with resolute decisions never to return to their land. Such was a disaster for the once glorious tribe. However, in due course of time, some of the Moyons returned back and settled at Khungjuur. However, with the coming of Christianity again, most of the people migrated to the encircling regions of the Khungjuur village.

Moyons do not have caste system. They are homogenous and consist of many clans. The grouping of clan is well defined in Moyon society though they are complicated in nature. There was no written literature on Moyon marriage system but they still follow a well established canon. Marriage practice is guided by traditional customs. Clan system is the fundamental social fabric of the tribe. Every aspect of their custom and culture is normally based on it. In one way or the other, grouping of clan is the centre of their unity and division too. Marriage, as the oldest institution of humankind, is absolutely based on clan system among the Moyons. Marriage within the same clan is highly restricted. Polygamy is strictly forbidden among them. Child marriage is not practiced. Re-marriage is allowed for the divorcees and widows.

Moyons were divided into two exogamous moieties – Shimphuwti and Ziingven having six clans each. They are:

Shimphuwti

Nguwruw/Ngoruw

Laanglom/Langlom

Charii/Chara

Serbum

Bungjeer

Suwnglip

Ziingven

Chineer/Chiniir

Nungchim

Ruwen/Roel

Waanglar/Wanglar

Khartu

Hungam

However, on the 31st August 1950, the ‘Shimphuwti’ was divided into two exogamous groups to widen the marriage circle, as inter-marriage

Provide yourself with a teacher and acquire for yourself a companion; and judge every person sympathetically. – *Joshua ben Perachya, Jewish scholar, Ancient Israel*

within the same clan was strictly forbidden. For the similar reason, the 'Ziingven' was also divided into two exogamous groups on the 21st March 1978. Thus, there are four exogamous groups in the Moyon society today.¹⁹ They are as follows:

Nguwruw/Ngoruw and Laanglom/Langlom

- Bungjeer, Chara/Charii, Serbum and Suwgnlip
- Chineer/Chiniir and Nungchim
- Ruwen/Roel, Waagnlar/Wanglar, Khartu and Hungam

The exchange of marriage takes place between these four exogamous groups. The traditional Moyon marriage starts with the 'Juktuw' i.e. marriage proposal, where the parents of the boy secretly visits the girl's family at night to ask for her hand in marriage. Upon acceptance by the girl and her family, they are recognized as husband and wife and considered legitimate to start a family. The Moyon society follows a matrilocal custom where the bridegroom must stay at the bride's parental house for three years. Living with the wife's family for three years is known as "*Imah Itu*". All his earning during this period goes to his parents-in-law. This enables the parents-in-law to ensure that their son-in-law is a capable and caring person as well as a good provider. This 'imah itu' practice has become obsolete now. In the course of the three years, the 'Imah' (son-in-law) had to organize a feast called 'Chaara-Itu' where he had to serve his parents-in-law and male relatives of the bride with meat, rice-wine and sticky rice. The last vital customary function was the 'Men-Itu' feast. During this function, the groom's family prepared meat and rice-wine which were properly distributed among the bride's family members and others e.g. ampa tuwng (share for father-in-laws), amnuw tuwng (share for mother-in-laws), shakam (share for brother-in-laws), zuwrsha (share for sister-in-laws) etc. The bride was presented with gifts i.e. mostly household items by her family and relatives as she left her parental house after three years.

19 Shangkham, Gina. (1995). "A Brief Account of the Moyons", in Sanajaoba, Naorem (ed.), Manipur Past and Present. Vol. 3, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.

Socio-Cultural and Political Background of Moyon Women

The Moyons are patriarchal, patrilineal and follow patrilocal system. Naturally, these principles lean towards male dominance in all areas of activities, except in that of the household management. The wife is the undisputed manager of the household no doubt, but her authority within the household is subordinate to the decisions of her husband. There is a saying among the Moyons “*ruwpanuw arae ommah*”, meaning women have no specific clan affiliation. Their clan affiliation changes with marriage, denoting their inferiority to men. No woman has any right to inherit her parent’s property even if she is the only child. Yet, she is expected to do all domestic chores right from her tender age, while the boy of her age group would be free from such duties. However, she is free to marry a man of her choice but she should not initiate the marriage proposals as it is considered unfeminine. She may divorce her husband or vice versa on reasonable ground.

The basic unit of Moyon society is the family. In ancient Moyon society, joint family was the existing norm. But today, most of the families are nuclear consisting of only the parents and children. The role of women in the day-to-day life and the Moyon society is tremendous; however their potentials are still unrecognized by the male dominated society. Equality of both genders, as provided by the constitution of India, is only an ideal as the old customs and traditions still reign supreme. Besides, women are always equalized with children. The phrases “*ruwpanuw naepangchong*” (literally meaning words of women and kids) and “*ruwpanuw naepangnong*” (duties of women and kids) etc. are clear indications of their position in the society.

Traditionally, the Moyons’ main occupation is cultivation. Women were hard working, so they played great economic roles in their families. Besides their endless domestic chores, they were engaged in agricultural activities right from the first stage of the jhum cultivation i.e. felling of trees till harvest. Weeding was also mainly done by women. Weaving

Arrogance creates a mental block preventing you from taking good advice. Humility allows you to open up, seek advice and imbibe knowledge. – Mufti Menk, Head of the Fatwa Department of The Council of Islamic Scholars of Zimbabwe, Africa

is an important occupation of the women and till date it is exclusively done by them. Usually girls start learning the technique of making clothes from early age. From ancient times, Moyon women have performed duties and task as a normal part of their responsibilities. They performed an array of duties ranging from household tasks, collection of fuel and water, tilling of land, looking after the domestic animals, taking care of their families' health, and contributing to productive and income generating activities of the household. Women's workload and responsibilities are increasing while their status remains the same.

In a traditional Moyon administration, the women are never taken into account. Far from being permitted to participate in the village administration, they could not even share their views with their husband as it was considered not their business. The women are to obey and not to question. On no account are they permitted to be present at the village Council meeting except when required as witnesses to give their testimony for or against those involved in the case. In the past, installation ceremonies of the members of the Village Council except those of the top five ranking councilors were done in a closed-door session exclusively by the village elders. Women were not allowed to participate in such ceremonies.

In olden days, there was no organized form of worship among the Moyons. '*Ynthe*' i.e. ceremonial rites were performed for the sick by traditional healers known as '*Ithiim*'. This particular profession was however, not the monopoly of man. Some women in fact proved to be great '*Ithiims*' and their names are still remembered in awe. The women *Ithiims* however, were not allowed to perform the village customary rituals. Even in this profession, their talents were not accepted on par with men. Though life was practically impossible without them, the women were placed in a lower position socially, politically, religiously and economically. And women too accepted their position and played their roles dutifully.

Before the advent of Christianity and education, indigenous medicinal

What the world need today is neither a new order; a new education, a new system; a new society; nor a new religion. The remedy lies in a mind and a heart filled with holiness. — Sai Baba of Shirdi, spiritual master, Maharashtra, India

plants were used for healing the sick. The people believed that illness was caused by some evil spirits. Illnesses and diseases were considered to be the influence of some evil forces. So the evil spirits had to be appeased by performing some sacrifices by *Ithiims*. But Christianity and education have liberated the people from such beliefs and superstitions. Today, pastors and priests pray for the recovery of the sick. A new confidence has cropped up in the minds of the people, a new approach to sickness and healings. Knowledge of sanitation and hygiene has also brought new understanding to cleanliness and healthy living.

Traditional Prohibitions and Taboos for Women

- Women are not allowed to be members of a village council
- Women are forbidden to climb trees
- Women are not allowed to touch a bow
- Women are forbidden to touch the shawls of men
- Women's clothes are not allowed to be washed by men
- Women are not allowed to dig graves
- Women are prohibited to go hunting and do blacksmith work
- Women are not allowed to plough fields
- Women are not allowed to step over the tools used by men
- Wives are not to step over their husbands while sleeping
- Maidens should not initiate marriage proposals
- No memorial stones are allowed to be erected for deceased women
- Women are not allowed to perform Ikam. However, there is an exception to it as documented in the Khuwngla i.e. Moyon traditional folk songs – Tunuh, a Moyon woman performed 'Ikam'.

No memorial stone was erected for the deceased men and women except

The generation that destroys the environment is not the generation that pays the price. That is the problem. – *Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize 2004, Kenya*

for those men who performed not less than four “Ikam ceremonies” i.e. a grand feast given to all after a bumper harvest to enhance their prestige. Moreover, a good quality plank was erected for their wives. Wooden poles and planks of inferior quality were erected for other men and women respectively.

In spite of the traditional prohibitions and taboos, the Moyon women were given the privilege of ‘*Buwren apehnuw*’ i.e., ceremoniously performing the first act of harvesting during the ‘*buwrenpeh* festival’. ‘*Buwrenpeh*’ is a traditional festival of harvesting the paddy and storing the basket of paddy into the granary. The women should be chosen from the *Ziingven* clan provided there was no misfortune in her family in that particular year. Only after that, the villagers performed the ritual for their respective families. It was believed that when such a woman from *Ziingven* clan harvested the first grain, there was fertility of soil, productivity of crops and no lack of food grains in the village throughout the following year. In the evening, the village elders gathered at the *Buwren apehnuw*’s house and celebrated the occasion eating, drinking and singing. However, at present the significance of *Buwrenpeh* festival is observed in the church as *Buwrenpeh* Thanksgiving in every Moyon village.

Contemporary Issues and Moyon Women

The impact of British colonization reached the remote areas of the North Eastern part of India. The four Moyon villages of Khungjuur, Nungtheeng, Matung and Bujuur Khuwfuw were affected by the Second World War. The presence of both the British and the Japanese troops brought psychological fear and tension among the villagers. Their normal lives were disrupted and disturbed by the physical presence and stationing of the soldiers in and around their villages. The people witnessed exchange of fire between the enemies. Dropping of explosives and planes flying over their land frequently disrupted the peaceful existence of the villagers. Children could not attend schools. People hardly went out for cultivation, food gathering, wood collecting, hunting or fishing. Their daily livelihood and activities were hampered.

The people lived in extreme anxiety and fear. Women folk who had encountered this experiences, would often narrate their wartime events with fear and sadness. According to them, it became a necessity to eat their dinners as early as possible before dark so that they could hide in the bunkers or trenches they dug for shelter and protection. Even today, some of these old women are so much habituated that they would make the younger family members eat early, a habit they acquired during the wartime.

In the 1960s, due to the Naga struggle, the Matung, Khungjuur and Riinong villages were militarized. It was during this time that the Government of Manipur formed the Village Voluntary Force (VVF) to counter the Naga national workers. Village men were beaten and interrogated for no fault of theirs. Women and children were also not spared in the harassment. They experienced untold hardships and fear. The people could not cultivate paddy or crops for one full year. Meanwhile the public were sandwiched between the two sides, with no voice and unaware of their human rights. Due to this conflict many villagers were compelled to leave their villages and they migrated to other Moyon villages, where they continued to struggle in the new environment.

Again in 1991-1992, another three Moyon villages – Menkang, Menkang Khunkhah and Bujuur Khuwfuw suffered the ethnic clash severely. Being in the border of India and a small tribe, the Moyons experienced fearsome unwanted incidents of bloodshed, torture, abuses, violation of human rights and unwarranted arrest. Thus, the people left their villages to escape from death and settled at Kapaam (Komlathabi) and its surrounding villages thus rendered homeless, landless, jobless, scattered, and forced to become labourers. This group of internally displaced people had a very peaceful normal life before the ethnic conflict. They had sufficient land for cultivation, were rich in forest products and had a good source of income in the sale of fishes collected from their region. With all the rich resources and basic educational facilities, the atmosphere was peaceful and safe. But now they have no

independent access to residential rights or employment. The women are subject to gender bias and face discrimination in all areas. They had encountered bloodshed, extreme fear and poverty which result in the decline of human dignity. Along with that, the traditional values that accorded high status to the Moyon women decline as well.

It is therefore imperative that women and minority issues be broadened to include the distinctive experience of these displaced women. Today a gulf exists among the Moyon women because of the imbalances they face in the area of health care services, and unequal opportunities for their education and livelihood. The internally displaced people are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable section of people among the Moyons as they are not included in decision making-process thereby depriving them of their fundamental human rights and freedom. Access to their ancestral land is still a far cry till this day. A totally new way of life was imposed on them. Besides being deprived of their ancestral land and other means of livelihood, the right to education, which is the basis of all development, has become a bygone thing.

The Moyon cultural attachment and livelihood dependence on land, forest, water and natural resources therein are the repositories of tangible and intangible wealth. Traditionally the displaced Moyon women were endowed with generous, receptive and welcoming qualities. But it is extremely difficult to maintain those good values when the situation of the past no longer exists. They have no resettlement till date. Therefore, these internally displaced Moyon women today are certainly at the crossroads-between troubled as well as glorious past, and disrupted present and uncertain future.

Moyon Women in Transition

The factors that brought about socio-cultural and political changes in the Moyon society are many such as the British colonization, development of transport and communication, introduction of education, Christianity, contact with and exposure to the outside

<p>God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: he makes saints out of sinners.- <i>Soren Kierkegaard, Denmark</i></p>

world, imitative tendency of the people etc. However, in bringing about changes in the Moyon society, the most effective factors were the introduction of education and the spread of Christianity. Today, almost a century has passed since the introduction of education and Christianity to the Moyons. The days of missionaries and the early period of conversion were days of dynamic socio-cultural changes. The work of missionaries and early converts were also noteworthy.

A society is subject to change through various contacts and interactions. No society remains stagnant. Every society goes through changes. *Moyons* are fast giving up their old customs and adopting a new mode of life. Many of their present customs are mixtures of their old traditions and external influences. Great changes have taken place in the social, economic and religious life. The process of encountering people from different cultural backgrounds has dwindled the *Moyon* traditional culture and values within decades, and “cultural shift”, a phenomena in which societies change their cultural patterns such as patterns of thought, language, behaviour, customs and values²⁰ has taken place.

In the past decades, the *Moyons* became the forerunners particularly in the field of education in the Chandel district due to the acceptance of Christianity and modern education a bit earlier than others. Today, the majority of the Moyon women are literate and a large number of them are working in different professional fields. Their occupational structure is of mixed nature now from that of being dependent solely on agriculture and this has facilitated to improve their socio-economic condition to a great extent.

A Watershed in the History of Moyon Women

The transitional phase of the women began with the movement of spiritual awakening, conversion and spread of the good news that engulfed the villages of Bujuur Khuwfuw, Khungjuur and Matung. Many objections were raised by the older folks. The women section faced the worst situation when they wanted to receive education and

20 Roel Margaret and Wanglar Alphonsa, “Importance of preserving and promoting Moyon indigenous culture”, BSR Diamond Jubilee Souvenir, 2015, kapaam, p.50

embrace Christianity. Despite the discouragement, warnings and severe punishment, they persevered and laboured to achieve their goal. Their love for Christianity and education increased tenfold. The early Moyon Christians took the initiative of imparting education to their own people by opening a school for the first time at Chiikuk in 1925, and passing a resolution at the Moyon Society Meeting on the 16th February, 1937 at Khungjuur Khungthak village that parents who refused to send their children for education would be fined. Such was the enthusiasm of the people in the new development, that from 1930s to 1940s some of those early educated Moyon women were sent to different neighbouring villages as preachers, teachers and helped in spreading the message of Christianity and education among the other tribes of Chandel area.

The coming of the Roman Catholic denomination in the district saw another conversion and today, the Moyons are all Christians belonging either to Baptist or Catholic Churches. The latter ushered in a new era in the field of education by providing new and better facilities. The teachings of the Christian doctrine gave emphasis on gender equality and new value system. Christian women societies were formed to further uplift the women and develop of the Church.

A New Chapter in the History of Women Civil Society

The Moyon Women Organisation known as the ‘Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh’ was the outcome of the women’s realization of their responsibilities to enhance the development of women and to examine their position in the society. Conversion to Christianity, education, contact with the missionaries and other tribes broadened the political outlook and mindset of the Moyons. Shapa Berang Chara, one of the early young educated Moyons took the initiative to organize the Moyon women and formed the Moyon Women Society in 1940 at Khungjuur village.

The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good, is my religion. – *Thomas Paine (1737-1809), journalist, political theorist and activist, USA*

Profile of Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh:

Year of establishment: 1940 at Khungjuur village, Chandel

Founder/Initiator: Shapa Berang Chara

First Office bearers: President, Shanuw Chongnoubi Serbum
Secretary, Shanuw Tusha Roel

Motto: “Promote cultural values”

Emblem: “Naenthu-naenteh”

Depicting indigenous rice steaming method
(symbolizes home building)

Vision: To achieve a just and sustainable society

Mission: To uplift the society in all aspects by encouraging education for all, promoting indigenous/traditional and cultural values, empowering the women by organizing awareness programs, seminars, trainings, workshops, conferences etc.

Update report: Inclusion of women in the Moyon Apex body,
Divorce alimony granted in the customary law

Number of Moyon Village: 17

Number of women population: 1,905 (a little more than half of the total population)

Portrayal of women in folktales: Juurbuw (faithful wife of Laangam Thangtah)

Unfortunately, in the early part, the women organization was greatly hampered from functioning and it became defunct due to the Second World War as the Moyon villages were affected during the war time. The organization lay in hibernation as the activities



of women were constrained by the war. However, it was re-organized in 1953 in the same village with Shanuw Chongnoubi Serbum as President

When a cat wants to eat her kittens, she says they look like mice. – *Kurdish Proverb*

and Shanuw Tusha Roel as Secretary. During the re-organization of the Moyon Women Society, the organization was then formally bifurcated into two specified bodies, one under the church called the Moyon Women Fellowship and the other known as the Moyon Women Society in the overall civil set-up. The main objective remained the upliftment of the status of women by doing away the discriminatory traditional customs pertaining to women. Their main activities were organizing annual meetings for the betterment of the society and reviving the traditional attires, ornaments, accessories which were discarded and disappearing with the change of religion. Those days, they encouraged women to be active in sports and games and they often played games like volleyball, and even football. The women society prohibited brewing and drinking of liquor in every village. They also took up the responsibility of preventing and discouraging immoral activities among the people in their respective villages and thus rendered their services in solving social problems.

The Moyon Women Organisation gave great effort to uplift the status of Moyon women. It functioned smoothly achieving a lot of progress through mutual cooperation among the units. These Moyon women pioneers were indeed far sighted in their perspective to promote and preserve the traditional attires. As such, in the same year 1953, when the activities of the women society were resumed, the Moyon traditional Inih (sarong) with patterns known as the “Tudeen Inih” was designed and woven by two Moyon shanuw (ladies) Florence Roel and Leiningam Chara. Among the various Moyon Inih, Tudeen Inih is the most popular and is accepted as one of the original Moyon Inih (Sarong) along with Changkak Inih, Laengki Inih, Poih ynghir Inih, Lumuw ruwngven, Khuw-ngiir-nuw Inih, Ynghir Inih and Lamtaang Inih.

To encourage and emphasize on weaving for promoting the Moyon attires and to reach out to the maximum women population in particular, the women organization was registered under the Registration of Societies Acts, Government of Manipur as the Weavers’ Co-operative Society in 1955. The newly registered society’s activities

were then carried out under the leadership of shanuw Pedang Chinir and shanuw Ngamnu Chara²¹. Henceforth, women could produce an extensive number of traditional dresses and attires for both men and women. They could also explore and experiment their creativity in bringing out various modified designs and patterns of Moyon sarongs and shawls in a remarkable quantity and quality.

Other important activities of the women society were: In the year 1965, the organization extended financial assistance in printing the first Edition of Moyon Christian Hymnal. Further they also contributed in the publication of another book called “Ichuwnii Labu” (Moyon composed songbook) in 1978. However, the women society could not continue their activities for many reasons. Though the women organization remained inactive for a number of years, it was revived on the 22nd June 1986 at Kapaam. With the revival of the organization, the Moyon apex body (Moyon Naga Council – MNC) which is called today as “Bujuur Aanchung Puh (BAP) recognized the Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh as an apex Moyon women body. It became a federal unit of the Naga Women’s Union (NWU) in 1994. Besides the previous objectives of Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh, more purposes were added to empower women, to preserve and promote traditional attires, ornaments and other indigenous artifacts.

Another milestone in the history of Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh is the official declaration of the various Moyon Traditional Inih (Sarongs) and designers as shown below –

Name of Inih.	Designer(s)	Year
Changkak Inih	- - - - -	-----
Laengki Inih	- - - - -	-----
Poih Ynghir Inih	- - - - -	-----
Lumuw Ruwngven	- - - - -	-----

21 Gachui, Rangya, Development Perspective of Moyon Tribe, DHP, 2007, Imphal, Manipur

Khuw-ngiir-nuw Inih	- -----	-----
Ynghir Inih	- Shangraeh Ngoruw	-----
Lamtaang Inih	- Tothang Ngoruw	-----
Tudeen Inih	- Florence Roel & Leiningam Chara	1953
Kungkung Inih	- Ningkhuwm Roel	1976
Shungnungpaar Inih	- Wanichung Ngoruw	1980
Tengpi Inih	- Ngamnu Chara	1990
Tongtingpa Inih	- Ngamnu Chara	1990
Duupzihi Inih	- Ngamnu Chara	1990
Aarshuumpa Inih	- Shangtin Chinir	1995
Kungbeng Inih	- Phanitin Wanglar & Deensha Roel	1995
Kuurki Inih	- Dr. Gina Shangkham & Chanbini Ngoruw	1996
Laarki Inih	- Shining Chara and Deensha Roel	1996
Changbom Inih	- Nani Nungchim	2007
Riikii Inih	- Ringthar Chinir & Ringningwar Ngoruw	2009
BSR Diamond		
Jubilee Inih	- Ngaini Ngoruw & Pekham Ngoruw	2013
Nijae Inih	- Agnes Ngoruw and Marina Ngoruw	2013

Conclusion

Like other indigenous communities, women in the past were considered the weaker gender and their rightful places were denied in the society. With time and changing perspective, Moyons have realized the need to empower women to transform their society based on the values of humanity, dignity, justice and respect. The Moyon society cannot

Four things come not back – the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity. – *Arabian Proverb*

be fully developed without tapping the unexplored resources of their women who constitutes a little more than half their population.

Despite the age old subjugation of women socially, economically and politically, the status of Moyon women has witnessed profound improvement. Unlike the beliefs of ancient times, women are now the promising hopes and prides of the families in the community. Traditions regarding many areas of women's lives are still there in principle; however most of the restrictions on them are fading. Today in most Moyon families, women are now given the opportunity in educations, employments, inclusion as well as participation in religious affairs and civil organisations, if they are found capable and suitable. They have been granted the right to vote and some have become executive members in the Moyon apex assembly. Notably, a women assembly speaker was appointed in 1997.

At the same time Moyon culture is under threat from many angles because of which their society is now turning into a different phase of development. The present reality of the women is living in a state of confusion without articulated culture, future and identity. The fear is, will there be traditional values to keep women identity intact? Where will women be in the coming generations? Moreover, some looming questions are whether the voices, realities and experiences of women would be allowed to be expressed in the wider public sphere? Are the Moyon women really enjoying their status in making decisions at home, in the church, or in the society? Is there justice and equality with regard to domestic violence, property inheritance and health care?

We need to reconsider the present scenario of our society wherein the values of life are degrading, human right violations are rampant and gender discrimination still exists, so as to build a dignified status for both women and men. In this fast changing global scenario the role of women has become more important in building up homes, societies and nations. They have become the guardians of their cultures. Therefore, the Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh (Moyon Women

<p>“True greatness and true glory is attained through – humble service and humility”</p>
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apex body) had appropriately chosen the theme **“Building our homes for posterity through culture”** for the BSR Diamond Jubilee held in 2015 at Kapaam (Komlathabi). Indeed, Moyon women have a long way to keep pressing on, through continuous learning, to be relevant and vibrant in the present context and the coming future.

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Upa Beshop Nguwruw, former Kapaam village counsellor

Your self-realization is the greatest service you can render the world. – Ramana Maharshi, India
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Upa Roel Jindashing, former President BAP

Shanuw Dr. Gina Shangkham, Advisor BSR

Shanuw Ngamnu Chara, former President BSR

Shanuw Shining Chara, President BSR



Written laws are like spider's webs; they will catch, it is true, the weak and poor, but would be torn in pieces by the rich and powerful. – *Anacharsis, Greece*

Perspective of Women Leadership in Poumai Community

- L.M. Tabitha Trumy

Introduction

The word “Poumai” is derived from two syllables ‘Pou’ and ‘Mai’. The literal meaning of ‘Poumai’ means ‘descendant of Pou’. As legend has it, along with the rest of the Nagas, Poumai dispersed from a place called Machapfi (now popularly called Makhel but also known as Makhrefii) to their present villages.

The Poumai is one of the major Naga tribes living along the northern border of Manipur and eastern border of Nagaland. According to the Indian Census Report of 2011, the population of Poumai is about 1,87,180 in Manipur and 10,000 in Phek district, Nagaland, and spreads over 78 villages where 74 villages fall under Senapati district of Manipur and 4 villages in Phek district of Nagaland.²²

The role of women in Poumai society encompasses a wide range covering economic, social, cultural, and, to a certain extent, political spheres. Within the Poumai society, a girl begins shouldering domestic responsibilities very early on. By the time she turns 6 or 7 years, she starts helping her parents in domestic chores like collecting firewood, fetching water and even preparation of food for the family. Besides, a girl helps her mother in cleaning the house, cleaning utensils and, in case of having younger siblings, the girl child is expected to take care of them too. As she grows older, she also participates in cultivation and contributes to other livelihood activities of the family. Till the time of her marriage, a girl extends continuous help to her parents in the day-to-day works.

While much of their contribution is not recognized or acknowledged, women play very important roles in the management and running of the household. She is responsible for organizing labour and oversees the central task of cultivating fields. Usually, financial earnings

22 Census (2011), Registrar General India

from vegetable products and domestic animals and yearly harvest is entrusted to and controlled by women. Thus, women undertake very critical economic roles. Also, in the event of shortage of food grains and other essential commodities required for the family, women through borrowing and bartering play central roles in securing the needs of the family.

Despite their significant contribution, women are not given equal recognition as their male counterparts. However, there are also practices which indicate that the Poumai society hold women in high regard. For instance, during the annual *Lounih* festival, a married sister is honoured and remembered by her brothers and other relatives from her clan with *Sounii*, a gift pack consisting of the best meat, wine and other items. Apart from this, parents and brothers would always ensure that the sister gets at least one fourth share of any game meat, and that she is obliged to be invited to all the family ceremonies and feasts.

To better understand the situation of women within the Poumai society, we shall discuss some of the practices, gender roles and responsibilities, social attitudes, and how these have changed or evolved over the years.

Traditional Domestic Life of Poumai Women

Traditionally, *Morung* is the most important institution for young men and women in Poumai society. It is the learning and cultural centers where members are taught different life skills and etiquettes. Discipline and respect are hallmarks of the *morung* system. It also serves as a repository of knowledge. Older peer groups would also transmit stories to the younger ones in the *morungs*. For a society that has an oral tradition, this served the very important role of transmitting knowledge and history of the people. These *morungs* extend maximum opportunity to each member for social interaction and exposure.

There is a specific age for a child to join the Morung. When they reach the age of six or seven, the parents prepare the child to join the Morung by performing the initiation rites, *Mochazii and Alao*. To perform

But what is liberty without wisdom, and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint. – Edmund Burke (1729-1797), statesman, author, orator and philosopher, Ireland

these rituals, all the things required for the ritual have to be fresh and new – fire, hearth, firewood, utensils, pots, wooden plates, spoon, etc. The usage of new things symbolizes the fresh and virgin members' entry into the *Morung* which meant adding vigor and strength to the image and stature of the dormitories. During their ritual performance, the girl child and the boy child get blessings from their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and the elders of the clan that good fortune may follow them all through their life.

After the initiation rites when the child attains the age of 11 or 12, they join their respective dormitories – *Louchi* for girl and *Threichi* for boys. In some cases, they set up a new *morung* if decided among themselves.

The *morungs* also follow a code and routine for activities. Normally, there is a time set for performance of different activities in the village in a year and no *morung* is permitted to organize games and other activities according to their whims and fancies.

The one who develops skills to the fullest is naturally accepted as the leader and command respect in the society.

The girls learn handicraft, weaving, spinning, designing of motifs, dance, music and songs. They form the major portion of their activities in the *Morung*. One of the most popular and enchanting cultural activities for the girls is the responsive singing competition with the boys known as *Ludohri*. Such competitions typically start with the singing of *Ado-Lu*—songs which tease and flirt, joke and ridicule each other. The singing of *Ado-Lu* would normally last until midnight after which the more serious competition of singing *Louche* begins. *Louche* songs usually deal with serious subjects and include stories of famous people, war, games, love stories, and important events. The *morung* which know and can sing more *Louche* is the winner. Besides the entertainment value of such a competition, it served the very important role of contextualizing the experiences of the people of the time and also in ensuring that history is passed on. Such competitions also ensure

Do not train a child to listen by force or harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each. - *Plato*

unity and cooperation among the community. These competitions are preceded by intense practices, discussions and gathering of stories so that songs can be composed around them. Through their sharing and discussions they learn from each other. That is how stories of the past are passed on from one generation to the next.



Morungs in the 1950s (Girls with short hair after Shaving)



Morung Girls in the 1950s.

The girls' *morungs* have this kind of competition with boys from the other surrounding villages too during the time when the latter paid a ceremonial visit to the village. Women, after marriage, cease to be members of their *morung*.

For the Poumai society, the chastity and purity of women is most important. Girls were forbidden to grow or keep long hair and her head remained shaven—a sign of chastity and purity—until she is betrothed.²³ These qualities were seen to be so essential that girls would guard their chastity and virginity even with death as told in the Poumai folk story of two maidens Rohne and Paone.

According to the story, Rohne and Paone were going to their fields when on their way a group of rowdy men accosted them and they were given a choice to decide their fate: to offer them their heads or allow their bodies to be defiled. Paone offered her body and they spared her life. However, Rohne offered her head instead of giving away her virginity and so she was killed. For the Poumai society, this popular story serves

23 Interview with Ms. Thichu Theleu, 97 years, Tungjoy village, August 2014.

as a reference point for moral integrity and Rohne is considered as someone whom the Poumai women should model themselves after.

Among the Poumais, marriage is usually decided and arranged by parents and relatives in the clan. However, women are not forced to marry against her will; it is more a matter of ensuring that appropriate matches are made. Relationship and marriage without the knowledge and approval of parents concerned are considered as acts of disobedience, and the woman in particular is singled out as an undesirable character. In this sense, compared to men, women have less choice in deciding whom they marry. While this may seem harsh, parents do this to find the best match for their daughters—a respected and reputed man thereby enhancing her dignity as well as that of her family. On the day she is married, she is stripped off the bangles she uses and her hair is kept long. (Thekho P.A, 2001).

In most cases, women, after marriage, go and live with the husband's family until they are able to build separate houses of their own. Typical of a patriarchal society, it is considered wise for a newly married woman to maintain a low profile in her new home; it is the time for her to obey and perform tasks and duties given to her. However, with time her roles and responsibilities grow in importance. Although frowned upon, there are increasing cases of elopement; there could be many factors for this but one prominent reason is parents not consenting to the relationship.



Rikhaimai in 1950s

Divorce is discouraged but it does happen. However, the moral judgment and position associated with divorce these days were not present in the past. The Poumai people talk of *Rikhaimai*, or woman who gets married for a few days or weeks, then divorces the husband and returns home. While the parents arrange the marriage, it is the

woman who decides whether to divorce or not. There are stories of *Rikhaimai* marrying multiple times. This practice seems to have been prevalent from the 1800s until the last fifty years. Significantly, these women were not morally judged, discriminated or vilified; they were considered respectable members of the community. Why there were *Rikhaimai* is not exactly known but one theory holds that it has to do with the desire of women to grow their hair so that they can look more beautiful; in the Poumai society, in the past women were not allowed to grow their hair until they marry²⁴. While this may be true, a more convincing reason could be the fact that women had the choice to walk out of marriages in which they were not happy or satisfied. In the case of a marriage not working out, and after all avenues for reconciliation has failed, the woman returns to her parents' or brother's home. The divorced couple would take back the properties they brought to the marriage; and those they acquired, whether moveable or immovable, during their marriage is equally divided.

In the past, in situations where a woman was unable to bear children, the woman was usually blamed and the husband's family would force them to divorce. There have been considerable positive changes in regard to this practice although there is still a stigma attached to barrenness; barren women are looked upon as cursed. A divorcee, in the event of getting a suitable person who seeks her hand for marriage, is free to remarry if she so desires. The choice and the happiness of women are given the highest consideration by the parents of the women if she chooses to remarry.

However, if the divorcee chooses to remain unmarried and she wishes to live separately from her parents' or brother's house, it is the responsibility of the family to give her a separate house. Within the Poumai society, a specific word exists to describe such individual - *Momyamai*. Etymologically, the term '*Momyamai*' is also applicable to men (divorcee or widower) as well as unmarried women who decide to live separately from their family; for all intents and purpose, a *momyamai*

24 Interview with Ms. Thichu Theleu, 97 years, and Ms. Theba Hriini, 75 years old, both from Tungjoy village, August 2014.

is considered a separate household. However, for a *momyamai*, his/her financial obligations such as house tax or yearly village tax are always less compared to a normal household. Similarly, a *momyamai* also receives less when there is distribution of any kind of cash within the community.

Traditionally, a divorced woman, if she desires can opt for the custody of her children, provided the children choose to live with her. In the recent past, the Poumai society has been witnessing increasing cases of women turning to formal family courts instead of traditional village courts. This is because they feel that the sanctity of traditional court has eroded and that there is little avenue for them to get justice. There are a number of cases wherein women who are widowed or abandoned by their husbands are pursuing legal cases in formal state courts for the custody of their children along with financial sanction from their husband for their upbringing.

Within the Poumai society, women also receive some properties at the time of marriage to enable and aid her as she starts a new life. In some Poumai villages, properties given to women include both moveable and immovable properties (paddy fields, plot) while in others only moveable properties such as *cha* (baskets/barn of paddies), cows, clothes, ornaments, etc., are given.

Ancestral immovable properties cannot be given to daughters. However, immovable properties acquired by the parents during their life-time with their own efforts can be given to the daughters if they so desire. The land and fields gifted to the wife by her family at the time of marriage is handed down to her eldest daughter; if there are no daughters only then can such property be distributed among her male children. Some Poumai villages practice a practice called *Loubinya* in which daughters are gifted with paddy fields at the time of her marriage and which can be utilized only in her lifetime, and to be returned to

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. — *Jesus, The Bible, Mark 12: 29 – 31*

her father's lineage upon her death.

In a situation when the husband dies, the wife has the right to live in the house of her husband with the children till she dies. However, there is also no compulsion for her to stay in the husband's house if she desires to return to her parental home after his death.

By this practice, the household of the deceased husband is prevented from extinction of the lineage and the hearth of the same is not extinguished. However, she has no right to dispose of, on her own, house, building, and fields where she lives in and cultivates. Similarly, she does not have the authority to dispose of the ancestral properties which do not belong to her though she can use during her lifetime. As a general rule, women have no right to dispose of immovable property but when it comes to moveable ones such as domestic animals she has considerable power. Given that women are generally responsible for household maintenance, it is usually the women who decide on matters relating to borrowing or lending of money.

Beyond the Domestic: Social Roles and Responsibilities

There are some specific social responsibilities and roles in the Poumai society which only women exercise. Most of these have to do with important rites and festivities related to agriculture. For a society whose physical and the spiritual world view is tied strongly to the cultivation cycle, the role of women in these activities is indispensable to the continued wellbeing of the society.

Most of the rites or 'Nyah' are conducted with a libation of *Zhou*, a common rice beer, poured to the ground along with pieces of ginger sacrificed to the spirits.

As mentioned, women as keepers of the wealth of the house exclusively perform many of the rites that involve the collection of things that will enrich their lives. 'Lousou Mosie' is a rite performed to call upon

Land is a central part of the connection to country and to our identity as people. Many of our significant sites, landscapes, customs and stories focus on connection to land. Land is therefore very important to our culture, history and future. – *Aboriginal saying, Australia*

Rappfi and *Rapu* (female and male ancestral spirits or deity of the field) before harvesting begins. The rite requires sacrificing pieces of pork meat preserved from the yearly *Lounih* festival.²⁵ On the day of the rite, the meat is cooked and brought to the place in the paddy field where they will gather the paddy. The ritual is led by a woman, usually the mother of the household, who give thanks to the spirits or deities for allowing them to cultivate and for giving them fresh food or source of sustenance. She also invokes the spirits to bless them with a good harvest. Once in the granary, another rite called '*Baoley*' is performed for the safekeeping, preservation and wholesome use of the paddy.

It is important to note that *Zhao* (rice beer) has its importance – it is abundantly used for feast, performing rituals and serve as food item. During the process of preparing yeast *Threideri* for use in brewing zhao, the mother of the household perform rites by placing two twigs of Alou, sweet scented plant along with two or three pieces of charcoal in *Mosii* (basket) and invoke the spirit of the household by chanting incantation - “let *threi* (yeast) sprout earlier before the moon rises and as it sprout let it be as white as the fangs of dog”.

Mouzii, Zhosou and Chizho are different types of feasts hosted by the couple to attain higher social status. Both the wife and husband take equal part in rituals. The ceremonial rites of *Zhosou* have to be performed always by two priests and one priestess. The couple enjoys the same status in occupying special seat called *Ashe Bu* pertaining to high social rank. These special seats are also occupied by the two priests and the priestess.

The couple enjoys the same entitlement and privileges to wear *Zhosou Sa* (White Shawl); right to wear *Hapei Dasa* (buffalo head/ horn shawl); right to use Lihso (Plantain leaf mug of status).

While these roles seem to be rooted in domestic needs, it has wider social ramifications and impact; they are important in keeping the social fabric together. Aside from these roles, there are examples of women

25 Lounih is a festival celebrated around July each year, after planting of rice has been completed.



Dragging buffalo to dead during the ceremony of ZHOSOU in 1982.



The last couple who perform Zhosou in 1982 at Tungjoy

within the Poumai community in which they have initiated wider and more important social changes. Women in Poumai community also play the very important role of peacemakers.

In the past, when two villages failed to settle a dispute amicably, a time and a place was fixed to decide the case by might. On the appointed day, warriors from the two parties would stand face-to-face and duel with their spears. When either party refused to surrender and casualties become heavy, women have the power to stop the fight by waving her wrap-around, the act of which is traditionally called *viidakha*. It was taboo for any group to carry on the fight if women commanded them to stop.

Victory can be achieved by various means. It can be gained with tanks and missiles, but I think that one wins with truth, honesty, and logic ... This is a new weapon. –
Lech Walesa, human rights activist, President of Poland (1990-1995), Poland

Tungjoy Village: From Sanitation to Broader Debates.

Tungjoy village traditionally called Veymai, is situated in the extreme north east of Senapati District. The important Barak River (called Avouri in the local language) runs through the village on the eastern side and flows towards Karong.

The village was culturally very rich, and attainment of higher social status was their sole goal in life. Performance of Feast of Merit (Zhosou, Mouzii, Chizho) in various forms were common. Veymais are hard working people and were strong believers of spiritualism.

The absence of basic healthcare facilities had taken a huge toll on the villagers with many dying because of preventable diseases like cholera, smallpox and typhoid. In the 1960s, the villagers led by some women began a cleanliness drive in the village. Aside from the huge infrastructural changes that was required, the task was momentous itself in changing social attitudes and beliefs. The women soon began monthly checks on households for cleanliness. The hygiene of children was one major focus.

The movement also brought about larger debates within the society regarding the entitlements of women. In 1967, the practice of returning paddy fields given to a daughter in marriage to their brothers or nephew after her death under the *Louhinya* practice was abolished. Village leaders, mostly men, recognized that it deprived surviving children an important source for their sustenance. The village therefore decided that the paddy field given to the daughters in marriage should not be returned to the parents, brothers or nephews nor would they seek for it to be returned but it would be passed on to the surviving children of the woman. This change proved to have great positive impact on the society and also gave the right to women to inherit immovable properties.

Become simple and live simply, not only within yourself but also in your everyday dealings. Don't make ripples all around you, don't try to be interesting, keep your distance, be honest, fight the desire to be thought fascinating by the outside world.
— Etty Hillesum, died in concentration camp because she was a Jew, Netherlands



Tungjoy Women Society in 1973

Formation of the Poumai Naotumai Me (Poumai Naga Women Union):

The role of women as peacemakers as an established part of the Poumai society has taken on new forms, roles and dimensions as is evidenced from the formation of the Poumai Naotumai Me (Poumai Naga Women Union).

The genesis for the formation of this Women Union can be traced back to the infamous Oinam incident. On 9th July 1987, an outpost of the Assam Rifles, an Indian para-military force, located in Oename (Oinam) village was attacked in broad daylight by a Naga underground group. Nine personnel of the Assam Rifles were killed and the underground cadres managed to walk away with a huge cache of arms and ammunitions. Following this, the infamous Operation Bluebird, a counter-offensive was launched by the Assam Rifles. Oename and another thirty (30) surrounding villages were virtually sealed off for four (4) months. Fifteen (15) villagers were shot dead in the course of a few weeks. Hundreds were tortured gravely and maimed for life.

In a society built on violence, to have a vision of a world at peace and to work toward that vision is a political act, an act of resistance. – *Magadalene Redekop, Professor Emeritus, Department of English, University of Toronto, Canada*

Electric shocks, being buried alive or hung upside down were stories of the day. Many women, including young girls, were also molested and raped. Most houses were destroyed or burnt down and valuables were looted. Churches and schools were used as detention centers no better than concentration camps. Villagers were 'grouped' in the open for days, forced to stand in torrential rain and scorching heat; during such groupings, two women gave birth in the concentrated open playground in full view of everyone. The civil administration was completely rendered powerless; even government officers and policemen were not allowed access to the area. Public leaders living outside were arrested, tortured and threatened.

Because of the denial of access to the area, initially, not much was known as to the massive extent of the violation of rights. However, news began to slowly trickle out through the few people who managed to escape at great risk of their lives to share what was happening to the people. Among them was Ms. V. Martha, the then Women Secretary of the Poumai Naga Baptist Association who had escaped from Purul village.

By then, the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) campus in Imphal became a hub for people to come together and strategize on adequate responses to the unfolding scenario of rampant rights violations. In the process, a committee of Poumai women in Imphal was formed. The Women Union of Manipur Baptist Convention along with the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights filed petitions on behalf of the women who were raped, sexually molested and also those who had been forced to work as construction labourers or porters by Assam Rifles during Operation Bluebird.

Operation Bluebird instilled a strong consciousness among the Poumai community to struggle for their rights. In the quest to get justice for the victims of Operation Bluebird, many women were mobilized. The committee that was formed began to take more streamlined structures and roles. On 17th November 1994, a general meeting of all the

It is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners. – Albert Camus (1913-1960), philosopher, Nobel Prize winning author, journalist, France

Poumai women was convened where it was unanimously decided that the Poumai Naga Women Organisation (now Poumai Naga Women Union) should be formally established. In establishing the organization, the founders had as its aims and objectives²⁶:

To secure equal rights, status and privilege in all respects of social, political, and economic [life] with men;

- To cultivate the cultural and traditional values;
- To endeavor the upliftment of religion, education, culture, and social-economic life of people in the area;
- To endeavor programmes for the development of women, children, [and] also to promote health care and bring faster social change.

Despite the significant progress that Poumai women has made, and their contribution to the society at large, the visibility of women in the political sphere and in leadership roles with regard to governance even at the grassroots level is still meager. In the Poumai community, traditional leadership is constituted by elders who comprise the Village Council. The Village Council, one of the most important and central institution that oversee governance in the village, has no women representation. There are no proscriptions against women being members of the Council; but the clans in the village from which membership to the Council is drawn, send only male members as representatives. The Village Assembly, the largest and most powerful decision-making bodies of the village do not see many women participation. In the rare cases when women attend, they are unable to substantively participate in the debates.

It is not to say that the interest of women cannot be reflected or protected in the decisions that the Village Assembly makes but women can contribute significantly to the discourse and result in better decisions if they are empowered to participate substantively as evidenced from the exceptional stories in which women were part or led the Council.

26 Solomi Khakhai. Poumai Naga Women Organisation: A Profile. In RAISUNRIANG III Issue. Naga Women's Union, Manipur. 1997. P. 16.

In the 1800s, on the death of Souso, chief of Lower Koide Village, his daughter Rohne administered as head of the village till her marriage. In the 1900s, after the death of Kanii, chief of Purul Atongba, his wife Siiru took over as head of the village. These women are known in the Poumai community for being wise and just administrators. And very recently, in 2007, Dani Nih, on the death of her husband became the chief of Tungjoy village. There are also folklores and stories in which women have taken positions and actions in the absence of leadership from men, like in the story of Paone Molaziipai. Following is the story of Paone Molaziipai. Every Naga village enjoys maximum autonomy and governs itself without interference from others. To ensure security and freedom of the village, men would guard the village (*rih-khao* and would also go out of the village sometimes to ward off any external disturbances, potential raiders or encroachers. In the past, inter-village disputes and wars occurred due to raids and subsequent acts of vengeance between villages. In this background, a story of a brave woman called Paone Molaziipai who used her wisdom and wiles to avenge the death of her brother is briefly narrated.

Yudo and Kado were contemporaries known for their feats of valor. Paone was saddened and troubled when her brother Yudo was killed in a war by Kado. With high expectations she counted and waited on her brothers and village men to avenge the loss of her brother. But as time passed she saw no sign of interest amongst men to do so. Finally, she decided to take the responsibility herself and confront the most gallant man of the time, Kado. She prepared the best wine and meat and asked her brothers to sharpen the knife for her.

She then, set out with a basket packed with food and a jar of fine “*Zhou*” (rice beer) to meet Kado. As she approached the land of Kado, she passed by village folks going to fields one after the other – she enquired the passerby if Kado was on his way to the field. She was told that it was difficult for them to comment about his coming and going because he did at his own good time but learnt

that Kado was always accompanied by a big dog. As she proceeded further she saw a man coming with a dog in front of him. Sure enough he was Kado, the man Paone wanted to see and meet. Her sheer beauty and courage allowed Paone to approach Kado. She told him that she longed to meet face to face a man whose feat of valor was known far and wide. She asked him what he prefers in the first place- enjoy her generosity (food and wine she brought for him) or feel her charm and beauty. Kado chose the latter and in the act of love, Poane struck him with the knife in his stomach and he was killed. She carried the warrior's head in her "*rho*" basket and brought it to her village. For avenging her brother and restoring honour to her village, she earned the respect and admiration of the village and the Poumai people.

Continuing Challenges and Recommendations:

With changing times, gender roles also changes. Men's roles are no longer about going to war or working in the field, especially for those who live in urban areas. Similarly, women's roles have changed and expanded from domestic and agricultural activities to other social activities. However, this changing role has not been able to accommodate her needs; for instance, even if a woman works outside the home, she is not relieved of her domestic responsibilities. Also, the past practices of women who are expected to be docile and submissive continue, resulting in increased gender violence.

Despite all these, Poumai women have come a long way in asserting their space within the society. To further facilitate this development, there is a need to create more space for women and a much more accommodative social attitude to enable women to participate more

Action ... flows from a dream that someday the sons and daughters of communists and Christians will frolic together; Arab as well as North American children will enjoy the earth's fruits; the tanks will be melted into playground equipment; the full glory of God will be revealed, and all flesh, united, will see it. — Mervin Eugene "*Gene*" Stoltzfus, founder director of Christian Peacemakers Team, USA

in decision making processes. In today's world, it is irrational and unthinkable to expect women not to be empowered, and importantly participate in decision making. It is a matter of equality and rights that women should be allowed to be represented in institutions such as Village Council, Tribe Hohos, Naga Hoho, etc.

It may be cited that three women representatives with voting right in the Poumai Naga Council was given in 1997 but sad to know that it was reduced into one in 2014 in the General Assembly of Poumai Council. An appeal had been made to retain three voting rights by Poumai Noutuomai Me in 2010 but they were refused on the ground that for women and students' organizations only one vote each could be allotted. Decreasing the number of vote is a discouragement for women. In order to bring equality and justice to women the tribe council should reconsider and create more space for women, knowing that "equality for women is progress for all".

One of the central challenges in bringing Poumai women at par with men is the complex social and political structures in which the participation of women in decision making is limited. As noted, there is a visible lack of leadership of women in decision-making in the administrative and political space at all levels. Aside from the lack of participation in traditional decision making systems, the odds are stacked against women even within modern electoral democratic systems. Often, women do not vote according to their wishes but on the basis of what the clan or the husbands decide; this is very antithetical to the idea of democracy itself.

The situation is not very different within other important social and religious institutions like the Church. With the advent of Christianity, many changes took place, some for the better and some that require serious introspection. Education, health care and sanitation are some

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me. — *Martin Niemoller (1892-1984), pastor and one of the founders of the confessing church, resisting against the Nazi regime, Germany*

of the good outcomes. However, in the garb of Christianity, people have also been misled into thinking that westernization is the way of life to be good Christians; market and capital ideologies have made significant inroads. In the process, many good traditional practices of the Poumai people have been totally lost or corrupted into a form that has no contextual relevance for the people. An institution like the *morung* in which women actively participated and contributed is now totally lost/ no more in existence. The young generations are even totally clueless as to what *morung* is.

All these indicate an urgent need for introspection. The roles and responsibilities of women, and how they contribute to the society cannot be undermined as it has far reaching influence on the social, economic, political, and cultural sphere of any society. Progression or regression of the society would depend largely on whether or not women are given their rightful space in societal building.

The consequences of not doing this are obvious: the Poumai community even in this 21st century remains heavily weighed down under the onslaught of social evils, political and economic injustice. There still persists a preferential treatment of a boy child over a girl child in imparting education rather than the merit or potential of the given children. As a result, the society stands deprived of meaningful contributions by women who constitute half of its population and who are the carriers and the custodians of the traditional knowledge and cultural practices which give them its unique identity. The role of women in carrying out rituals is reflective of this.

However, it is encouraging that some changes are taking place and these are positive signs for women in villages where efficient male leadership is not available like in the case of Tungjoy village which currently has woman as a chief. There are lessons we can draw from history as well where women have risen to inspire the society like in the case of Paone

Why do we spend money, time and energy to tan ourselves but hate people who are born tan? Why do we enjoy travelling around the world but resist when the world comes to us? ... The all-loving and knowing God has brought about such differences within creation. – Basanti Jacobs, General Conference Mennonite Church

Molaziipai. Given the right push and opportunities, there are many potential Paone Malaziipai.

It is, therefore, to encourage the women to ascertain their due rights for women participation in decision making processes at all levels by approaching their respective village councils by the village women community bodies/ tribe wise women body and of Association and Parish of the Churches.

The need of the hour is to work for a strong system that upholds values of equality and principles rooted in the rights of each individual. At the same time, women should not see themselves as victims of their traditions and culture but as potential agents of change. It is important to take the concerns and issues of women to the right places with the right voice. At the end, equal space and opportunities for women cannot be overlooked nor justified on grounds of tradition, culture or social conformity.

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Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Mr. P.A. Thekho, Ms. Aram Pamei and Mr. L.K. Thekho for their valuable help. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to the respondents who have given their precious time and information without which it would have been difficult to bring to this stage. Respondents: 1. Pokho Puni, 2. Dani Nih, 3. Thechu Thelu, 4. Theba Hriini, 5. Khani Sani, 6. Dai

The king ought to listen to good counsel; even if he doesn't know to listen, it is the duty of the minister to advise firmly. - *Thiruvalluvar (3-1 BC), saint, India*

Challenges within and without: Rongmei Women's Experiences in Society

- Lungsanliu Panmei.

The Rongmei Nagas are one of the many indigenous Mongoloid communities living in three States of Northeast India. They belong to the same cognate group known commonly by the coined nomenclature, 'Zeliangrong', consisting of the Rongmei, Zeme, Liangmai and Inpui/Puimei.²⁷ They have a common homeland, sharing a common history and culture except for dialect variations; and, taken together, they constitute one of the largest tribal groups having the largest tract of compact contiguous land.²⁸ But their land has been trifurcated under the three States in the Indian dominion, thereby, leaving the Zeliangrong people to several disadvantages and remain backward wherever they are. The main homeland of the Rongmei is the remote Western Hills of Manipur State of North East India now called Tamenglong District while we find settlements of some Rongmei Nagas in certain pockets of neighboring Districts and in the States of Assam and Nagaland.²⁹ Rongmei population is estimated to be 1, 28, 137 settling in a total of 247 villages. There are 196 villages in Manipur, 36 in Assam and 15 in Nagaland.³⁰ Meanwhile, according to Hill House

27 The prefix of Puimei was not included in the 'Zeliangrong' nomenclature coined in 1947. Because of this the Puimei later moved away from being a part of Zeliangrong organizations.

28 Benjamin Gangmei, "Political empowerment and Tribal Women of Manipur" <http://www.sinlung.com/2010/04/political-empowerment-and-tribal-women.html#39dVNaTT6>, accessed on August 12, 2014.

29 The Zeliangrongs are found in large number under Dima-Hasao District of Assam, Peren district of Nagaland and Tamenglong District of Manipur as a unit while Zeliangrong villages in Loktak Project are under Churachandpur district of Manipur. The westernmost Zeliangrong villages are found in Cachar District of Assam, while its adjoining villages fall under Jiribam Sub-division of Imphal East. Over 88 villages are found in Manipur Valley and its foothill, under different administrative set ups – Imphal East, Imphal West, Senapati, Bishnupur and Thoubal. In Nagaland, pockets of Zeliangrong villages are found in Kohima and Dimapur.

30 "Rongmei Population (Annexure B)" in Hundred Years with Christ (1914-2014): A Commemorative volume of Rongmei Christian Centenary Celebration-2014, p.286-289.

Counting Assessment in 2010, out of the total population of 1, 05,558 in Tamenglong District, the male population accounted for 54,183, whereas the female population was 51,515.³¹ We can therefore assume that out of the approximate total Rongmei population of 1, 28,137, there may be around 60,000 Rongmei women in all.

Historical Rendering

Since pre-colonial times, Meitei kings had been associated with the hill tribals. The Rongmeis who joined the services of these kings as labourers, security guards, maiba (seers), domestic helpers, etc., settled down near them in the patches of land provided by them. When the British came, they too used the tribal Rongmei as forced laborers and porters to carry their luggage from one place to another without any remuneration. In the early part of the 20th century, Haipou Jadonang, a Rongmei mystic, initiated Naga Raj Movement against the British Colonial Rule. But he was executed by the British in 1931 after which his successor Gaidinliu, a teenage girl, organized her own army to fight the colonial rulers.

This uprising was suppressed by the British who captured and imprisoned Gaidinliu. The Kabui, as they were called in those days, were taken wherever the colonizer wanted for their requirement – even to Calcutta, Sylhet in Bangladesh, Shillong, Gauhati and many parts of British India. Many returned to nearby Manipur and Nagaland while a few stayed behind in those places mentioned³² above, many of whom remain unknown to the majority of the ‘mainland’ Rongmei. In the 1950s, the Rongmeis later joined in the Nagas’ armed struggle for sovereignty started by A Z Phizo. In the 1960s through the 1980s, the Zeliangrong people under the leadership of Rani Gaidinliu demanded a separate administration within India for the Zeliangrong Nagas by uniting their trifurcated territory. But the movement was suspended in the larger interest of the Nagas’ struggle for

31 K.P. Kamiuthuan, “The Rongmei Naga” in A Gift to Churches: Souvenir of RNBA Silver Jubilee, Dec. 9-11, 2011, edited by Thuanliang Gangmei, 189-190. According to this Assessment in 2010 Rongmei population in Manipur was 1,05,558 in Tamenglong District alone with an additional figure of about 45,400 from Greater Imphal, 10,500 in Nagaland, and 1,230 in Assam with a total population of 1,62,668.

32 Gairiangmei Naga, answer to a query posted by the author on Rongmei Naga Facebook Group on August 11, 2014. Accessed on August 12, 2014.

sovereignty.

In 2012, the Rongmei along with the Zeme, Liangmai and Inpui have been separately recognized among the Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India. Before this, the Rongmei and the Inpui have been clubbed together with the common identity called Kabui while the Liangmai and Zeme were identified as Kacha Naga which was a misnomer handed down by the British. The Nagaland State Government recognized a section of Rongmei as one of the indigenous tribes in 2012 though with several discriminations and negative repercussions from other Naga tribes. In Assam there are about 36 Rongmei villages. Geographically divided Zeliangrongs including the Rongmei were pushed to the fringe economically and politically; their aspiration for a dignified life has remained unfulfilled. The tribals in Manipur State too have been demanding separate administration and autonomy from the non-tribal dominated government so as to be free from discrimination and to secure their rights to their lands and resources.

In this article, I am exploring the challenges and problems faced by Rongmei women keeping in mind their status in society in the midst of the changes and struggles the tribal people are living with.

Marginalization of Women: From Headhunting to Modern Era

Headhunting, the kind of warfare performed only by men folk was a practice that principally underlined all Naga traditional history. The Rongmei term for headhunting days was *Sangnaric*. While men conspired to go to war, women were the active agents in the sustenance of village life. They engaged themselves in agriculture – ploughing, sowing, gleaning and reaping, and performed all kinds of domestic works.³³

Since womenfolk did not participate in the institution of headhunting they were excluded from the *Pei* which is till today the highest decision-making body of any Rongmei village regarding issues of warfare, land,

33 Eyingbeni Humtsoe, “Women’s Experience of “Sorrow” as a Source for Doing Theology from Naga Perspective” in No More Sorrow in God’s Garden of Justice: Tribal Women Doing Theology, Women Study Series No. 4 edited by Limatula Longkumer, (Jorhat: Women Study Department, ETC, 2007), p 4.

forest, area of cultivation, dispute settlement, etc. It also functions as the Village Court where its executive power is derived from unwritten customary laws and traditional practices. Women's participation in the Village Pei/Court is permitted only when they are invited or accused or called forth as witnesses. Whatever the case, even when allowed to attend conflict resolution meetings in case of dispute, divorce or theft, they are not allowed to speak unless they are asked to. Thus, there are psychological and social barriers to their participation in village decision making. Scholars like Wati Longchar pointed out that one of the factors that marginalized tribal women in village polity is because of their non-participation in "headhunting".³⁴

The coming of the British and their modern influence upon life as well as the activities of Christian missionaries towards the people of the North East India made them realize the futility of this practice; and headhunting has been abandoned by both Christians and non-Christians.

Women in Public Sphere: "*A woman is somebody with a wound*"

Even though the Rongmei have stopped the practice of headhunting, village administration continues to be a male domain.

The Village Pei (Council) continues to function as the authority in socio-political, legal matters and implementation of developmental schemes in the village level. Democratic elements have been introduced to bring about changes in the village polity yet the democratization of this institution was not accompanied with empowerment provision for women.

Many men simply cannot imagine women's inclusion in village or tribal polity. Asked as to why women are excluded from leadership in village and tribal polity, the elders' justification is: *Ntumei thu zamv phunghmei de* (a woman is somebody with a wound). Though not a common concept, people who question this status quo have been supplied with

34 Wati Longchar, "Headhunting: A Socio-religious Factor for Oppression of Women in North East India," Good News for North East India. A Theological Reader, ed. Renthly Keitzar, (Guwahati: The Christian Literature Centre, 1995), 198,199.

this mockery about women's monthly cycle to justify the exclusion of women in public life and addressing in public. Many Rongmei people including women themselves are of the view that women should not address important gatherings be it social, political or religious 'because it is not our custom'. Men are the primary receivers and holders of information in Rongmei society and women do not have equal access to information and resource training to face new issues leaving them ignorant and unconfident for leadership positions.

However, there has been a historical step taken by one Rongmei woman in village administration. Dithuanliu Kamei of Machiang (Abungchiang) is the first woman to lead a Village Council as its Chairperson. Machiang is a Rongmei village in Tamenglong District, Manipur, with about 189 households. Dithuanliu became the Village Chairperson in the milieu of a leadership conflict in the village council regarding access to financial power and government schemes especially the NREGS (National Rural Employment Generation Scheme). To prevent antagonism and conflict among the villagers, her uncle who was then the Village Chairman suggested that a woman's leadership would be the best option for the sake of peace at the juncture. Thus Dithuanliu, a young lady in her early thirties and a graduate from the Nampou's (Village Chief) family, was appointed in September 2009 even though there were male members within her family capable of the chairmanship.

After completing her first tenure, she came to office for the second tenure by an election in 2012 with 80% majority vote for her. She is actively involved in bringing positive change in her village. Through her initiative, her village got electrified and got a water reservoir to relieve the water scarcity that had been necessitating the people to walk half an hour down to collect a pot of water. She has done a commendable advocacy on forest preservation as the means to conserve the depleting water resource in her village. Even though there are no other women members in the Village Council, she has sought to include women in various village development committees.

We have not inherited this land from our ancestors; rather we have borrowed it from our children. – *A Kenyan Proverb*

Men folk tend to ignore government's directions on women's quota in village level bodies, but with her leadership, she has put all efforts to include women members in Village Health and Sanitation Committee, School Management Development Committee, Integrated Watershed Development Committee, and Vigilance Monitoring Committee as per Government's directions.

Dithuanliu is actively involved with the wider Iring (Aling) Area Development Committee which comprises 14 villages; she is one of the key representatives of the people overseeing the Myanmar-Halflong Asian Highway crossing the region and is the Treasurer of the All Tribal Chiefs Forum, Manipur. Even though she has faced hardships as a woman having to complete tasks in time bound manner, she affirms that she has received encouragement from all quarters and has never been discriminated by people for being a woman while holding this post. Dithuanliu believes that both men and women have equal intellect and with patience, determination and by being responsible, women can take leadership in this generation.³⁵ Can the encouragement that Dithuanliu receive from her male colleagues from within and outside her tribe be an indicator that majority of the Rongmei are ready to accept women in leadership position in the village level? The answer remains with the multitude of Rongmei men in village polity.

Even though most Rongmei cannot accept women's involvement in traditional political institution, they cannot deny women's involvement in electoral politics because of the "opportunity of equal access to political structures" provided by the Indian Constitution. Very few Rongmei women have risen above their social horizons to participate in electoral politics. A recent development in this area is in Lungbungjang area, Cachar, Assam where Ms. Lumgailiu Rongmei became the first ever elected President of Gaon Panchayat (Lakhinagar G.P.)³⁶ from Ramgaizang village on February 14, 2013. The Rongmei community

35 Telephonic conversation with Dithuanliu Gangmei, Village Chairman Abungchiang on 27th January, 2015.

36 Local governance in Assam has a three-tier set up - Gaon Panchayat with 6000 - 10,000 Population; Anchalik Panchayat (at the block level) and Mahkuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level.

in Assam has been living as a minority group and never had the opportunity to get such presidential post.³⁷ Guiliangliu Panmei is the only Rongmei woman in Manipur so far to have contested, though she lost, in a State Legislative Assembly Election in the year 2000 against other five male candidates.

On the one hand, women do not join politics in the forefront because they are not mentally empowered due to lack of awareness, lack of role models and support and because of the attitude of the people, particularly of men who consider women traditionally unfit for political and serious issues except to utilize them in supportive roles. On the other hand, women do not get involved in politics because they are poor.

Economic empowerment is required to encourage women to involve in politics. The responsibility of the home and the mindset of the society keep women from freely involving in political leadership. These along with the present scenario of relegating politics as a dirty game make women apathetic to politics. The Rongmei women are yet to realize that to uplift the people especially womenfolk, it is important for women's voice to be heard and considered at the decision and policy making level of governance rather than being at the receiving end.

Personal Sphere: Shifting Identities and Loss of Status: “*Ntumei thu kakai khuang maek ge*”

This is a common Rongmei saying which means ‘A woman has no clan’.³⁸ A woman's clan identity is always in relation to men as a daughter, a wife or a boy's mother. She is considered the property of her paternal clan before her marriage and of her husband's clan after marriage. This is very clear in the customary practice of settling adultery and rape cases in which the men consider the act as an encroachment of their property. Penalty is demanded by the male relatives from the culprit's clan or relatives. Often they demand land or money as penalty which in no way benefit the female victim.

37 A Facebook post by Puanthan Dangmei in Zeliangrong Naga Facebook group on April 30, 2013.

38 Her clan is determined by her marriage.

Since the Rongmei practice exogamy, patrilocal residence, and patrilineal family line of inheritance, boys are preferred to girls because of the fear that there will be no one to carry on the family line without them. After marriage the Rongmei woman loses her membership in her paternal clan and in her community or church if she marries outside.

Earlier, before the coming of western education, no written script was available. A married woman attains double identity – she is her clan's *aluh* (daughter) and her husband's clan's *kaipui* (wife/mother). Now with the coming of the written script and influence of the western patriarchal ideologies and gender roles, married women have come to be formally addressed with their husband's surnames and no longer by their officially documented surnames – which can be understood as an influence of colonialism. The community addresses a woman by her husband's surname without confirming if she has officially changed her name by an affidavit. Earlier, most women did not have names formalized in official documents but now many educated and professional women do have official names from young age which they find inconvenient to keep changing after their marriage. Even if a woman has officially changed her surname to that of her husband's, if or when she is divorced or widowed and happens to return to her parental home, she has to change her surname again. And again, she has to change her title if she gets remarried to another man. Thus the secondary status accorded to women in the traditional social system is further worsened by external influences. However, this does not mean that a Rongmei woman is not cherished by her family and society.

Bride Price and a woman's value:

A woman's value in Rongmei society becomes evident mainly during her engagement and marriage. She is not easily given away in marriage by her kinsmen. The boy's kin are to respectfully approach the girl's family for her hand. In the past, the formal marriage proposal for *Khaemthan* or Holy marriage was usually done by bringing a pot of

To plunder, to slaughter, to steal, these things they misname empire; and where they make a wilderness, they call it peace. – *Publius Cornelius Tacitus (55-117), Roman historian, Rome*

rice wine and later followed by the payment of Bride Price agreed upon by the two parties. The first installment of the Bride Price may be paid on the day of engagement. Bride Price is usually paid by the groom's family to the bride's parents in the form of paddy.³⁹ The bride price is determined by the status of the bride - whether she is a virgin, a widow or a divorcee. After the bride price is fully paid, the girl's parents will arrange a customary function called *Puatsumei* (packing up for the bride) by cooking the meat of a sizeable boar and sending to the groom's house along with a sufficient quantity of sticky rice beer. There are other forms of Bride Price such as *Mandu* - which is paid to her family if she has died before her Bride Price was cleared. *Maiguang Mann (Widow's Price)* is paid by the late husband's family to the widow's parents if the former do not want her to go back to her parents. If it is not settled, the widow can go back home. *Rou Mann (Bone Price)* is paid after the death of the wife by the one who inherits her husband's property. This is the last payment for a bride which is not fixed but agreed between two parties.⁴⁰

The woman's kinfolk closely observe the way she is treated by her husband's family and clan. If she is mistreated, her relatives can raise the issue of taking her back. Or in case the same clan comes with any other marriage proposal in the future the girl's clan can bring up such subject against the man's clan and even decide to withhold the girl's hand in marriage. Nowadays paying Bride Price is no longer a common practice due to economic reasons but it has become a tradition to bring rice beer to the girl's home and serve food on the day of the marriage proposal regardless of the type of marriage. But expensive weddings are replacing these practices. While the practice of Bride Price has become uncommon, the practice of *Puatsumei* (Packing up for the bride) is religiously continued especially among Christians as a day of blessing a daughter and arranging gifts to take to her new home.

39 The bride price varies from village to village and may range between 80 measures (buanh) to 200 measures of paddy. It may be paid in installments.

40 Dichamang Pamei, *Liberty to Captives*, A ZBCC Platinum Jubilee Publication, (n.p.:n.d.), p. 42.

Aluh Paumei:

During Phutuan Ngai (a festival celebrated after all the ploughing of the field is done), one day is set for *Aluh Paumei* in which families send food and rice wine to their married daughters' families. This is a practice of honoring the married daughters of the family whose Bride Prices have been received. The husband's family would also cook special food on the next day and give them in return. This is not a common practice anymore but seems to have evolved into something like Ningol Chakouba of the Meiteis in Manipur in which Rongmei families especially in the Imphal Valley also invite all the married daughters to their paternal homes for a feast.

People take great care to invite all the married daughters during all important family events like weddings or plentiful harvest. Their shares of the food or gifts are given according to tradition. These customary gifts are received turn by turn by the womenfolk from their respective families and clans as they grow older. The final and biggest honour an elderly woman receives traditionally from her father or brothers is called *Nap tann tiime*, a rare practice nowadays. After a plentiful harvest, her brothers would send paddy (*Nap tann*) through sons-in-law as much as they can carry on their backs to the eldest Aluh (daughter/s) of the family.

Domestic Sphere: Socially Assigned Roles

Domestically a woman is overburdened with numerous roles and expectations assigned by the society. The daily domestic chores, child rearing, and manual work at home have been unconsciously considered by everyone to be purely women's role. Even if circumstances demand that men help in the domestic work, it is considered a favor done to women. A daughter too has enormous roles in the domestic affairs. Workload is not equally shared among boys and girls in the home. Girls do most of the work while usually boys go out to roam and play. Womenfolk, being busy with household activities do not have equal access to information, public life and leadership as men do. This division

One moment can change a day, one day can change a life and one life can change the world. – *Buddha*

of roles is one main reason that hinders women's social mobility and taking up of leadership status outside the home. But domestic duties are invisible activities and are undervalued.

Nowadays women do not simply stay at home but perform many activities that contribute to the family's economy. Gender disparity measures reveal that men's responsibility is shrinking in that men no longer go to war or actively work in the fields, whereas women's work frontier is expanding as they take over works traditionally designated as 'male domain' besides being nurturers and care-givers in the domestic realm.⁴¹ This is becoming visible too in Rongmei society.

And if a woman works outside the home, she is not relieved of the household responsibilities unlike for men. Today, women face what is called 'double burden' and 'triple burden' of taking care of family members, household activities along with jobs and obligations outside the home.

A man in leadership position shared about how he was chided by a senior friend for carrying his kid around with him, saying that it was unbecoming to his status. Such is the attitude of the older generation. Still, it is encouraging to see some young couples working out between themselves in the care of children while women go to work.

Regarding decision making, a woman may take most decisions relating to household matters but hardly does a wife make a final decision with regard to the children's career, procurement of major assets, choice of faith or religion, village matters or political candidate to support without the consent and decision of her husband. She is expected to blindly follow her husband's decision or that of his clan. A woman tells of her experience:

My husband's clan and my parent's clan were on the opposite sides of a land dispute. When the conflict became serious the village Pei got divided into two. The dissenting group formed a new Village Council. Eventually the Church got split into two. As Government funds and schemes got divided between the two village

41 UA Shimray, 'Women's Work in Naga Society: Household work, workforce Participation and Division of Labour'. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/4414929?uid=3738256&uid=2129&uid=28&uid=70&uid=48&sid=21101871413301>, accessed on June 12, 2013 at 3.30 pm.

bodies, I am expected to blindly follow my husband's family or clan decision in the matter of political candidate in the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) and MP (Member of Parliament) elections, where to cultivate or earn my NREGS wages (100 days wages under National Rural Employment Generation Scheme) and which church or denomination to go for worship. When I did not go by their decision, they told me that I could go back to my parents. To prevent further chaos and for the sake of my children, I submitted to their diktat.

Economic Sphere: Mere Custodians of Male Property

Rongmei society follows the patrilineal system of inheritance in which the youngest son inherits the ancestral home. The father can distribute his land and properties to his other children as he wishes. Traditionally women are not entitled to inherit their parent's immovable assets. If a man dies without a male child, his nearest kinsman will inherit his properties even if there are daughters.⁴² As long as she is living in her parents' home, a daughter may utilize her family land and property but she leaves them all behind when she gets married and becomes a caretaker of her husband's family assets. She may be gifted moveable property such as paddy, furniture, jewellery and clothes but traditionally immoveable assets are divided among her brothers.

However in some cases a woman is given a patch of land or forest – a *rambou* – by her father or brothers if they own enough land and so desire to give. Such cases are more common if a woman returns as a widow, divorcee or has a husband without land to settle or has no share of forest area (*rambou*) to depend on for livelihood. In most occasions such land will not go to her husband's family but may be taken back in the future when she dies. Or it may be passed on to her married daughter if she so needs it. But with land becoming scarce, these practices are becoming fewer as men folk increase their grip on their landholdings in the backdrop of the rising value of land against increasing population and human wants. There are cases of male relatives selling off land allotted to the daughter without her or her immediate kin's knowledge creating discord among family members. Changes in social and economic structure and cohesiveness are diminishing these

42 Op cit., Thuanliang Gangmei ed., "Women in RNBA", 64.

traditional practices of care and respect for the Rongmei women.

A widow is just the custodian of her husband's landed property if her son is still a minor. Another stark reality regarding the discrimination of Rongmei women surfaces in this area of inheritance and ownership of property. If a woman has no son, her life is more insecure in her husband's home. A recent incident of Ramgailiu⁴³ speaks of the precarious condition of the multitude of women at the mercy of men brought up in a patriarchal society.

After the death of her husband, the brothers-in-law of Ramgailiu started acting indifferently towards her. They told her that since she and her husband had no boy-offspring, the daughters are not entitled to the property. They started envying their home entitled to her late husband. The men and their wives started treating her badly that she knew they wanted her to leave. So she decided at last to return to her parents' household. Other two similar cases happened in that same village the following year.

Even if a woman brings up her child born out of wedlock because the man is already married or had denied the baby as his, after some years the man's kin can come and claim the child by giving some amount of money to the woman. The child can continue to live with its mother but from then on he/she will be counted as belonging to the father's clan. This payment is called "*Nakuanlan tiimeï*".⁴⁴

Someone sadly pointed out saying: *Women do not have the right to own even their children which is the fruit of their painful labor. There is no law to protect their rights. There is therefore, nothing that a woman can claim as theirs either in their fathers' house or in their husbands' except a little amount of moveable properties given by her parents at the time of marriage. This kind of treatment is inhumane. It is a serious issue that should be taken into special consideration by legislators of all levels as well as by people at large in order to improve the condition of women.*⁴⁵

43 Name has been changed.

44 Jimmy Pamei, Inriangluang Village, September 19, 2015.

45 Thuanliang Gangmei ed., "Women in RNBA", in Souvenir RNBA Youth Conference, 2008, 65.

Few women have started taking up their case to the law courts with the help of some NGOs. For the first time in 2010-2011, a woman fought for the custody of her children while settling her divorce. She won the case which allowed her to keep her children if they wish to go to her. Two of her children are living with her. Thereafter, some other women who have been widowed or abandoned by their husbands are following suit and seeking legal help for the custody of their children as well as financial sanction for their upbringing. Slowly women are turning to family courts away from customary law which has no sanction for them anymore.

Religious Sphere: The Glass Ceiling in Church Ministry

The majority (approx. 80%) of Rongmei have been converted to Christianity with the remaining still following the traditional ancestral religion. The year 2014 marked the commemoration of 100 years of Christianity among Rongmei people. People claim to have come out from the 'dark days of headhunting into the light' through the Christian Gospel. But along with Christianity came the Western male-oriented ideologies and interpretation of the Bible thereby curtailing women ministries as well as involvement in decision making bodies.

Churches have been encouraging both men and women to undergo theological training in preparation for church ministries. There are around 100 theologically trained women⁴⁶ in Rongmei churches in Manipur who are as qualified as their male counterparts. But the notion of 'Women-lead-women-and-children' still holds strong among the churches as a result of the influence left behind by pioneer leaders and evangelists groomed in fundamental conservative teachings. Some churches do not give platform for women to address the general congregation of the church.

Within the Baptist Church which is the largest denomination followed

46 Telephone conversation with Ms. Gaimuna, Women Secretary, RNBA, 2nd April, 2013.

by the Rongmei, there is a record of 61 male ordained as Reverends⁴⁷ but there has been no female pastor and no ordained women Minister as yet. Leadership in the churches, Board of Deacons,⁴⁸ the various departments and associations are dominated by the men except for the Women Department and Sunday school department. At a snail's pace, we are witnessing women being inducted into leadership roles in the local church. Neikanlong Baptist Church in Imphal has two deaconesses out of five. Emmanuel Baptist Church and Tamenglong Baptist Church in Tamenglong town have one deaconess each as token representatives. There are no women as church Secretaries or Youth Pastors. Tamenglong Baptist Church which is the biggest Rongmei Church appointed women to the posts of Youth Worker, Sunday School Superintendent and Mission Secretary.⁴⁹

Again at the Association⁵⁰ level, in the history of RNBA (Rongmei Naga Baptist Association in Manipur) with an official record of 7000-7500 baptized women, no woman has ever led as Executive Secretary. The Chairperson or Secretary of all different departments except Women Department and evangelists are mostly men. The topic of women's leadership is an anathema to many people's ears. Voices in favor of this issue are still in the periphery. Some churches impose head covering upon women during worship. Previous RNBA Women Secretaries in the past experienced discrimination to the extent of being made to sit among the children in some village churches during official team visits while other male members were invited to sit on the podium along with

47 Thaikhui Rongmei, "Who's Who and Important Events", in *Hundred Years with Christ (1914-2014) A Commemorative volume of Rongmei Christian Centenary Celebration-2014*, 202-206.

48 The Board of Deacons can be called the main decision making body of the Baptist Church.

49 Ms. Gaikhuiliu and Ningreiliu Panmei served as Youth Workers/Directors for a term each; Ms. Abuan Riamei is the Sunday School Superintendent and Ms. Gaihiamlui Panmei has been recently appointed as Mission Secy. at Tamenglong Baptist Church, Manipur.

50 The Baptist churches come together under a parent body like the Rongmei Naga Baptist Association (RNBA) in Manipur, Rongmei Baptist Association, Nagaland (RBAN) and Regular Fundamental Baptist Churches (RFBC) in Assam. The writer has focused on the Baptist denomination and regrets for not presenting the scenario in other denominations due to lack of information.

the pastors and deacons.⁵¹ However this extent of discrimination is not experienced by the present Women Secretary. One progress experienced by women in ministry is that most churches are giving their pulpit for women to preach except one or two Rongmei churches.⁵²

The biggest gathering of Rongmei Baptist women under RNBA happens every ten years on the occasion of the RNBA Women Conference. Only in the 3rd Women Conference in 2006, speakers have started highlighting about women empowerment such as the need for 50-50 in decision making process and equality. This triggered negative responses from the older conservative male leaders. In the 4th Women Conference in 2015, women ordination has been generally highlighted in the gathering by a resource person. Leaders sensed that the time is not yet ripe for a thorough discussion and conclusive public statement. But the discourse has been started and there seems to be general awareness and acceptance among the educated womenfolk and few male leaders.⁵³ In the ongoing consultations conducted by the RNBA Women Department to bring out its Vision and Mission statements and future strategies, the leaders discussed upon the need to be ready with women who can be recommended for ordination as and when the ordination of women is accepted by the church.⁵⁴

In 2014 during the Annual Business Session of Tamenglong Baptist Church, some members of the Women Department raised the agenda on women ordination for a pioneer women leader. The responses from the men were as usual: pointing to biblical passages written in early Judeo-Greek context that restrict women's leadership. When we tried to sustain the discussion, some deacons became very agitated and threatened that 'if this discussion is not stopped, we will start quarrelling.' Every now and then, some people have tried to raise this issue of women as pastors and ordained ministers in the RNBA churches

51 Interview with Azanliu, Former Women Secretary, RNBA, at Tamenglong on 3rd Jan 2010.

52 Telephone conversation with Gaimuna, Women Secretary, RNBA.

53 Telephone conversation Pouguliu Pamei, President of Women Society, Tamenglong Baptist Church and leader in RNBA Women Dept. and 30th June 2016.

54 Gaimuna, Women Secretary RNBA, 10th June, 2016.

but the majority of the men-folk strongly oppose it even though they have no problem with women leadership in secular offices. The issue continues to be hushed up by leaders for the sake of church unity.

The seven Rongmei Baptist churches in Nagaland come under the umbrella of RBA. Due to lack of trained ministers in these churches, women are comparatively taking significant leadership roles. The key post of Secretary of the Development Department of RBA which is doing a major role in uplifting the poor Rongmei villagers in Nagaland is a woman – Akeina Gonmei. A woman (Mathiuthuanliu) has also served as Mission Secretary. There are women serving as church secretaries and Sunday School Superintendents and deacons.⁵⁵ Kariugailiu Kamei Koza, who served as Associate Pastor in Rongmei Baptist Church, Kohima, for a term was the first woman associate pastor among the Rongmei Nagas.⁵⁶ Rev. Dr. A.G. Kamei in Nagaland is the first Rongmei woman to be ordained as a Reverend but it was not given by Rongmei Church.⁵⁷ Meanwhile in the inter-cultural setting, we have two Rongmei women Gaigongmei Gangmei serving as Associate Pastor of Zeliangrong Christian Fellowship Delhi and Ms Ninguang Kamei serving as the Pastor of Rehoboth Church in Delhi at present. When this news was posted in Rongmei social networking sites, it sparked a heated debate and criticism from Rongmei men mainly from fundamental circles.⁵⁸ In these debates regarding women's position in the church, people continually quote the biblical passages indicating the Bible does not allow women to lead or be above men.

Fundamental theological and biblical interpretations are to be blamed for this 'glass ceiling' that discriminates against women from serving according to their calling and capacity. Some men and women who studied in colleges teaching contextual theology have been exposed to gender issues and are open to women's partnership in church leadership. But most Rongmei men and women opt to go to fundamental colleges

55 Lungdapou Riamei, Youth Secretary, RBAN, Correspondence, Zalukie, 16th January, 2010.

56 Ajuna Pame (ed), "Kariuganliu Kamei Koza" in Rongmei Lu Di, 13.

57 A.G. Kamei is ordained by her institution.

58 A Facebook post by Kadima Gangmei on June 12, 2014.

due to lack of guidance and finance. Whoever raises these issues is considered to be diluting the church with false teachings and thus many continue toeing the middle line.

Society's Tolerance to Violence against Women

Rongmei society seems to have become tolerant and apathetic to crimes and violence against women. Wife battering by drunken husbands, rising rape cases in society, constant fear of sexual assault by men in conflict situation brought about by our Naga people's struggle for sovereignty, clashes between the Indian military and the Naga undergrounds, infighting among the Naga underground factions, all these place women in vulnerable situation. There have been several rape incidents of Rongmei women including small baby girls. Wife battering by inebriated husbands are considered issues between husband and wife that need no interference from relatives or society. 'I suffer for the sake of my children' is what most of the exploited women say. Sexual assault and rape cases within the community are considered inter-clan matters to be solved by concerned relatives without any legal consolation for the victim.⁵⁹ The customary laws enforced in these cases are hardly in favor of the female victims but are taken advantage of by the male relatives for their self-interests like demanding land from the condemned party.

In 2012, following the rape of a Rongmei woman chilly hawker by four men in a truck on the intervening night of March 21 and 22, valley based activist groups came to Tamenglong to show their solidarity by conducting a rally. The turn-out of the local people was so dismal that they went away disappointed with the apathetic nature of the Rongmei public.

Even the religious bodies/ churches remain as silent spectators most of the time. They never empathize with the victims or show their solidarity. Society tries to find fault with their behavior and further stigmatize them. During the case of the five girls in domestic helpers'

59 There was however an incident in which a man who raped a woman was beaten to death by his relatives unintentionally in Tamenglong.

service in Malaysia and Singapore who became victims of sexual harassment but were rescued by Women and Child Rights groups, church people gathered where they were sheltered to admonish the already traumatized women. They even attempted to give a press release emphasizing that women like these should not bring bad name to our people again in this manner.⁶⁰

Rongmei Women Confronting Challenges

Women's voices for women's rights have been raised every now and then among the academic circles in writings and women conferences. But there has been no strong and sustained effort for action so far. Surely the awareness is growing among the young women through education and social media. At the grassroots, women are organizing themselves into Self Help Groups (SHGs) in order to help one another economically by borrowing at low interests from the group money rather than from money lenders at high interest rates thereby helping towards breaking the cycle of poverty. Several NGOs have been helping in forming SHGs by providing initial capital along with gender awareness seminars but these groups need constant encouragement and monitoring.

Every locality has a women's society or network. When alcoholism is rampant especially during election time, the womenfolk form themselves into groups and take turns to position themselves at key locations to check drunkenness and brawling, drunken driving, smuggling of liquor and sale of intoxicants (this is called *nisha bandh*). Sometimes they also ransack illicit liquor hubs, capture drug peddlers and drug users and even check gambling and revelry.

Zeliangrong Tanpui

Rongmei women have been engaged for years with their Zeme, Liangmai and Puimei sisters in working for the welfare of the society through an organization called Zeliangrong Tanpui also called Zeliangrong Women Front. It has been involved in maintaining peace in Zeliangrong areas, spearheading the *Nisha Bandh* movement, preservation and promotion of arts and culture and organizing demonstrations, rallies and seminars

60 As told by an NGO worker.

according to the need of the situation. Since its inception in 1982, Zeliangrong Tanpui has seized approximately 5000 (Five Thousand) litres of illicit country liquor from different places in Tamenglong district and handed the people over to the local police station for taking legal action.

Besides, in the wake of ethnic conflict among the hill tribes of Manipur since 1992 the organization has in two occasions detected the excesses of the Indian security forces in its action of counter insurgency and against the violation of human rights. The Zeliangrong Women Organization has sponsored public rally against the 11 Bihar Regiment for their heinous crimes of killing an innocent cultivator from Tamenglong Village in November, 1993. The cases of security forces' excesses at Longmai and Khumji Kaiba were also fought by the Zeliangrong women where they confronted with the security forces for their inhuman treatment of the innocent public and killing one disabled Namjokpou in the name of counter insurgency operation. When the Ahu/Barak Range Zeliangrong villages were under siege and were subjected to atrocious torture for a week by the 21st Rajputana Rifles in August 1995 and when all means had failed including the civil administration to rescue our people in distress, the Zeliangrong Tanpui strongly came out and confronted the army authorities and rescued more than 60 victims and took them to the hospitals.⁶¹ On the night of 31st October 2012, the women of Tamenglong spearheaded the torch bearing peace rally to protest against factional shootings in Tamenglong town area.⁶²

Rongmei Lu Phum (Rongmei Women's Organization)

Rongmei Lu Phum (RLP) which was formed in 2004 consists of all Rongmei women from the three States of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland and it was led by Panti Gonmei as President, Ph.Amunliu Gangmei as Vice President, Atina Gangmei as Secretary and Priscilla

61 "A Brief Report of The Zeliangrong Tanpui" presented by Ashinliu Remmei, President and D. Songdiliu Secretary, Zeliangrong Tanpui, Tamenglong, November 2, 1995.

62 Benjamin Gondaimei posted in in Women of Zeliangrong Facebook Group. Accessed on June 15, 2014.

Panmei as Asst. Secretary and G. Khamsinliu as the Treasurer. The Rongmei Women Organization/RLP is at present led by Panti Gonmei as President and Aram Pamei as Secretary.

Their activities are mentioned below.

- RLP/RWO has been involved in working for justice towards various rape victims. Till date, it has involved itself in fighting for seven rape cases in both the hill and valley. These works consist of sending fact finding teams, documentations, helping to file charge sheets against the culprits and condemning the acts through press releases and thereby pressurising the government to take lawful action against the culprits. It also provided financial help to the needy victims or sought compensation for the victims. The officials have witnessed court hearings and kept track of the proceedings.
- The President, Secretary and other officers have been part of 17 Fact Finding Team Visits in many cases of excesses, murder and human rights violations against civilians by Indian army and insurgent groups.
- The Organization has besides its own Conferences, organized several seminars and workshops on Mediation Skills, Non-Violence and Conflict Transformation, and a Friendly Football Match. It has felicitated 6 outstanding Rongmei women. In 2009, during the First RLP Conference a book called *Rongmei Lu Di* was published as souvenir. During this program, competitions in March Pass parade, Traditional Dancing Dress, Traditional Wedding Dress Model, Theme Song Competition in Traditional Tune, Football, Solo and Group Song, Debate and Games and Sports were organized. A Memorial Stone was erected in commemoration of the event.

4. Rongmei Lu Phum has been engaged in brokering peace and

I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me ... All I ask is that you respect me as a human being. – *Jackie Robinson, American Major League Baseball player, USA*

negotiation among conflicting groups and it took major part in taking care of deceased bodies during conflict and provided relief to refugees affected by inter-tribal clashes between the Zeme and Dimasa in Assam and aided victims of anti-conversion movements in various Rongmei villages.

5. RLP has been actively involved in campaigning against Tipaimukh Dam, Oil Exploration in tribal areas and many other issues.⁶³

Rongmei women and their associations are the guardians for the well being and harmony of the community. But their activities have been mainly community-oriented to solve day to day crisis in the society. Their activism has also been in support of the larger tribal bodies which fight against armed forces, against construction of mega dams, mining, and Land Use Policies and for alternative political arrangements for Nagas. The tribal apex bodies like Zeliangrong Union, Zeliangrong Baudi, Zeliangrong Youth Front and Rongmei Council are all male dominated organizations. Women's organizations such as Zeliangrong Women Union, Zeliangrong Pui Baudi (recently formed) and Rongmei Lu Phum are understood as women's wing of these apex bodies even though they may have been formed independently. They are expected to speak in the same tune as the 'parent' bodies. If they raise gender rights issues, they get minimal support from these bodies. Women's rights are taken as minor and individual issues in the context of the wider issues of the community and tribe.

In the overall tribal struggle in North East India, women's contribution to the struggle of our people as a whole are often not recognized or acknowledged. Women's concerns have been ignored and forgotten in the cause of the wider struggle and all policies that have been made for the tribals have overlooked their plight. Rongmei women are only beginning to be aware of this discrimination.

63 Aram Pamei, "Rongmei Lu Phum Kahoumei Khatni Taan Tanpat Kanmei," A Report presented on 5 March 2014 at Rongmei Lu Phum (RLP) Executive Committee Meeting held at RLP Office, Tarung.

The Way Ahead

Rongmei women like many other indigenous women do not see themselves as victims. Faced with discrimination, they have been forced to develop skills and strategies for their own survival, and for the survival of their people and culture. Rongmei women's activism has not yet taken the shape of a sustained women's rights movement. Sometimes women's issues were taken up on International Women's Day, etc. But Rongmei women are yet to actively take their voices and issues of women's Right to Equality to the level of legislation. No particular strategy seems to have been formulated to take the issues of women to the legislative level except sensitization on women's condition and rights or voices raised against discrimination of women now and then in few public and social media forums or write-ups by some concerned individuals. Unity, networking and sorority among women, long term strategy and organized action are the need of the hour.

On the one hand, the majority of Rongmei women are unaware of their situation and rights though they are actively contributing to the social and economic life of the society. On the other hand, many women are mentally empowered through education but are hindered from participating in the decision making process due to men-made social boundaries such as patriarchal customary practices and cultural roles and fundamental religious teaching.

The way forward would be to gain the support of men by creating awareness among the opinion makers such as the community leaders, teachers, social activists, church leaders, by raising awareness through education and by encouraging women to involve in changing the policies and practices that marginalize us. Women are often placed in a situation where they must deal with new challenges and effects without an informed perspective. They need equal access to information and training activities from concerned bodies so that a condition where

Freedom and Justice. If you have those two, it covers everything. You must stick to those principles and have the courage of your convictions. — *Ian Douglass Smith, politician, farmer and fighter pilot who served as Prime Minister of Rhodesia, Africa*

the men are the sole primary receivers and holders of information does not persist. Training and education will provide us with the skill to develop professionally, economically and involve politically. Attempts that allow for women's input and participation need to be scheduled according to their convenience keeping in mind the lives they lead and roles to fulfill as care givers and nurturers.

Awareness of and change in the status of women need to begin with the church which is the most powerful institution in today's Christian dominated Rongmei society. The Rongmei churches need to open their doors for women as equal partners in the church ministry. Teachers of religion need to change their rigid mindset and learn how to apply the liberal message of the Bible contextually. Customary laws which depend on oral traditions need to be modified so that no section of our society is discriminated and then codified according to the change of the times.

Above all, from the examples of women like Rani Gaidinliu who rose above her society to lead her people for freedom, and also of women like Dithuanliu Kamei, Lumgailiu Rongmei and other women leaders in the past and present time, we can still hopefully say that we can overcome whatever barriers that exist and rise above the male dominated society if women are united, possess courage and intellect, and our men supportive.

Man understands his life only when he sees himself in each one of his kind. – *Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time, Russia*

Tangkhul Shanao Long: A Continued Struggle and Emerging Trends

- Chonchuirinmayo Luithui Pheiray

Introduction

Indigenous peoples all over the world have experienced extreme human rights violation and different kinds of hardships in their struggle for self-determination. Similar is the situation of the Tangkhul Naga people.⁶⁴ Prolonged militarization has placed the people in a constant state of emergency where women have accounted for much of those affected by the conflict. They are seen as easy targets by the state armed forces and are subjected to various kinds of humiliations.

The Tangkhul society is a patriarchal and patrilineal society. Women in the Tangkhul society enjoy a much better position as compared to those of other patriarchal societies. However, their position within the community is limited by traditional practices and customs which are often repressive to the women. Yet, the Tangkhul women have been at the forefront in the struggle for self-determination, sustainable peace and conflict resolution.

Background

All the villages of the Tangkhuls like other Naga villages existed as independent republics bound together by a set of customary laws, traditional institutions and governance based on active participation of the community. This independent character of the Nagas has changed over time with the British occupation and post-colonial occupation by India. From the time of the British colonial period, the Nagas have been

64 Tangkhuls live in the Indo-Burma border in Ukhrul district and some parts of Senapati District in Northeast India and in the Somra Tract in upper Burma. It is difficult to ascertain the exact population. However, according to the 2011 Census (India), Ukhrul's population is 183,998 with a sex ratio of 943 females for every 1000 males. It is also to be noted that the census includes other communities residing in the district including Kukis, people from other parts of India. (<http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/377-ukhrul.html>)

struggling for their right to self-determination. When the British left the Indian sub-continent, the Naga territory was left divided between and within India and Burma against the expressed will of the Nagas. Since then, the Nagas have been fighting against the political control of both India and Burma and has also taken recourse to armed struggle. The response from India had been to heavily militarize the Naga areas spread in the states of Nagaland and parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. The Nagas in turn reacted to this with more and more people joining the armed struggle. Thus, the vicious cycle of armed confrontation continued till the late 1990s when the Government of India and the Naga armed groups entered into ceasefire agreements. Although military excesses have greatly reduced, the military and paramilitary forces of India continue to operate in the Naga areas even after the ceasefire agreements.

To suppress the Nagas' aspiration for their self-determination, the Indian state has adopted a number of tactics including military excesses. Protected by laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA), the cadres of the armed forces torture, kill, rape, and sodomize the Nagas, and burn down and loot their houses and granaries. This has severely and adversely affected the social structure and inherent human rights of the people.

During the British occupation, boundaries were drawn between the villages by the British according to the topography without respecting the sovereignty of each village. This created more discord than resolve boundary dispute between villages and tribes. Today, violent clashes between villages over boundary dispute are not unheard of. In addition, the British often entered or recorded the names of anybody who came to pay taxes as the village chief/ head man of a village causing a great deal of dissonance within the village and between villages. Unfortunately, the entries and records are being relied on and used as good documents by the present state administration in its affairs.

If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships – the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace.
– *Franklin D. Roosevelt, USA*

The ill-effects of the British occupation are likely to be discovered more as the people continue to unravel and understand it. What we do know now is that the Tangkhuls were not prepared at all to confront the British who were so different from their way of life with sophisticated weapons, different polity and justice administration, and totally alien concept of ownership of property including land and resources.

Making the situation worse was the imposition of electoral politics, a concept foreign to the Naga people whose governance and decision making process had been based on consensus. It closed the door for an open dialogue that was so relevant in a consensus democracy where the opinions of individual candidates became the sole foundation for generating public opinion and taking decisions. Once the foundation of open dialogue was destroyed, the governance structure also changed creating more division than bringing 'order' in the community.

Militarisation

*"After India declared our land as 'disturbed area', we saw all kinds of atrocities in the hands of the Indian army. We were afraid and terrified. We used to work the whole day and socialize in the evening, sometimes late into the night, but after the army started making regular visits in our villages, nobody ventured out of the house after sunset. There were instances in some villages where people did not want to continue or be part of the Village Council because they were often targeted by the army."*⁶⁵

The Tangkhuls are an agricultural community and therefore they work during daytime while evening is a time they socialize. It was during the evenings that they shared stories, sang songs together, brought their crafts and learned from each other. This is important for their existence as a community and as a people. But militarization brought an end to this. There have been many instances when they could not celebrate festivals or perform ceremonies which were central to their identity and sense of belonging to the community as an indigenous people.

Military operations along with modern form of education and advent of Christianity brought another cataclysmic change – the dying out of

65 Interview with M.P. Shimray (85 years old)

the Youth Centre⁶⁶ where the main learning took place. From the age of 7/8 onward, children started to learn traditional values, customary laws and practices, rituals and their meanings, history, community living, team work, social etiquette and decency, fair play, and building skills in taking social responsibility, art of group sharing and discussion, carpentry, weaving, and personal hygiene in the Youth Centre. In short, all the knowledge and skills of the community used to be handed down to the youth from the elders through the Centre.⁶⁷ The learning could be through and include songs, stories and dances.

Thus, when the youngsters stopped attending the Youth Centre, and when the people stopped gathering in the evenings, they stopped learning about their way of life. And there followed a huge gap in the continuation of their knowledge, customs and traditions as well as the traditional form of governance. Today, many youth as they enter into adulthood have not been able to adapt themselves to the role of decision makers or take up other responsibilities as leaders and elders of the community. On the other hand, many children dropped out of school because either their school had been turned into an army camp or destroyed or they were afraid or they could not afford it because the bread earner of the family had been incapacitated. Anxiety about their parents' and elders' vulnerability to atrocities easily destroyed the confidence of the children and the consequent fear psychoses were detrimental for their foundation of life.

The Nagas, in their struggle for self-determination, have always asserted their culture as integral to their identity as a people that can only come from collective experience. As history would tell, conflict tends to create situation which is nonflexible even in peace time and often gives further rise to more violence, malaise and other health issues including substance abuse and anxiety. This further takes away the chance to live as a people.

66 Known as Long Shim (in Tangkhul), Morung, etc. depending on the tribes

67 Luingam Luithui, "Indigenous Council System of Governance: The Case of Nagalim, 2003", An Independent Study Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Diploma in Community-Based Development, Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. Cf. Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, "The Indian Constitution, Law and the Nagas: A case study of Nagaland" in C.R. Bijoy et al, India and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (AIPP: 2010), p. 125

In spite of the innumerable cases of atrocities against the people, they never made it to the news headlines and the Indian state continued to commit all kinds of repressive tyrannical acts against the Nagas, violating their right to life, right to judicial remedy and fair trial, etc as well as denying their collective rights to live as a people for decades. As the relentless killing, torture and humiliating treatment, especially gender related violence, by the members of the Indian security forces continued, a pressing need was felt to form an organization of women to resist such inhumane conduct and to fight for their dignity and rights.

Birth of a Movement: Formation of Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL)

In the year 1974, during the first week of March, the 95 Border Security Forces (BSF) conducted operation on two Tangkhul villages, namely, Grihang and Ngaprum (now Kumram) in which many women were raped and molested in front of their men while men-folk were brutally tortured (besides stealing and robbing many valuable things from many houses). On 4th March, a young girl, Miss Rose Ningshen was raped by three BSF officers taking turns one after the other. Unable to bear the humiliation, she committed suicide on 6th March, 1974. This was just one of the thousands of incidents that happened and because of these people were living with intense insecurity and fear. But the incidents in Grihang and Kumram, especially the death of Miss Rose, became the driving force for the formation of an all Tangkhul women organization.

On April 9, 1974, a public meeting was called to show solidarity to all the victims of the brutalities inflicted by the Indian security forces. Thousands of people representing all the Tangkhul villages held a peace rally and gathered at Tangkhul Long Ground. Many publicly shared their anguish and asserted that the crime was not just against the women but against the whole community as a people. They submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister

I do not believe the greatest threat to our future is from bombs or guided missiles. I don't think our civilization will die that way. I think it will die when we no longer care – when the spiritual forces that make us wish to be right and noble die in the hearts of men. – *Lawrence Gould*

of Manipur to arrest and give befitting punishment to the culprits and to uphold and guarantee “women’s right for women’s dignity”.

It was against this backdrop that the process started for the formation of a woman organization and finally, on May 8, 1974, seven hundred and three women from 90 villages resolved to form an organization uniting all the Tangkhul women. Initially known as East District Women Association (EDWA), it was changed to Tangkhul Shanao Long (Tangkhul Women’s League) in 1981. Since 1975, the organization has been observing March 4 as its day every year in honour of Miss Rose Ningshen.

According to the Preamble of the Constitution of Tangkhul Shanao Long, the organization was formed to unite all the women of the Tangkhul villages and work together for their rights so as to live as free human beings with dignity; to unite in their endeavor for better livelihood, education, economy, society and family life irrespective of their situation in life.

The organization, since its birth, has come a long way. From confronting militarization and its excesses to promoting the human rights of the women and girls to taking active participation in the struggle for self-determination it has been able to actively respond and claim a place in the social milieu.

Tangkhul women have always been part of the social support system as care giver, nurturer and peace maker. They find no difficulty in mobilizing themselves at the grass-root level at times of crises and respond as required by the situation even in an informal set up. Thus, its formal structure has enabled it to play a significant role in the movements wherever it has been involved.

Structures and Functions

Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL), with “Unity for Justice” as its motto, is the highest body for women with its jurisdiction extending all over Tangkhul area; all the village women organizations/units have to

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. – *Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 - 1968), Baptist minister, leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, USA*

function under TSL. Every woman who has reached the age of fifteen can be a member of the organization. However, her membership will be confirmed only after she has paid the membership fee through her respective village unit. On special cases where there is huge presence of Tangkhul women beyond the Tangkhul area and where the TSL executive has given its approval, a unit can be set up in that area.⁶⁸

The organization headed by the President is run by an executive council comprising of not less than nineteen members but not more than 21 members.⁶⁹ The General Assembly⁷⁰ is the highest decision making body.

Campaigns and Activities

From tackling militarization to contributing as peace maker to taking part in the political process, the organization has been able to actively involve itself in times of exigencies. In the last forty years of its existence, the organization has taken up a number of activities and campaigns. Some of them are discussed below.

Response to Military Excesses: Immediately after its formation, the members of the Tangkhul Shanao Long took up the case of Grihang and Kumram to the court. To raise funds for the case, they approached the earning and willing members of the society in the Ukhrul District. Around that time, while lobbying for the case, the organization met many influential persons and organizations. One of the outcomes was the formation of All Manipur Women Action Committee (AMWAC) in August 1974 represented by 29 organizations, thus further taking forward the cause of justice for women.⁷¹

The organization has also contributed significantly towards dealings

68 Section B of Chapter II, Constitution of Tangkhul Shanao Long. An example is the Tangkhul Shanao Long Delhi (TSLD) that was established in 2014. The unit has been actively working on issues including child and human trafficking and gender empowerment

69 Section 1 of Chapter XIII, Constitution of Tangkhul Shanao Long

70 According to Section 1(a) of Chapter XI, Constitution of TSL, the General Assembly is to be represented by not less than 2 persons from each unit and the number increases reciprocal to the number of women in each unit.

71 The case was settled out of court by the villagers of Grihang and Kumram.

with other cases of military excesses within the community. They canvassed support to punish Captain NL Sharma under the martial court for assaulting a public leader in 1981; they filed a habeas corpus in Guwahati High Court in another case where two men were taken away by the 21st Sikh Regiment.⁷²

On August 12, 2009, the Assam Rifles (AR) attacked⁷³ the NSCN between Shakok and H. Godah situated in Ukhrul District that led to the death of two NSCN personnel. People travelling along the area were detained and were used as human shield to deter the cadres of NSCN from shooting. The personnel of AR threatened that they would shoot if any of its members were shot. From August 12 to August 15, the neighboring areas were placed under siege. People were detained for long hours without food, water or other basic necessities. They were made to switch off their phones. It evoked massive public protest reiterating their desire for peace and justice. However, the Assam Rifles did not allow any civil society including TSL to visit the affected villages. Still then, on August 15, women peace keepers numbering more than 3000 forced through the barricades set up by the Assam Rifles at Shangshak village and they managed to visit the affected villages.

Campaign against Alcoholism and Substance Abuse: In the 1970s, alcoholism and related violence became a serious issue. Besides loss of wealth, the number of domestic violence also increased. To address this, the organization took up prohibition campaign checking the sale and use of alcohol. The organization along with women from other communities in the State of Manipur lobbied with their respective administrations for assistance to check the sale and consumption of alcohol in the state. It has been recorded that alcohol related crime and violence went down exponentially during that time.⁷⁴

72 TSL, Tangkhul Shanao Long Thotchan 8th May 1974 – February 1999 (History Committee Tangkhul Shanao Long: 1999), p.19

73 A ceasefire agreement was made in 1997 between the Government of India and the NSCN for a political dialogue (instead of armed confrontation) and since then it has been extended from time to time till date.

74 TSL, Tangkhul Shanao Long Thotchan 8th May 1974 – February 1999 (History Committee Tangkhul Shanao Long: 1999), p. 13

Unable to cope with the social unrest caused by the militarization, many youths took to drugs and alcohol. In addition, in the 1980s, many youths have resorted to such abuse due to the absence of options for entertainment and extracurricular activities in which the youth center had earlier played an important role. Since then, alcoholism and substance abuse seem to have taken a life of its own, increasing manifold in the last few years and these have badly affected the health, economy and social cohesion of the community. Many young women have been widowed, either because of the effects of armed conflicts or drug abuse. More children have also dropped out of schools. TSL, along with other traditional organizations and NGOs, has been persistent in addressing these problems through workshops, seminars and checks on sale and use of alcohol, drugs and other substances of solvent abuse.

Social Security and Services: Indigenous women play a very critical role in the maintenance and growth of their society. They are the ones who provide the support system when required. TSL through its units and members have been able to quickly mobilize and extend help to people in need at times of catastrophe such as loss of homes due to fire, displacements,⁷⁵ etc.

TSL has conducted a number of handicraft trainings including knitting, weaving, etc and other vocational courses. Their main objective is to enable the participants to become self-reliant and also for the continuance of the traditional weaving techniques – an important indigenous knowledge. According to Chapter XXI of its Constitution, the TSL aims to work for the promotion of culture and traditions as practiced from their forefathers' time. This includes the maintenance of traditional attires and dresses and production of new designs.

The organization had also made attempts to encourage women's participation in sports and had started the East District Women Football Association. Through this, many women were able to take

75 Displacement is not common in Tangkhul area. Where it had occurred was mainly due to fear of persecution by the state security forces and people most often return to their homes. But in recent cases, one of the main causes of displacement is developmental aggression and it is mostly a permanent one.

part at the National Football championship. Besides sport, TSL has also been awarding scholarships and acknowledgements to girls so as to encourage them in their studies and to promote academic excellence among the girl students.

Pukreila, the Peace-Makers: Tangkhul women's role as peace keepers is rooted in their traditional role as Pukreila/Pha-khreila⁷⁶ where a woman would run between two warring groups (who could be - her relatives by blood and by marriage, her maiden village and husband's village or her maiden tribe and husband's tribe) to end the violence and make peace between the two adversaries. The society has given a social sanction to this traditional practice of women as peacemakers and the Tangkhul women have carried forward this practice to keep peace even with the Indian security forces.

In 2009, from January 19 to February 2, the whole village of Shirui was laid under siege by 17 Assam Rifles to drive out cadres of the NSCN-IM, a Naga armed group, stationed at the periphery of the village. The Shirui villagers and people in the adjoining area could not carry out any agricultural or other livelihood activities. The traditional bodies and civil society were not allowed to enter the area where the Naga armed personnel were camping. In this volatile situation, the women from the neighboring as well as distant villages intervened as peace keepers and took turns to keep vigil at the site day and night. Their restraining presence checked the likelihood of an armed confrontation between the NSCN-IM and the Assam Rifles.

Emerging Issues and Challenges

The Tangkhul women have been playing multiple roles according to the situation they have been placed as human rights defenders, as peace makers, as knowledge holders, promoters of indigenous knowledge and

76 Its origin is not known and in some of the villages located at the Northern region, it is known as Pha-khreila. The name denotes the status of the married women. Pha means body and khrei means higher or bigger. In Phungcham village, it is said that once a woman was married, except for her husband, no man could touch her as she has attained a special status. Those who were married were considered as pukreilas between her families: by blood and by marriage. The practice is common to other Naga tribes also.

as conscience keepers of the society; and, accordingly, the Tangkhul Shanao Long has evolved. Its movement has been a continuing process and the Tangkhul women as members of the organization as well as individuals have persisted in their goals to promote and safeguard the dignity and human rights of every woman while addressing issues such as right to decision making and property rights, human trafficking, developmental aggression, etc. Some of the current issues that Tangkhuls are facing and which also need to be dealt with urgently are discussed below. These are issues that cannot be identified as separate entities but are interlinked and need to be looked at as such. At the same time, they should not be read as mere gender issues since the whole community is affected.

Decision Making: In spite of the fact that women's contribution in the society is obvious in every area, they are marginalized in the decision making processes. It is rare to find Tangkhul women participating in the processes or taking up the leadership roles and actively taking part in the governance within a set up sanctioned by the state. It is much rarer to find women within the traditional institutions such as the village councils or the traditional justice administration. Some of the reasons for this include the traditional systems which are dominated by men and the stereotyping of women with the traditional roles as care givers and of men as earners.

One factor that has to be kept in context is how we define decision making. In most situations, Tangkhul women have contributed where major decisions are taken concerning their families and community on issues including agriculture, finance, health, land, etc. But these are decisions taken at the informal level and within a group of more closely knit members and what remains to be seen is their participation and acceptance of their contribution at the formal decision making process where men have been the main players. In situations involving larger number of people or villages such as land disputes, development projects, etc much of the decisions are based on the opinions of men without taking into account their effects on women and children.

Setting the conditions before you make an agreement is better than having an argument in the middle of the work. – <i>A Yemeni Proverb</i>
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The Tangkhul Shanao Long has been lobbying with the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL), the highest traditional body of the Tangkhuls, for participation of women in the decision making with voting rights in TNL. According to the Constitution of TNL, every Tangkhul individual is a member of the organization.⁷⁷ Nowhere in the Constitution is it stated that men should solely be responsible in the functioning of its office and in the decision making. The flaw apparently is in its structure. The TNL Assembly, made up of the representatives from each village (according to the number of households), is the highest decision making body. The representatives from each village are not less than two persons: the village chief or the headman and others who are elected by the village.⁷⁸ In all the villages, the representatives are elected from and by the village council which is generally constituted of the village chief, the clan heads and clan representatives – all men. Thus, a woman representative in the TNL remains a challenge.⁷⁹

Ringui Village

Ringui village is about 35 km from Ukhrul with a population of about 2000. It was declared in a public meeting of the village in December, 2014, that women of the village must be allowed to participate in the village court and the offices of the church. In the course of their discussion, it was pointed out that women's participation in the decision making process was there in the oral narrative but it was so rarely happening and soon, it was regarded as something that was prohibited. Thus, the people of Ringui put it down in writing that women should be welcome in the village court as members of village council and to hold offices in the church. What was significant about this decision was that it was the men who initiated the process. It was also decided that women should be chosen as clan representatives and should not be made only to give their affirmation to what their men have decided. Thus, we may soon witness women formally participating in the decision making process even till TNL.

77 Article 4, Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) Riyan (Constitution)

78 Article 6, TNL Riyan

79 There are instances where women had been members of the village council but these are very rare.

The challenge can only be overcome by change brought about at the grass root level, i.e. the village council. Given below is a case of such change witnessed in a village in Ukhrul.

Property Rights: Tangkhul women do not have property right per se but this has to be appreciated in the context of how land ownership was understood before their land was colonized and foreign concepts of ownership and property were placed on them. There are clan's land and community land with universal access to its members. There is some level of exclusivity in the case of fields meant for paddy farming. Otherwise, use of land is seen necessarily not for the purpose of possession but to sustain livelihood; and much of the people's relations, culture, customs and way of life have evolved around land.

During marriage, a bride could ask her husband's family for a particular field and after marriage she has a lot of say in how to use the land inherited by her husband. The only thing is that she could not sell it off without her husband's consent. And if she is a widow, she has to consult her husband's family and sell it to the nearest kin. If she has no sons, she could enjoy the land only till her death. After her death, it goes to the legal heir who must take up the responsibility of looking after her daughters. Not much has changed on this regard as a concept; but in practice, there are cases where the legal heir had taken control of the property and used it as he pleased while the woman was still living.

There has also been a shift in the ownership of properties. In the last thirty years or so, many Tangkhul women have taken up different careers and they have bigger say on how their earnings are spent including buying and selling of properties. Now there are many women who own land. So it would be wrong to even say that women do not have property rights, except over the ancestral land.

Migration, Urbanization and Market Economy: Lack of economic opportunities, inability to meet the market/money economy and the prolonged armed political conflicts have caused many Tangkhul

Trust is that there should be no difference between what you do and say and what you think. – *Hazrat Umar Ibn al-Khattab (R.A.), the 2nd caliph of Prop Muhammad*

youths to migrate to urban cities seeking jobs and employments.⁸⁰ Many of them are engaged in low-paid jobs such as waitresses/waiters, sales persons, security guards, etc. There has been a gradual increase in the number of persons employed in higher levels such as managers in hospitality industries and companies, media houses, as teachers in schools and universities etc., many of them being women. Sadly, many women are also forced into prostitution because of poverty.

Because of their close tie with their land, it can be difficult for the migrants to adjust to a drastically new cultural environment. The other side to this is that they face extensive hardships such as racism, finding place to live, high house rent, lack of security, language problem, etc. It also becomes difficult for the elders of the community to pass on the indigenous knowledge to these youths for the continuation of their cultural and spiritual integrity which will ultimately safeguard their identity as a people. However, the migrants on their part attempt to maintain their relationship with their land and people by setting up organizations with their functioning style similar to that of the traditional institutions back home.

There is also decrease in the food production because of the reduced man power and many families are buying essential food items such as pesticide-infused rice, vegetables and other basic needs from outside.⁸¹ In addition to the lack of manpower there is also the dependence on agro-chemicals like pesticides or inorganic manure to increase crop production to meet the need of the market economy of the place where they have been drawn.

As opposed to people leaving their homes, there is the pressing issue of 'outsiders', migrating into their land in search of work. These migrants are working as porters and laborers but most of them have set up businesses controlling the market economy and the cash flow. Some of them have also married Tangkhul women and have taken up names of

80 They are in addition to the thousands of youngster who have left their homes for education

81 Because of the lack of data, it is difficult to tell how this is affecting the health but we may infer roughly from the mortality rate and increase in the number of life style related diseases such as hypertension, heart attacks, low bone density, diabetics, etc.

the women's family which is against the traditional practice⁸² and so is anathema to the Tangkhuls in general.

There has been a rapid increase in the population of Ukhrul town due to the viability of its market economy and education. This has placed a lot of strain on the natural resources such as water and firewood which are needed for daily sustenance. Generally, firewood is brought from their villages but people, mostly women, are forced to fetch water from very far places.

Thus, migration and urbanization along with market economy may gradually deplete their resources and destroy their indigenous knowledge and traditional values and relationships unless a balance to these adverse consequences is maintained.

Developmental Aggression: Tangkhuls are living in areas rich in natural resources and minerals such as chromium, lime stone, valuable bio-resources, etc. With the market economy gaining momentum, these resources are being targeted as the base for extractive industries. Adding on to this is the construction of large dams which has extensively affected the way of life of the people who are dependent on land and natural resources for their survival.

Tangkhuls have a close connection with their land and any change in the relationship with their land including land holding system, control and topography is bound to greatly affect them as a people. What has to be asked is whether their free, prior and informed consent have been obtained; whether the affected community has enough access to information for them to determine and give their consent; whether impact assessments on the environment as well as the community have been conducted.

Here again, Tangkhul women have been actively participating in resistance against projects that are being taken up against the will of

82 A woman once married must join her husband's clan which must not be the same clan as hers and their relationship must not fall within any of the prohibited relationships. Therefore, where her husband takes the name of her clan by birth, it falls within the prohibited relationship.

the people. That women have important roles to play for sustainable development is no longer a moot point and we can only take this forward by giving more space to the women in the decision making process while respecting how development is perceived by indigenous communities.

Congclusion: Tangkhul Women's Role in Struggle for Self Determination

The world over, there are infinite number of movements and debates on gender equality. Keeping this scenario in mind, we have to understand the role Tangkhul women have been playing in the struggle for self-determination. They have always been at the forefront in the struggles for self-determination in different capacities. Unfortunately, gendered movements including those against alien occupation and system born out of alien occupation are seen as issues that are confined solely to women because often they are related to efforts to protect women.

As stated erstwhile, their role in the society has been restrained by how the Tangkhuls have come to understand traditional values and customary practices. Along with this is the influence of an alien social structure where women are often treated as second class citizens. And what they are left with is a system that tends to underestimate the contribution of women whether it is in economy or politics. This, in turn, has greatly influenced how their contribution in the political resistance has been defined.

However, when we look within the Naga context, Tangkhul women's assertion for gender equality and equity has much to do with the struggle for right to self-determination. Thus, their confrontation against military suppression, their demand for space in the decision making, their campaign against domestic violence and alcohol and substance abuse, etc. have played a part in the fight for self-determination.

Indigenous peoples all over the world have insisted that their right to self-determination is dependent on their identity as indigenous people,

<p>Force tells weak strong for a moment; truth tells right from wrong all the time. – A <i>Chinese Proverb</i></p>
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which in turn is closely linked with their cultural integrity, language, traditional attires, indigenous knowledge, etc. These are areas where women's role is vital because their preservation and continuity largely depend on the knowledge and skills of the care givers. Thus, looking beyond the movements for gender equality, women have always played a part in their struggle for right to self-determination.

The birth of Tangkhul Shanao Long is, in itself, a testimony of the Tangkhul women's contribution to the struggle for self-determination. It has come a long way from its initial years of fighting against militarization; and today, the issues have expanded manifold covering developmental aggression, participation in decision making, human trafficking and preservation of traditional knowledge. These are factors that go closely with the assertion of the right to self-determination; and, therefore, devaluing and marginalizing women's voices can only have a detrimental effect on the struggle for self-determination.

The Tangkhul Shanao Long has come to be recognized as an integral part of the social structure - an important social institution. Their activities have underscored their ability to sacrifice and have brought out the forum's importance, not only for women but the whole Tangkhul community. This is also to acknowledge that many men had contributed in its formation and likewise, the organization can only be carried forward with support from every member of the community.

Prophet Muhammad said, "A strong person is not the person who throws his adversaries to the ground. A strong person is the one who contains himself when he is angry". – *Narrated by Hazrat Abu Hurayrah (R.A.), Recorded by Bukhari*

The Socio-Political Status of Women in Tarao Society

- K. Choirita

Introduction

The Tarao with a population of about 950 is the smallest tribe in Manipur. In spite of their small population, the government of India has recognized them as one of the Scheduled Tribes on 8th January, 2003, after a prolonged struggle, for their distinctiveness in traditions, cultures, folklores, folktales, ornaments, music, dresses and dances from the rest of the other major tribes. The Tarao is one of the oldest indigenous communities. The Taraos were mentioned as early as 1263 AD in the Royal Chronicle, *NingthourolLambuba*⁸³ reflecting their involvement in the Manipur State affairs.

The Taraos are geographically located in five villages namely Bukthrol, Leishokching, Heikakpokpi, Khuringmul, Sanaphai, Khulairam, in Chandel District and Sinakeithei in Ukhrul district. Of the five villages, *Bukthrol (Laimanai)* is the oldest while the rest are its offshoots.

The Taraos are a patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal and ultimogeniture society speaking “*Taraotrong*” which has been classified as a Tibeto-Burman language. In the past, the Taraos had four exogamous clans all of which had a common ancestor. A present, it is a tri-clan society. Khulpu and Tlangsa have merged into one clan – Tlangsa. Marriage within the clan is considered incestuous and is therefore prohibited.

CLAN	LINEAGES	
	Olden times	Present times
1. Khulpu-en	Khulpu	Khulpu is now not a separate clan but a lineage of Tlangsa Clan.
2. Katrimsa	1) Katrimsa 2) Tuiilamthlang 3) Sanoisanei 4) Lunglaan 5) Toleksanei	1) Katrimsa 2) Tuiilamthlang 3) Sanoisanei

CLAN	LINEAGES	
	Olden times	Present times
3. Tlangsa	1) Khulpu 2) Khulan 3) Rabdou 4) Mathangmanei	1) Khulpu 2) Khulan 3) Mathangmanei
4. Chanasa	1) Chana 2) Leikhan 3) Thamou-en 4) Tleitlap	1) Chana 2) Leikhan 3) Thamou-en

A Tarao village is traditionally and independently administered by a group of elders representing all the four clans known as *Phungreija Changreija* under the leadership of *Khulpu*. Since the emergence of the people from the cave, according to the oral history, *Khulpu* became the undisputed leader as the escape of the people from the tiger prowling at the mouth of the cave was because of his extraordinary feat. He occupied a dual position among the people. He acted as the politico-religious head of the village. A change came into the administration system with the introduction of the post *khulakpa*. *Khulakpa* is a Tarao term which is derived from two words “*khu*” meaning ‘village’ and “*lakpa*” meaning ‘administrator’. This norm was followed till 1962. After this, village administration began to function with the following posts: *Ningthou*; *Senapati*; *Khulakpa*; *Lunglakpa*; *Pakhanglakpa*; *Naharakpa*; *Ruithil*; *Keirak*; *Ramrak*; *Matarpu*; *Tongpra*; *Chingsanglakpa*; *Mantri*; *Ningollakpa*; *Keirungpa*; *Sellungpa* and *Changroi*. The first four posts are the most important and are called ‘*Chum*’ meaning ‘immovable’. They are equivalent to cabinet rank while the rest of the posts are executive and called ‘*Aktloh Akhal*’.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. Traditionally, they practiced jhum cultivation and it is still practiced in *Bukthrol (Laimanai)* village while the rest are either engaged in wet rice cultivation or other local handicrafts, where no land is available. Traditionally, the land belongs to the people as a whole. In other words, the whole land is the

When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it-always. - *MK. Gandhi*

common property of the people even though they have a hereditary *khullakpa* in the village. *Khullakpa* is the head of the village and is the land owner. However, he has no authority of his own to dispose or sell the land without the knowledge and approval of his cabinet. In case of any land dispute with the neighbouring villages/communities, the whole villagers are involved under the leadership of the village *khullakpa*. Thus, the land is collectively owned by the people including the *khullakpa*.

Traditionally, the tribe has a team working system starting from the felling of trees to the storing of grains into the granaries. The youths engage themselves in voluntary team organisations and help all the needy in their agricultural work. Every seasonal work ends in a joyous spirit. Besides agricultural practices, some villagers engage themselves in handicrafts, basketry, weaving, carpentry, and also wage earning in seasonal works.

In the olden days, the Tarao people had their own unique religious beliefs and practices. There was no specific term for their religion. However, as they believed in a supreme being *Rapu*, they can be called *Rapuning* (believers in *Rapu*). Besides the belief in *Rapu*, they believed in goddess *Shangkuh* and the lesser spirits. *Rapu* was the master of all, goddess *Shangkuh* was their saviour and protector while the spirits were their enemies. Today, they have abandoned that belief and embraced Christianity disregarding the traditional religious values.

Women in Tarao Society

Traditionally, women are considered less important compared to her counterpart in the society though men depend much on the women for most activities. Male enjoy more powers, authorities and privileges in private as well as in public sector because of the patriarchal system and the work of women is not well recognized and given less attention. The society attributes different qualities to men and women where men are

It is the oldest ironies that are still the most satisfying: man, when preparing for bloody war, will orate loudly and most eloquently in the name of peace. – Alan Moore (born 1953), author, UK

encouraged to be tough, not emotional and less sensitive while women are taught to be open-minded, fragile, emotional, sensitive and timid. The works performed by women are not recognized and their roles in the family and in the society are given less importance compared to those of men.

As a Baby Girl

Right after the marriage, either by means of elopement or proper engagement, the family is established. And when a baby, whether it's a boy or a girl, is born in the family it is considered as a blessing from God Almighty. However, a baby boy is preferred over a girl though there is no distinction or differences in the degree of celebration and happiness when a child is born. When a baby girl is born in the family, normally, the father's sister would approach the parents of the girl child for her hand to be her future daughter-in-law. If it ever happens eventually, this type of marriage is known as *Mouhai*. The proposal would be kept secret until the children are grown up and reach marriageable age. It is the most preferred system of marriage in the olden days so as to continue the oneness and bond of love in the family tree.

The Taraos follow certain distinct customary practices to let people know if the new-born baby in the family is a boy or a girl. When a baby girl is born her umbilical cord would be cut off and dumped on the left side of the main entrance (door) of her house, while it would be dumped on the right side if the baby is a boy. Even though there are certain favoritisms over the sex (gender) of their children in the minds of parents, it is never shown in their treatment. A striking feature of a girl child is that she acts as a constant helper and a companion to her mother especially in the domestic works.

As a Daughter

When a girl has reached adolescence, customarily and traditionally she has to perform various duties and responsibilities in regard to

The foundation of an empire is art and science. Remove them or degrade them and the empire is no more. – William Blake (1757-1827), poet, painter, printmaker, UK

family, youth and village. In the olden days, all the teenagers, both girls and boys, would be placed separately in a peer group called *Loom* in a common house called 'Inn' under 'Naharakpa', in-charge of youth's affair. The quality of a wise and good wife was seen or recognized through her children, husband and household activities. To be a successful woman in the family one should be adorned with the characteristics of modesty, good character/morality, obedience to parents and elders and hospitality in the society. Since the girls would one day get married and become mothers/wives these qualities were taught and learnt during their stay in the *Inn*. Besides, they would be taught customary folk songs, cultural dances, folk tales, and music. The main reason for keeping the youths in groups under strict rules and close watch was to prevent premarital affairs, unwanted and premature pregnancy for these were considered to bring great shame and disgrace to the family and tribe as a whole.

The Tarao tribe is rich in its cultural heritage. The traditional culture is expressed in different forms such as costumes, ornaments, songs, dances and festivals. These different varieties of costumes and ornaments are used by both the sexes in group wise – old men, young men, women, maidens, and dancers.⁸⁴ Young maidens had certain dresses and hair cut system distinct from others through which they could be recognized. They kept fringed hair and wore *puurekthriing* mekhela and *puunthlehlhna* shawl most of the time. However, after the advent of Christianity, all these practices have been kept aside.

The Church stresses much on the importance of virginity and purity in one's life before marriage by inculcating the values of Christian life. Family devotion/worship also plays an important role in bringing up and training the children in the fear of the Lord. God-fearing parents would deal with their daughter(s) seriously from the word of God once they know that they have reached the adolescence period and instill in them the values of Holy Marriage. In the olden days, most of the girls were unable to marry men of their choice because of family objection

84 M. Bejuan, Tarao Dress & Ornaments, A Seminar paper, Unpub. Read on 17/6/1992, Leishokching, 1992

but today children are given more freedom to choose their future partner. Marriage is a major transition in the life of a daughter because her future rests there.

As a Wife

Traditionally, once a Tarao lady gets married, her relationship with the in-laws is stronger than with her natal family. She would establish close and intimate ties with her husband's family by shouldering full responsibility of the domestic affairs. If the marriage is by elopement, Tarao custom demands that a boy should stay at his father-in-law's house for a minimum of three years and serve his father-in-law as a bride price which we call *Meilouseh*. During his stay there he would help his in-laws in whatever ways he can and try to please them. On completion of the term, he would go to his house with his wife with the blessings from his father-in-law.

Custom demands that wife should be submissive to her husband, and also be humble, devoted, kind hearted, faithful, loving and generous in her dealings with her neighbours. She is not only engaged with the daily domestic works at home, but is also fully responsible for children's welfare. Husband would remain as a nominal head getting all the credits and lion's share of every success of the family.

Traditionally, husband is responsible for earning while wife manages the house and the family. However, in most of unemployed families both earning and management are done by the wife in the family. Moreover, household chores, raising children, and even decision making are entirely the responsibility of the wife. She would get up early in the morning and start working while children are still in bed, prepare them to go to school and would engage in day time work while children are at school, then return and prepare dinner and would even work till late at night. Besides getting herself engaged in agricultural works, she would also weave traditional shawls and mekhela for extra income. Above all, the status of motherhood is clearly marked by her potential fertility to conceive a child so as to continue the patrilineage.

Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war. – <i>Maria Montessori (1870-1952), physician, educator, Italy</i>

Engagement, Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance:

Marriage takes place either through proper engagement or elopement. The first is of two kinds. One is an engagement following the social custom i.e. marriage of a boy with mother's brother's daughter which is the most preferred marriage and is called *Mouhaikuung*; marriages of father's sister's daughter are considered incestuous and prohibited. The marriage is arranged when the boy and the girl are of marriageable age. The parents of the boy approach the parents of the girl for her hand (*Mouhai*). Then a function called *Silukngathal* formalizes the marriage and the two live as a husband and a wife. In case the boy refuses to comply with such arrangement, he is fined with a pitcher of rice beer, a pig, and a plot of jhum land. The last one is given to the parents of the bride, while the other two are consumed by the village councilors and the people. Such custom is called *Leichoihna*. The other kind is the marriage of a boy and a girl through the usual process of engagement where individuals select their own mates but outside one's clan.

Elopement is an age-old practice. Though it is not sanctioned by the social customs, it is an acceptable form of marriage. In such cases, both the parties are equally fined – a pitcher of rice beer as well as a pig each - which are consumed by the gathering of village councilors and other concerned people to settle the case. In cases when premarital relationship takes place leading to the pregnancy of the girl, the village council presses her to produce her counterpart before the council and on finding him, both are fined equally. They can either live together or get separated but the boy must provide whatever is required for the upbringing of the child to the mother till the time when the child is given back to the father. If they are not separated, the couple lives together at the residence of the girl for three years to perform *meilouseh*. Marriage within the same clan, known as *Kajuur*, is prohibited. According to the custom, both must be fined a cow each and they are forced to separate. If they do not comply with the order of the village council, they are ostracized and expelled from the village.

To force oneself to believe and to accept a thing without understanding is political, and not spiritual or intellectual. – *Gautama Buddha, India*

Divorce is strictly restricted in the Tarao community. But if at all unavoidable, it can be sought by any of the parties. If a man divorces his wife, he must pay a pig, a plot of jhum field and money to his wife. And if it is the wife who seeks the divorce, she must return all the expenses incurred at the time of their marriage and also the bride price. However, these days, customs are not strictly maintained and even the village council could not dispense justice. Women have become victims in this modern money-controlled male dominant society.

Since time immemorial, the Taraos have been practicing the custom of distributing parent's wealth or inheritance among the brothers in the family. In the absence of male heir in the family, the inheritance would go the eldest man of his clan who is expected to look after the welfare of the family until the girl children are fully grown up and married. He is also responsible for finding suitable partners for the girls for establishing families.

Economic Sphere

The main means of livelihood for the Tarao people is agriculture. They practice both jhum/shifting and wet types of cultivation. Some people own tractor, bulls or buffaloes to plough the paddy fields while most people depend on handicrafts, handlooms and basketry besides agricultural engagements. The people, most of whom comprise women, go to the forest to cut bamboos for making mats, baskets, fishing nets, fans and sell them in the nearby market. Besides this occupation in handicraft, some women are also engaged in weaving and embroidering shawls (*Puun*), *Inkhuh* (wrap around for women), bags (*thoong*), sweaters and neck-tie etc for supplementing family income. They would sit and weave the whole day during off season of agriculture and also at night after all the household works are done. Since the Tarao society is patriarchal in nature all the properties or inheritance would be divided among the brothers without any portion or share left for the daughters. Women in the Tarao society play an important role in

Realization is the only goal. When realization comes into the heart, all arguments cease and divine knowledge shines forth. – *Ramakrishna Paramahansa, India*

financial management of the family. Most of the Taraos employed in government services are males. Since women are expected to leave their home to go to their husbands' house, the job opportunities are often prioritized to men of the family. In recent times, things have gradually changed. People have started giving equal value and treatment to both boys and girls in the family. Even inheritance of properties and status are equally divided irrespective of gender. This instance is highlighted in the following case studies:

A woman born and brought up from an orthodox Tarao parents faced discrimination from her parents. She was constantly considered worthless and therefore not given any opportunity for education, nor was she given any property at the time of her marriage. As a result she led a miserable life. Meanwhile, in another family, the parents saw their children as gift of God and thus treated equally. All their children irrespective of their gender were given good education. The daughter became a doctor and became a blessing not only for the family but also for the Tarao people at large.

Political Sphere

The *Taraos* are deeply rooted in their traditional values having rigid customary pattern to be followed. The general understanding of the Tarao is that women are inferior and weaker than men; therefore women are not allowed to speak at public gatherings. The customary law of the village denies equal rights to women as to men in the political or administrative sphere. Traditionally, all the political posts of the village are open only to men.

However, in the recent times, the *Chotnu Jurei*, the apex organization of all Tarao women, under the leadership of Mrs. K. Tongam,⁸⁵ has been demanding for the inclusion of women representatives in the Village council by way of creating the post of *Ningollakpa* (women caretaker). Debate continues without any concrete result and it remains a great challenge for women.

85 K. Tongam, former President, ChotnuJurei (Women's Apex Organisation of the Taraos)

Religious Sphere: Local Church

The administrative set up of a local church and village council is quite different. The Local Church administrative set-up is established based on the teachings of Jesus Christ while village council is based on the customs, cultures and traditions of a particular tribe. Based on Christian doctrine, there is no discrimination based on gender in Tarao society. Women take equal part in the local church administration. Women have been inducted as deaconess, accountant and treasurer. In all the churches of Tarao Baptist Association, women are not ignored. They are given special place in decision making of any church developmental programmes. In the Baptist Youth Department, women are given prominent roles.

Tarao Baptist Association

Christianity came to the Tarao people in the early 1940s. The first Christian missionaries were Thoma Roel and Serbum Ngamdil. The apex religious organization, Tarao Baptist Association (TrBA) was formed in 1988 and affiliated to the Manipur Baptist Convention. Since the inception of TrBA, the most significant position, Executive Secretary was held by men till early 2010. However, in August 2010 till 2012, this post was given to Ms K. Lotus as she was found qualified and capable. Besides this, women have always held the post of women secretary and women committee chairperson.

Roles of Tarao Women in Bringing Change

ChotnuJurei, the apex women's body of the Taraos, was established in 1996 under the leadership of Mrs. K. Tonga and M. Khamningkham as its President and Secretary respectively. Earlier it existed as Tarao Women Society (TWS), a sub-ordinate body to Tarao Tribe Union (TTU), the Tarao Apex body.

Chotnu Jurei is mainly involved in uplifting the social and political status of women. It also strives for preserving art, culture and traditional

To know oneself is to study oneself in action with another person. — Bruce Lee (1940-1973), martial artist, teacher, actor, philosopher, film director, Chinese-American

values especially the fundamental rights and dignity of Tarao women. It is also actively involved in fighting and eradicating social evils such as alcoholism, drug addiction, crimes, in rescuing sexually abused children by opening rehabilitation centres, promoting child care, organizing awareness camps on health and education, etc. It also safeguards women's right and privileges, fights against rape and molestation, and notifies women's grievances to the concerned higher authorities. Above all, educating women to defend themselves from socio-economic exploitation, political domination and military repression was its prime concern. From time to time it also conducts literary meet for the students. It also works very closely with the women groups of other neighbouring villages and communities. Its area of jurisdiction covers the whole of Tarao villages.

On the other hand, Women Fellowship, the religious apex body strives for the spiritual growth and unity under the leadership of Women Secretary of Tarao Baptist Association. It also conducts seminars, workshops, camps, gospel Olympic and crusades for the holistic transformation in people's lives. Triennial Fellowship – a gathering of all Taraos– takes place once every three years to enhance cordial relationship.

Except in the village administrative set up, women are included in the decision making processes of other organizations like Tarao Tribe Union and Tarao Baptist Association by inducting them as executive members.

Village Chotnu

A Village *Chotnu* is a womenfolk's society or organization of a village functioning directly or indirectly under the guidance and instruction of *Tarao Chotnu Jurei* and Village Authority. Its main power and function, and area of jurisdiction are confined only to the village.

I am a firm believer that language and how we use language determines how we act, and how we act then determines our lives and other people's lives. – *Ntozake Shange* (born 1948), black feminist, playwright, poet, USA

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, it is seen that the tribal village administrative set-up are men-centric. The control and rule over women is due to the patriarchal system of the society. Though men appear dominant in almost every public sphere, women's roles and contributions are enormous and praise worthy. All the household chores are managed and looked after by the women. The husband is believed to be the protector and provider; therefore, he is the breadwinner of the family. Men do not abuse, exploit or dictate and control over women in the society but consider women as weaker and therefore take the responsibilities of safeguarding them. The advent of Christianity has changed the mind-set of the people. The latest educational statistic report of the Tarao shows that women are doing better than men. Many of the women are getting good jobs and performing well in entrepreneurship, which has further enhanced the position of women in the society. This has also led to giving importance to their participation in decision making of the community.

Status of Thangal Sanui (Women) in the Thangal Patriarchal Society

- K. Pongdeila

Introduction:

Thangal which was earlier known by the name “Koirao” was substituted by its original name “Thangal”⁸⁶ by the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) order (Amendment) Act, 2011 (No. 2 of 2012) which became effective on 8th January, 2012; an Act further, to amend the constitution (Scheduled Tribes) order, 1950 to modify the list of Scheduled Tribes in the states of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, the excerpt of which is as under:

“In Part X- Manipur, iii) for entry 10, substitute Thangal for Koirao.”⁸⁷

The Thangal tribe is one of the foremost original indigenous groups in Manipur and is known as the founder dynasty of Manipur. The Thangals inhabit the hill ranges in the southern part of Senapati district.⁸⁸ It is said and believed that the Thangal tribe settled at ‘Angkaipang’ in the present district of Senapati, and after living there for a short period they moved down to Angkailongdi, and from Angkailongdi they came towards the south to a village called ThangalSurung and then scattered into different villages from there.

All the Thangal villages were situated on the ridges of the hills like the other Naga villages. This was so in keeping with the purpose of defending the villages as there were frequent inter-tribal feuds and head hunting raids in the past. The Thangal villages were later shifted from the hill top to the present location where there is better communication and facilities.

All the Thangal villages are located within the Senapati district of

86 The name “Koirao” was substituted by its Original Name “Thangal” on the 9th of January, 2012. Under the Gazette of India extraordinary, part ii, Section I, published by Authority, New Delhi, Monday, January 09, 2012/ PAUSA 18, 1993 (SAKA).

87 Sangai Express (Manipur English Daily), 9th January 2012, Imphal

88 K.S.Singh, The Scheduled Tribes People of India, Vol,iii, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Walton Street, 1994, p.550.

Manipur. The Thangal population is six thousand approximately. A Thangal village is a socio-politically organized unit ruled by a hereditary Headman/Chief called “Guongba”. Thangal Guongba in the ancient time had absolute and supreme power; the villagers were always at his command. Some of the names of the Guongba were *Pu*⁸⁹ *Thangkaraba*, *Pu GuongKarao*, *Pu Jongbu*⁹⁰. Guongba (Chief) is assisted by a council of elders representing the clans. Each village has its own village chief and council of elders who represent the clans and each village has its own land and forest which are owned collectively by the villagers.

Thangal Society:

Traditionally, the Thangal society is patrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence and only male can become the chief of the village. The female members of the society are partly under the control of the fathers or husbands in many social, political and domestic spheres. The eldest son is respected and represented in all the socio-political set up in the village. Originally there were twelve clans in the Thangal society. They were Kadeikeimi, Nthangmi, Nrakhangmi, Pampuinat, Sagongduimi, Houmi, Dibungnaonmi, Mbuipuinaomi, Khambuinaomi, Pajeinaomi, Njangmi, Reisongrangnaomi. Three new clans viz. Sangeipuinat, Bomlungtoukapat, Yangdenglungtoukapat which were segregated from the former clans with their consent were later added in the society.

The Chief/Headman is considered as the most important person in the Thangal village as he acts as the head of the village Authority. He is succeeded by his eldest son. If the eldest son is a minor at the time of his father's expiry then the younger brother/or nearest kin of the deceased will administer the village till the son is capable of taking full charge of his responsibility as the village chief/headman.

The sons in the family inherit the parental properties. The Thangals like the other Naga tribes strictly follow the patrilineal system that women are not given shares in the property of the parents even in the absence of male child. The girls are not entitled to any ancestral land property

89 Pu is a title given to address a powerful and respectful person in Thangal.

90 PuJongbu is a king of Thangal who has been given the power even to fly.

or any immovable property. Only in very rare cases do the parents give immovable property to their girl children out of love.

One of the most important characteristic features of the Thangal tribe in the recent past was the institution of morung/dormitories known as 'Khanglong' (boys' Dormitory) and 'Laalong' (girls' Dormitory). To quote Chand AnthThangmi: "Boys' dormitory is usually housed at "Tankei" which is recognized as elder's house. In case of girls' dormitory, there was no specially built house and structure as such".⁹¹ These dormitories were also known as club or watch house. These were the headquarters of village defense, recreation, and training in various activities including education, culture, art and ceremonial functions. These could also be referred to as educational institutions. All young men and women were trained here in various arts and crafts, music, morality, discipline as well as in the arts of offence and defense. The girls' dormitories were usually known as the centre of music and song. Weaving techniques were also learned here.⁹² They also learned about social behavior, manner and obedience. It can be noted that the different teachings imparted to the two sexes in the separate morungs were discriminatory in nature. Women were taught to be obedient, submissive, and also to excel in household works besides weaving, whereas the boys were instilled with the patriarchal mindset of dominance and imparted the skills of participating in defense and war. Moreover, there was no specially built house for girls.

Another peculiar characteristic of the Thangal tribe was the tradition of keeping "*Pui Pa Sayongnao*". It was a custom of the tribe that strong men of the village were selected to be fed well and brought up in such a way that they remained healthy and strong. The selected men were given training in all the art of wrestling so that they were fit for any eventuality. They defended the village and its people from outside aggression and kept the village under constant watch and well protected in times of conflicts. Thus Pui Pa Sayongnao which constituted a group brought up to sacrifice for the society was the protectors of the village.

91 Chand AnthThangmi, *The Thangal Naga Tribe of North East India*, New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2012, p.69

92 Interview with Hingakadeikeimi, ThangalSurung village, Senapati: June, 2014

Religion:

In ancient period, objects and spirits were worshipped by the Thangals as supernatural beings. People worshipped the presiding god of the village for safeguarding the village and its inhabitants. They called the village god as 'Keilong Raiba' (meaning Village God). They worshipped these gods for health and life, for protection from diseases and sickness, for works and crops, for good harvest and protection from natural calamity, for the well being of the society and animals including properties and wealth. Every household in the village also had their own household god called 'kei raiba'. They prayed for the well being of the family to the household god. They also had forest god called 'gong raiba'. In the religious field too, women's participation was very low.

Economic Activities:

Agriculture was/is the main occupation. The Thangals practice both Jhum and wet cultivation. The cultural and social activities are intimately connected with agricultural pursuit. Every cultural operation, e.g. tilling, sowing and harvesting, is followed by a village festival because of which, almost every month, we see the celebration of one festival or the other.

The Thangals also engage themselves in cattle farming, piggery, poultry, weaving, etc. The Thangal women are diligent in weaving clothes for their families and also for commercial purpose. They play an active and crucial role in these economic activities. Through these various activities besides cultivation, women contribute so much to the family economy. Like most women, the Thangal women also perform the triple tasks of housework, agricultural and livestock labor and socio-cultural obligations of the family. Despite the significant role played by the women in the economic sphere, they are economically dependent on men folk. Due to the social norms, women's labor is often considered "free and cheap" and on many occasions, women's work is not even considered as "work" but something natural for women because she is a woman.

If anyone is not willing to accept your point of view, try to see their point of view. –
A Lebanese Proverb

Thangal Socio-political Institution:

In the Thangal society most of the political activities are confined to village. A village is an indispensable social, economic and political unit.⁹³ There is a system of hereditary chieftainship among the Thangal. The Thangal had very powerful Chiefs (Guongba) like Guongkarao, Thangkaraba, Jongbu, who were regarded as divine and whose words were law: no commoner might stand upright before them. The Thangals however, have a body of elders who represent the clans in the village.

The most important political institution of the Thangals was the '*Katekei*', the village council, led by the hereditary office of headman/ chief. Every village has a village council, consisting of elders representing the clans to assist the village headman/chief in the administration of the village. The village council is responsible for the administration of the whole affairs of the village. The village council has the authority to decide on any important matter and their decisions become law in the village. The village council is the sole legislative organ of the village. Although the village assembly is claimed to be based on democratic principles, membership is limited only to the male members and women do not generally participate in the assembly session. Hence, women are not given the opportunity to take part in any decision making processes and be in the village administration. In a true sense, the Thangal political institution is not a democratic one, as women who comprise fifty percent of the population are left out.

Thangal Custom:

In the customary law of the Thangals, women have no equal rights with men in the political or administrative sphere though their role is seen to be very essential for the proper functioning of the society. The traditional and cultural mindsets of the people have for a long time acted and are still acting as tools of oppression. Thangal villages are ruled and administered according to their customs and traditions. Women have no political power in the traditional or present society. Naga women still suffer from many social handicaps under Naga customary laws. It

93 Opcit., Chand Anth Thangmi, P.111

is the customs and traditions which really bind them.

Naga Women and Socio Political Participation:

The most universal experience is that the political space is extremely restricted for women.⁹⁴ No female member has the opportunity to occupy a seat in the Village Assembly, Village Council, etc., and take part in the decision making processes and be in the village administration. The attitudes of the majority of the parents are found to be more positive towards a male child than to a female child. Women's decision making power be it in the social, economic or political matters is restricted by the atmosphere at home. The wife normally lives by her husband's wishes.

As Jean Drag has rightly pointed out, the reality of women's lives is that while they have constitutional rights, they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities, and politics and community affairs are seen as unsuitable for them.⁹⁵ Highly patriarchal societies enforce rules, responsibilities and behavior for women in ways that affect their self confidence, limit their access to information and skills, and reinforce their lower status. Attitudes that put politics and decision making into the male preserve see women as incapable of management and governance roles. Traditional beliefs about superiority of men can have a negative impact on how women are seen as decision makers. In the election for village, tribe or committees, women are criticized and rejected despite the fact that they have often outperformed men.⁹⁶

Naga women have no right of inheritance, they cannot express their voice to claim their share before men; and though they are considered more independent and enjoy more freedom than the women of other

94 Hajira Kumar, *Women's Empowerment, Issues, Challenges And Strategies*, New Delhi: Regency publications 2005, p.16

95 *Women in local governance in Asia and the Pacific A Comparative Analysis of 13 countries* by Jean Drage, School of political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of wellington, New Zealand, Paper presented to the Asia Pacific Summit of women Mayor and Councilor Phil Sanulok, Thailand, 18 to 22 June, 2011 p.6/15.

96 *Ibid.*, p.6/17

community, they cannot come out of the bondage of customary laws.

The Naga women do not realize the rights deprived of them; at the same time, the men folk do not want to share the better and higher privileges that they had been enjoying since the time of their ancestors. Moreover, at home women are silenced by their men; women are not allowed to attend the meetings in the villages. Even if women come, they remain as mere spectators having no place for raising their voices on any issues being discussed there.⁹⁷

Women have thus no role and significance in the decision making processes in the Naga society. Therefore, men with their superior physical advantage and partly by cultural practices as protectors are given more importance than women in the society.⁹⁸ Political activity seems to fall outside the boundaries of social norms and socially acceptable activities for women. Women's decision making power is restricted to the atmosphere in the house.⁹⁹ They only give their free services round the clock within their homes.

Women participation is not recognized beyond the work they do at the domestic level. Women have realized that their roles remain invisible, and the unpaid economic activity of women and their contribution through work in the domestic sectors remain unreported.¹⁰⁰

Thangal Women and Patriarchy:

The Thangal family like in other Naga societies was strictly and purely patriarchal. Patriarchy is defined as a social system in which men have all the power. It serves to subordinate and exploit women. Patriarchy is the most important manifestation of gender biased socially constructed

97 Yashoda Bhatt (ed.), *Beyond The Threshold: Indian Women On The Move*, B.R Publishing corporation, 1995.p.36

98 Audrey Landingpuii, *Women's Representation In Decision Making Bodies: A Study Of Mizoram in North East India* History Association, 28th Session, Goalpara College, Goalpara, 2007, p.106

99 BilkisVissandjee, *IndianJournal of Gender studies*, Vol.13 (Sept-Dec. 2006, p-443.

100 RanjanaKumari(ed.), *Women In Decision Making*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing Hose Pvt. Ltd, 1992, p.59

institution.¹⁰¹ The father is the head of the family and as such has certain duties, responsibilities and powers. The women are under the dictatorship of their husbands. They cannot control their activities and be decision makers by themselves. What they do, how, when and where they do it, are all controlled by men.

Man is the head of the house and the wife lives within his rules. Women, besides taking up domestic works like cooking, cleaning, washing, collecting firewood, taking care of the children, rearing domestic animal, are also compelled to take up agricultural and non-agricultural works outside the home. However, the value as well as the productivity of her work is grossly underestimated and their access to economic resources is very much limited. Although they rear or take care of the domestic animals, they are not given the freedom to decide when, where, and whom to sell them. Men control women's productivity both within the household and outside in paid work. Women are often confined to 'inside' occupations, the invisible and unorganized sector while men's domain is 'outside', the visible field of work.

Within the household, women provide all kinds of free services to their children, husbands and other members of the family, throughout their lives. They are forced to sell their labor at very low wages, or work within the home in what is called "home based" production, which is nothing but an exploitation.¹⁰² They did all the back-breaking, endless and repetitive labors but they are not considered work at all by the Thangal society and the women are seen to be dependent on their men.

Most property and other productive resources are controlled by men and they are passed on from one man to another usually from father to son. Even where women have the legal rights to inherit such assets, a whole array of customary practices, social sanctions and, sometimes, plain violence, prevent them from acquiring them. This is amply

101 ShireenMahdavi, Review by: ShireenMahdavi Source: Middle East Journal, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 695-698
Published by: Middle East Institute, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329966>,
Accessed: 07-04-2016 .

102 KamlaBhasin, What is Patriarchy, New Delhi: Women unlimited Published, 2005 (Reprint), p.6

illustrated by United Nations statistics: “women do more than sixty percent of the hours of work done in the world, but they get ten percent of the world’s income and own one percent of the world’s property”.¹⁰³ Religion and deeply rooted cultural patterns confine women largely to the home or to invisible activities.

Status of Thangal Women:

Hence, women are assigned a very low social and political status in the society. Political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to this role of women.¹⁰⁴ Thangal women have a lower status as compared to men with no decision making power in public space except at household level in areas like, what to cook, what thread to buy, etc. Traditions, customs, and religious beliefs work against women. Socially, politically, educationally and economically women are treated lower to men. Men have always monopolized political space; no women dare to come forward. Participation in decision making is where the women worldwide are discriminated. The non-participation of women in decision making in public space is considered “normal” and accepted culturally in the Thangal society.

However, women are found to have played an important role in the administration of the village. Women played an important role during the head hunting days when war with the neighboring villages was a common feature. In order to safeguard the village, men assumed the role of guards while women took the task of carrying out both domestic and agricultural work. In this way women participated in the administration of the village directly.

Women also played direct role during inter-village wars by acting as ambassadors of peace by intervening in between warring groups. They had the courage to intervene being the daughters/sisters of their fathers’/

103 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford and Newyork: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.9

104 Kalpana Roy, *Women And Their Environment*, Vol.1, New Delhi: Rajat Publication, 1999, p.267

brothers' village on one side and on the other side the daughters-in-law and members of their husbands' village. The womenfolk did not want bloodshed among the members whom they were related by blood and marriage.¹⁰⁵ In this way women participated in the village's politics. However, Thangal society was characterized by strict norms and attitudes of patriarchy which had a significant bearing on the status of women. Women were not visible in public domain because they were excluded from the domains of public life and confined to domestic space.

Women are powerless and become easy prey to exploitation and subjugation. Women often remain at the lowest level of power hierarchy. They rarely question this power hierarchy; on the other hand, they accept this subjugation willingly placing greater value to stability and integrity of the family institutions. Thangal women remain powerless due to their illiteracy. The literacy rate of Thangal women is very low compared to men; though they are enrolled in the primary level they rarely go to the higher level. Lack of awareness, low self esteem and self confidence, and lack of money and power make the women dependent and vulnerable. They remain in a state of 'blissful' ignorance. Ignorance of their own rights has led them to subjugation and deprivation. Therefore, it is essential to create awareness concerning human rights amongst the Thangal women; as such awareness creation is a part of struggle to uphold respect for human life, equality, freedom and human dignity.

Some examples of discrimination and violence against women, and violation of women's rights in the Thangal society are given below as narrated by some women.

Case 1:

Experience of a single woman called Ms. Rosy (Name changed), who was denied of inheritance by the villagers in the name of custom/tradition: Rosy, an unmarried woman who still lives in the village, approached the village elders for a plot of land to establish her own family, but was

denied by the villagers. Rosy was asked to live with her brother who has established his own family, although she wanted to live on her own. The right to inheritance was denied by the village elders and villagers for she is a woman. She strongly felt that women should also be given the right to property and inheritance as she is also a member of the village. She is one of the respectable women among the womenfolk of the village. She has also contributed greatly to the well being of the village. In spite of all the contributions made by her, village authorities failed to acknowledge and give what she ought to get.

Case 2:

Ms. Pansy (Name changed), after her marriage, has been living with her husband who is a drunkard. She was tortured by her husband every day. She was beaten black and blue, she was also asked to leave the house leaving her children who were still minors. Rosy and her in-laws felt that the husband, being a man, had every right to do that. Moreover, they didn't want to defame the family's name by revealing the act of their son/husband. Therefore, despite the physical, mental trauma, Rosy failed to realize the right she has as a human being. After attending awareness workshops on Human rights (women's rights) conducted by Thangal Sanui Jonlong, she came to realize that women are also human beings, and that women also ought to enjoy the rights enjoyed by mankind.

The most rampant way to oppress females these days is the imposition of 'social norms'. Since it is not normal in the patriarchal societies for women to be emancipated, women are made dependent on men folk. Every step towards equality has been a struggle against social norms.

Most of the Thangal villages have women organizations attached to their respective churches. These organizations work for the welfare of the people in general and women folk in particular. The activities of the village-based women societies, being attached to churches, are mostly religious in nature and fail to voice for the socio-political rights of the women. Hence, the Thangal women with the help of educated few

The greatest step forward in human evolution was made when society began to help the weak and the poor, instead of oppressing and despising them. – *Maria Montessori (1870-1952), educationalist, Italy*

among them felt the need for the formation of a secular organization at the tribe level in order to work for the realization of social, economic and political rights of women. Thus, the Thangal Naga Women's Union later called as the Thangal Sanui Jonlong (an indigenous name) was formed.

The Thangal Sanui Jonlong (Thangal Women's Union), formed in the year 1995 with its motto: "Chingrikathouna Deikaka" (Peace and Development), is the tribe level Apex women organization of the Thangal tribe. The union came into existence on 12th January, 1995, to work for the realization of the social, economic and political rights of women in order to bring peace and development in the society, to create awareness on human rights and to sensitize both men and women on gender issues.

The Union also fights for the rights of the Thangals in general and the Thangal women in particular. The union also passed a resolution to demand for the participation of women in all decision making bodies on equal footing with their counterparts in order to bring about equality in the society.

Some of the traditional and cultural values which are deep rooted in the minds of the people have for a long time acted and are still acting as tools of oppression. Therefore, Thangal women have also organized themselves in order to raise their voices against oppression by highlighting those traditional and cultural values and practices which curtail their rights.

The Thangal Sanui Jonlong (TSJ), therefore, has organized various programmes like workshops, seminars, and conferences in order to make people, especially the Thangal women, aware of their rights and live a dignified life. The conferences on "Women and peace", "Women and culture", "Women and development", "Women empowerment", "Women and human rights", etc were conducted by the Thangal Sanui Jonlong. Besides conferences, the TSJ has also taken up different activities for the upliftment and empowerment of Thangal women.

What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make. – Jane Goodall, *primatologist, anthropologist, UK*

TSJ has also organized and conducted seminars, awareness programs, workshops, etc. on Human Rights (women's rights), Peace Building, Mediation Skill, Gender in relation to Customary Practices, etc. in collaborations with the Naga Women's Union based in Manipur.

The activities taken up by the TSJ has to some extent helped Thangal women become aware of their rights and have empowered them in social, economic and political aspects of life. We can see changes taking place in the status of women in Thangal society although in a very limited way. Now we can see a woman as the head of the religious affairs in the Thangal Naga Baptist Association (TNBA). Ms H. Apila, the present Executive Secretary of the TNBA has been in office for the second consecutive term. Ms. Pongdeila Kadeikeimi has also been a member of the Constitution Drafting and Election Commission of the Thangal Khanglong (Thangal union), the apex body of the tribe, for two consecutive terms. Thangal women are also sub-committee members of the Thangal Union; it reflects that women are being empowered at some level.

However, women along with some men supporting them fought for their rights. During the election/appointment of the Executive Secretary of Thangal Naga Baptist Association, there was a strong disagreement among the council members for appointment of a woman. Search committee convener tendered resignation as he did not want a woman to be the religious head of a tribe. He tried to justify saying that it was against the custom of Thangal tribe and also against the Christian doctrine. But Ms. Houmei Apila is now in her second term as the Executive Secretary. Her sincere and hardworking nature, her capability and also the progress and development made during her leadership are being acknowledged and appreciated by the tribe.

We also see women inheriting some of the immovable property although this happened as a rare case. Some 0.5% women have started enjoying this facility. Some village women are also nominated and

We have to sit down, have a meal together, pray together and then actually talk together. Then we realize that, yes, although we have some differences they are not impassable differences. - *Pauline Tangiora, Australia*

inducted in the village development program under Village Authority like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Ngaihang village Baptist Church now has a woman secretary and a woman deacon.

The Thangal Sanui Jonlong (Thangal Women's Union) has now its own office, a training centre, with guest rooms and a conference hall where more than five hundred people can be accommodated. Now the Thangal Sanui Jonlong is economically independent partially as it generates income from the training centre under the great and capable leadership of the following members, the *present officials* of the TSJ:

<i>President</i>	: Pongdeila Kadeikeimi
<i>Secretary</i>	: P.Y. Sinoubui
<i>Vice President</i>	: Y.K. Julie
<i>Treasurer</i>	: M. Ajin

Consultative Board Members:

H. Ponga	: Former TSJ President
B.K. Roseline	: Former TSJ President
Y.K. Iris	: Former TSJ President

Conclusion:

The Thangal women perform a range of tasks ranging from household chores, to fetching of water and firewood, tilling of the land, and looking after families and domestic animals. They are also burdened with a number of important responsibilities such as taking care of their family's health, contributing to the economy of their household by undertaking productive and income generating activities, and also performing community works. They have performed all these duties and tasks from time immemorial as a normal part of their responsibilities.

Nevertheless, in the Thangal society, men control the access to and the use of land; women neither own nor inherit land. They often do not even control their own earnings and their economic rights are limited.

We have to face the fact that either all of us are going to die together or we are going to learn to live together, and if we are to live together we have to talk. – *Eleanor Roosevelt, US delegate to UN, USA*

The Thangal women often have little or no decision making power. The leadership is constituted by elders consisting of men only. Women do not participate in the meetings or dare not speak up as these are against the culture.

The Thangal women, conscious of the contributions they make to their families and to their communities, are starting to realize the inappropriateness of the situation; they feel that their role should be recognized and that they should be allowed to fully participate in the decision making processes. They want their due rights to be respected so that they can participate in the decision making process with the same rights as men and their voices heard and listened to in all aspects of community life. The Thangal women, through the 'Thangal Sanui Jonlong' along with the grass-root level women's organizations, have started voicing and asserting their rights.

The Thangal women organizations, both at the village and tribe level, have been striving hard to empower women in order to bring peace and development in the society. The TSJ also wish Thangal women to be recognized as people with rights, not only with duties. Thangal women need to be made more aware of their rights, be it social, political or economic. Traditions, customs, and religious beliefs which are gender biased and treat women as subordinate to men, be it in social, political, or economic realm, need to be transformed.

To conclude, it can be said that the Thangal society remains to be a patriarchal society, although some women have started occupying some positions in the society. In many ways their subordination is reinforced through customs and beliefs.

The conservative attitude of men towards women still has adverse impact on the Thangal society. Thangal women still have a long way to go to be empowered in the economic, social and political levels.

Someone needs to explain to me why wanting clean drinking water makes you an activist, and why proposing to destroy water with chemical warfare doesn't make a corporation a terrorist. — *Winona Laduke*

Zeme Woman throughout Her Life

- Eheu Newmei

The Zemes are an indigenous Naga tribe living in the North-East India inhabiting the southern portion of the Barial range between the Dhansiri and the Barak rivers.¹⁰⁶ However, with the creation of new states after independent India, the Zemes have been divided and placed in the three states – Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The settlement areas of the Zeme Nagas are now in the Dima Hasao District of Assam (N.C Hills), Peren District of Nagaland, and Tamenglong and Senapati Districts of Manipur. This division has made the Zemes live as a minority in the remote corners of the three states. The Zemes are also identified in relation to their three other kindred tribes – the Liangmai, the Rongmei and the Inpui, altogether known as the Zelianrong. In Manipur the Zemes and the Liangmais were earlier recognised as Kacha Naga, and the Rongmei and Inpui as Kabui. It was only recently in 2012 under the constitution ST Order Amendment Act 2011 (no. 9 of 2012) that they have been recognised separately as Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui.

Till today not much authentic work has been done on the Zeme Nagas, except for the contributions of the British administrators and writers like Ursula Graham Bower who shared about her experience in Zeme villages of Assam and Manipur in her book “*Naga Path*”.¹⁰⁷ Some Indian writers, interested in studying the tribals living in the North-East India too, have made some attempts to explore and write about the Nagas and the Zemes in particular.¹⁰⁸

Zeme Woman at Different Stages of Life

In the Zeme society the birth of both sexes – male and female – are

106 Hunter, W.W: Statistical Account of Assam Vol. 2, B.R Publishing Corporation, N. Delhi, 1982 p 186

107 U. G. Bower “Naga Path” (1952, reprinted 2002) John Murray U. K

108 B.N Bordoloi and G.C Sharma Thakur's in “The Tribes of Assam ” Part-II, Barkataki's “The Tribe of Assam” and Roy Burman; Baba Chandra Singha's unpublished Ph.D Thesis on “The social-economic life of the Zeme” .

welcomed by family members. The birth of a baby girl is a joy to the family because they believe that she can help her mother in household chores and take care of younger siblings even from her early age unlike the male child. In fact many Zeme families prefer their first born baby to be a girl. There are instances of families having many children in the desire to have more girl child.

Case Study- 1: A 50 year old mother in Tamenglong was happy that her eldest child was a girl because she thought that girls were more helpful to the family; she wanted to have more girl child but she had four boys instead and if it was not for her health problem she was still willing to give birth to more children for want of girl child.

However, we also find that the Zeme, being in a patrilineal society, the birth of a boy is important. The family with many male members is a matter of pride to them. And the society respects such family.

Case Study-2: One Pame family was happy when they got a girl as their first child but when they had a second girl child they became worried and when the wife was pregnant with the third child, the family environment was tense. The husband was ready to divorce his wife if the third child happened to be a girl. On the day the wife gave birth, the husband went out early and came back in evening with a big hen which, he said, would either be the last dinner together with his wife if the baby was a girl or a welcome dinner if the baby was a boy.

From her childhood a woman is taught to be submissive, obedient and quiet, and to learn to endure hardship which they view is the required feminine quality every girl should possess. Miss Newme narrated how she was taught to be submissive from the time she was very small by her mother. She said “When I was small I had a fight with my younger brother. My mother and I knew that my brother was wrong but she stopped me from further argument and told me that girls were not supposed to fight back even if we were right.”

Zeme woman enjoys maximum freedom when she is a child living in

Your child is like an acre of land, you are the farmer, till it with word of God sow it with your exemplary life and testimony.

her home. As a child she enjoys being taken care of by her parents and older siblings at home. She grows up spending her time playing with the neighbouring kids though there are times when she is interrupted by her mother's call to help in household chores or to take care of the younger ones. It is not restricted nor tabooed for a girl child, but the family usually doesn't allow her to loiter far away from home or go to jungle like a boy child does, so that she can be easily reached when her service is required. The concept of woman as a home-maker is already ingrained in her mind since her childhood.

In the past when morung (dormitory) system was practiced, reaching puberty and becoming a full member of *Leuseuki*¹⁰⁹ (girls' dormitory) was considered stepping into the next stage of life for a girl. *Leuseuki* served as a learning centre where weaving, spinning, singing and dancing and also moral values, manners and social etiquette were taught and learnt. The senior members of the *Leuseuki* were responsible to teach the new and younger members. They would work in their homes or would be in the agricultural field during the day time and return to the dormitory to sleep. No married men were allowed inside the *Leuseuki*. Only the village headman could come by for fatherly visit from time to time. They practiced '*Leurebe*' which was a part of the morung system (we shall be discussing in detail in the later part of this article); it eventually led to wedlock unless there were objections to their intimate relationship from the parents. When there was objection from the parent's side or from the inmates or the villagers, if the man was caught red-handed courting a girl, he is liable to punishment.¹¹⁰ Outrage on the modesty of a woman or any attempt of it was regarded as a heinous crime and the relatives of the woman considered it their right to spear the rapist to death.¹¹¹ Rape was considered a capital crime.¹¹² In recent years, instead of killing the rapist, he is expelled from the village for a

109 *Leuseuki* is girls' dormitory or girls' morung in Zeme villages. Each village has usually two or more *Leuseuki*, but in some small village they have at least one *Leuseuki*,

110 Th. Baba Chandra Singha, *The Socio-economic Life of the Zeme in the Twentieth Century*, Ph.D. unpublished Thesis of Department of History, Manipur University, 1996 p 82

111 Th. Baba Chandra Singha, op. cit. p 200

112 U.G. Bower, *Naga Path* (1952, reprinted 2002) John Murray, U.K. p 107

period of three years or forever.¹¹³

Today, the morung system which was the main social, political, legal, military and educational centre of the Zemes has lost its significance due to the impact of various social changes.¹¹⁴ One of the factors that contribute to the diminishing significance of '*Hangseuki*'¹¹⁵ and '*Leuseuki*' was the introduction of modern education. Nowadays every parent makes effort to send their children to school and other higher studies.

Zeme society is a classless and casteless society; the social stratification is marked by the stages of life of a person. Marriage is another stage of life and is very crucial for women. It is often said that the fate of a woman is known only after marriage. Different forms of marriage are practiced in the Zeme society. '*Pumsanggei Meibe*' is a type of marriage considered equivalent with modern day Holy Marriage but practically it is deeper than that. A girl to be qualified for *Pumsanggei Meibe* should not only be a virgin but should be pure in all forms – she should be physically fit and morally upright since childhood. '*Pumsanggei Meibe*' is the most highly respected and most sacred form of marriage.¹¹⁶ It is rarely performed because the girl could get cursed if she missed out on any of the criteria required for this type of marriage.¹¹⁷ Love marriage is the usual practice in the Zeme society. The girl enjoys considerable freedom in choosing her life partner. However, marriage without the consent of the girl is also found especially when the girl has no parent. Forced marriage known as '*nduajube*' where a boy kidnaps a girl and makes an outrage upon her due to extra-ordinary attraction by the beauty of a girl does not result in marriage in the Zeme society. It is taken as a rape case and heavy punishment is meted out to the boy, usually by expulsion of him from the village.¹¹⁸

113 Th. Baba Chandra Singha, op. cit. p 200

114 Ibid. P 83, 84

115 Hangseuki is boys' dormitory or boys' morung in Zeme villages.

116 Interview with Rev. Kumuitew ITS (Emmanuel Theological Seminary) Principal Tamenglong

117 Once a Zeme girl performed PumsanggeiMeibe marriage and later became blind because she has stolen a red chilly from her neighbor garden when she was small.

118 Ibid. p 201,64

In the olden Zeme society, it was a must for the bride to bring bridal gifts called '*hemeiphut*' consisting of a hoe, baskets (*keluang*, *nkha*), weaving materials, axe, sickle, plate, a pig and a hen which were considered to be the basic needs for survival. Today, the bridal gifts compulsorily consist of shawls for the bridegroom and his male family members and wrap-around skirts called '*minis*' for female members, besides many other items or materials depending upon the bride's family's economic condition. As the Zeme women participate in all household economic activities, they are regarded as important assets. So, when a man wishes to marry a girl he has to pay a heavy compensation to the girl's father in the form of bride price (*hemei-mi*) for the loss of valuable asset.¹¹⁹ There are no fixed rates for *hemei-mi* but in the olden days it included necklace, oxen, mithun or cattle. Sometimes land is given if both belong to the same village. The bride price during the late 20th century was around rupees 5000/- or a little more.¹²⁰

Women as a wife and mother play a very significant role in the economic life of the family. Mothers are given full authority regarding the domestic affairs. She has considerable freedom to take important decisions about family matters in the absence of her husband and other male members of the family. In her home she occupies a high position and her children treat her well.

After the death of her husband, a widow can remarry if she wishes. At the time of her remarriage, all the usual ceremonies are performed. As per the custom of the society she can marry her late husband's younger brother but not the husband's elder brother.¹²¹

Divorce or '*kelaksakbe*' is permitted in the Zeme society with the approval of the village council presided by the village headman. Though the rules for divorce are very strict, yet it is not unprecedented. There are various reasons for divorce. If a husband is an expert in wooing a girl, he is not restricted from having more than one wife. However, in the Zeme society, polygamy though permitted is rare. Also, if the husband

119 Ibid. p 199

120 Ibid. p 65

121 Ibid. P 202

dislikes his first wife, he can choose another woman for his wife. A wife can also be divorced on the ground of barrenness despite the fact that barrenness is not her choice or fault but a God-given nature. Divorce due to adultery which was extremely rare and negligible in the Zeme society in the olden days is rare till today but not negligible anymore. In the olden days punishment to adulterer was very severe. If caught red-handed he could be killed by her husband. Now-a-days the adulterer and the adulteress in lieu of being put to death are exiled from the village. In most cases, wife deserting her husband brings compulsory divorce.¹²²

Death is a natural process from which none can escape. The grave of an ordinary person is called '*Herau*' and that of an illustrious and rich man in the village is called '*Herautebung*'. The death of a pregnant woman while in labour called '*Hepuilamtetbe*' and a woman who died soon after giving birth called '*Mpichaibe*' are considered unnatural death (*hechitsaibe*) and are not given normal death burial. In such cases, young boys and girls do not attend the funeral.¹²³ The grave of a person of such an unnatural death is called '*Heraunding*'. In the olden days before the coming of Christianity, the house where such death took place was locked and abandoned or sometimes the whole village was abandoned.

Zeme Women in Economic Sphere:

Women at Home

In the olden head-hunting days, the main concern of the village was the protection of the village from the enemy. Men's duty in the Zeme society at that time, therefore, was to guard the village from enemies and to go to war for which they were trained at *Hangseuki* and were always ready for war at anytime. In the past, due to inter-village feuds or war, men were always necessary to be ready for assault. Hence, it became a custom for women to cultivate the fields while men prepare for war and fight in battle.¹²⁴ Men kept themselves away from the

122 Ibid. p 69

123 Ibid. p 280

124 William, Robinson: A Descriptive Account of Assam, SanskaranPrakash Delhi. P 389

domestic affairs and considered it below their dignity to indulge in such activities.

Ursula Graham Bower on her description of Zeme women said:

To men fell the heavier and more arduous work, but not that which was the most productive. Aside from hunting, fishing and war, which were not, in current conditions, of economic importance, their contributions was house building, basketry and felling of jungle, all of which took a long time and showed no immediate profit. It was the women's works which are of economic value. They cooked, brewed and pounded rice, and made the little there was to go the longest way; they carried wood and water, they sowed, weeded and reaped (though the men took their share here); they spun and dyed, they wove and sewed, they kept the home and raised the family. A man alone was condemned to poverty.¹²⁵

The norms of life practiced in the olden days, which were dictated by the circumstances of war and survival, have been inherited and passed down from generation to generation without question or reasoning. Thus women continue to hold full responsibility of domestic affairs and maintenance of the family while men remain aloof from domestic affairs even when men no longer need to guard the village or go to war. Th. Baba Chandra, therefore, has observed that man has more leisure time when head-hunting was no more practiced.

A Zeme youth's life as compared to that of girls, is an enviable one with hardly anything to do during the day except drink beer, gossip, make baskets, play music and array himself in beads, hornbill feather and cloths of variegated colours in order to make himself an object of admiration to the girls and permitted at night indulge in courtship; his life till marriage is perpetual holiday, with their innate love of pleasure, dance and music, colour and pageantry, the Zeme allowed their young men to have as much of good time as they can as their means would permit.¹²⁶

Even before the break of dawn the womenfolk would get up and pound

125 U.G. Bower, op.cit. p 78

126 Barakataki, S : Tribe of Assam, National Book Trust of India, New Delhi, 1969, p 70

rice, then at the first cock-crows they would in group carry the bamboo pipes in cane or bamboo baskets to a spring pond or a stream down the village to collect water. The return journey uphill with the load of water on their back was strenuous. Then they would prepare meal for the family, have food and go for work at jhum fields. At midday they would spend some time in eating the packed lunch. The work would resume and go on till sun-down – sowing, hoeing, weeding, harvesting. While coming back she would carry home firewood, vegetables and wild leaves for family consumption and also for domestic animals. In the evening after returning home, while men spent time in leisure and relaxation drinking rice beer and gossiping or singing, women would cook the evening meal.¹²⁷ Being a subsistence agricultural economy, this trend has remained even till today except for a few changes like women no longer go far as those days to fetch water since water tanks have been constructed under various government schemes in the village.

Even today we find that it is the women who play a very important role in domestic affairs. Though the modern world campaigns for men's help in the domestic work and household chore, the psychological barrier that has been ingrained in the sub-conscious mind of the Zeme people continues to persist even in the present generation which keeps men away from household works. Even as a child a daughter is expected to help her mother at home while boys are given full freedom to hang out with friends and play.

The demand to cope up with the changing modern world today is an added burden for Zeme women. In most of the Zeme families, besides the domestic work at home, the mother performs many activities for improving the family economy and in providing the needs of the children for education. She goes to the field and she has to manage to find time to sell her agricultural products and her hand-woven traditional shawls and wrap-around skirts. Her condition becomes worse when the husband is not a responsible person and in extreme situation when she has to meet the needs of her husband's luxury. In Zeme villages, though not every household, the mothers are the main

127 Th. Baba Chandra, op.cit. p 198

bread earners of the family. When the husband neglects his duty as head of the family, the responsibility of meeting all the needs of the family members falls on the mother.

Very often foreign observers made comments on the lethargy of the male and diligence of the female.¹²⁸ Even today we find this trend existing in the Zeme society. While women are devoted to their family and economic activity, men are easy going and care free.

Women and Inheritance

In the Zeme society, the practice of patrilineal system is stringent and being an ultimogeniture society in nature, it is the youngest son who takes the responsibility of taking care of his parents when they are old. Thus the inheritance right goes to the youngest son in the family. The inheritance includes all the goods at home, household materials, money, ornament and domestic animals and livestock. The immovable property such as land, agricultural field and water well however are divided equally among all the brothers of the family.¹²⁹ But when it comes to daughter, according to Zeme customs and traditions, no daughter has inheritance rights – she can be presented with heavy gifts which may include even a plot of land if her father is rich. Women share the inheritance of her husband, but there are complications when her husband dies. There are no strictly defined customary laws that safeguard the right of a widow to inherit the home she and her husband have built and the properties they have accumulated (if any); in most cases, widows suffer loss of everything and are often left to survive at the mercy of the society (case study 3 below is one of such incidents). In Zeme society, if a man dies without a male child, the inheritance right goes to his nearest kinsman and not his daughters. When the husband dies, the widow can choose to either stay back to take care of their children and remain as a guardian to her son and husband's properties or go back to her father's house alone without anything since

128 Gangmumei Kamei, *A History of Zeliangrong Nagas, From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu*. Spectrum Publications, Guwahati/Delhi 2004, p260

129 Rabi Pame, *Church and Culture: History of Zeme Naga Church, N.C. Hills Assam 1910-1995*. Published by Nzauna Baptist Church, Nagaland 2015 p 60

she has no right over the properties and her children.

In Zeme society, if the childless couple wishes to adopt a child, they can adopt one of their relative's children or they can even adopt any illegitimate child who has been abandoned by the parents. In such a case, the adopted son can inherit all the parents' properties but if the adopted child is a girl no inheritance will be given to her.

In case of divorce, whether the cause of divorce is from the husband or from the wife or a mutual one, the wife has no right over her children; it is obviously against humanitarian law. Another injustice we find is that if a man divorces his wife, all the common properties are divided equally between them but she has to return the bride price. And if the woman divorces her husband, she has to return the bride price and gets nothing from the husband; she has to return to her parents empty handed. When it comes to a divorced Zeme woman's share of properties, it is often said: "She will be like a hen laying eggs in other's nest."¹³⁰ However, one positive practice found in the Zeme society in case of divorce is '*Timtanjibe*', that is, if the divorce is by mutual consent no bride price is refunded and all the properties except for land and domestic animals are distributed equally between them.

Woman and Land

Land issues are issues of power, economic independence and identity. For Zeme society which depends on agriculture for livelihood, land is the most important resource for survival. When women are not given the right to inheritance, especially immovable properties like land, it shows gender inequalities in access to resource and the distribution of resources. This not only let her live in poverty but also makes her dependent on others for survival and further weakens her position in the society. She becomes prone to all the social evils when she is economically poor and dependent.

Case Study-3: In Inem village the peace and happiness of a family was shattered after the death of the father. When the father died after prolonged illness due to cancer, the mother decided to live with her 7 children to

130 Ibid. p 58

take care of them and raise them up. But things began to change after the death of the husband; she was ill-treated by her in-laws. She was constantly threatened to go back to her parents but she decided to sacrifice her life and endure hardship out of love for her children. She and her children were mistreated several times. Her children were also beaten in her absence. She was treated as if she was the reason for the death of her husband. Later, after a year, all their properties were slowly taken away which included even her own home built by her and her husband. She had no right over her own children. She lost everything when her husband died. She had nowhere to go. She went back to her parents' home. Her children were taken to Tamenglong to live with the paternal grandparents but since they were poor the children were not given proper care. The eldest daughter was handicapped but she had to take care of her younger siblings. She was a young teenage girl when she came to Tamenglong. While the younger ones went to school, she usually went to jungle to collect firewood and wild vegetables for their own consumption as well as for sale. On one fateful day, she was raped by someone in the jungle and was left unconscious there. As a young girl she had to face not only hardship and struggles but she lost her dignity too. Her hard life experiences made her feel insecure and lonely. She got married with an old man in the neighbouring village in the year 2013. But after a few months she was found dead in a forest where she had gone to collect wild vegetables. Her body was recovered after three days on the river side. No one knows the reason of her death – it was surmised that she was either drowned or she committed suicide.

Women's disinheritance from the basic means of production (land) in a subsistence agricultural economy like Zeme society affects not only the women but the whole family especially the children. The Zemes had a commendable tradition of helping the widows in times of need; the village young men called '*morungkiangna*' used to come together and build houses for the widows, and the whole villagers used to collect grains on a yearly basis and donate them to the widows for their survival. But such tradition is now obsolete and practiced no more. What she needs is not a mere free donation from the villagers which

makes her dependant on others for her survival but what she needs is her right to inherit and own land so that she has economic freedom.

Women and Her Socio-Political Life: Women considered as bad omen.

According to Wati Longchar, one of the factors for oppression against Naga women was their non-participation in 'headhunting'.¹³¹ Like in all the other Naga tribes in olden days, men's main duty in the Zeme society was to guard the village and go to war; men were engaged in the society and participated in decision making processes of the village whereas, women while enjoying the protection provided to them by men folk were confined to domestic works. Since women did not participate in headhunting they were excluded from '*village pai*' or village council. Along with the prohibition against women from participating in the village council, many taboos were introduced that further deteriorated the condition of women. The presence of women in public meeting was considered a bad omen for the whole society; as a result, women were prohibited from having any say in social affairs. It was tabooed for a warrior to sleep with his wife or even touch her inner cloths before going to war or for hunting. They believed that infringement of this would bring about undesirable consequences to him and to the whole group of warriors of which he is a member. Women were not allowed to sit cross legged or put her leg on men. Women should not touch the spear and shield of men for those are weapons of battle. It is considered that the sanctity and the efficiency of the weapons are lost the moment a woman touches them. This is substantiated by the personal experience of a girl:

When I was small, my father was a good hunter and he had a hunting rifle. He went for hunting almost every weekend. As a child I was curious to see, touch and hold the rifle. But my family would not allow me to touch it because I was a girl while my younger brother was allowed to touch and clean the rifle. My parent said '*Npuimi hegimi*

131 WatiLongchar, "Headhunting: A Socio-religious Factors for Oppression of Women in North East India," Good News for North East India. A theological Reader, ed. RenthlyEitzar, (Guwahati :CLC 1995), p 199

deineu, ngauchiche.’ (The literal translation of this sentence is: Npuimi-women, hegimi- gun, deineu- taboo to touch. Ngauchiche- it can lead to the loss of efficiency of the rifle)

Women cannot join hunting and cannot loosen their hair before the village elders. It was tabooed to eat the game killed by a woman. It was considered unclean and unnatural. Women were considered spies of the enemy. During the time of war, it was forbidden to leak any sort of strategy of the village to any woman for fear of becoming spy of the enemies. It was a fact that secrets were never shared to any woman.¹³² Such kinds of discrimination against women where women were considered not trustworthy and not reliable clearly depict the lower status of women. The reason for considering women as not trustworthy could be because the Zeme society is one in which exogamous moiety is practiced. Women are considered to be responsible for quarrels between the clans and neighbours.

Her Negligible Role in Social Life

Women have major roles in family and economic activities, but when it comes to social life she is given only a negligible role. Ursula Graham Bower observed the following in Zeme villages:

At the great festivals and on similar public occasions the girls of the allied dormitory appeared. They served as waitresses, carrying beer to the men as they worked. Sometimes they went on formal outings, or picnics, with the bucks and boys; and it was they, of course, who were the main attraction of every dance. Since they married early and so gave up the art, they were seldom such skilled performers as the men; but the Zeme held that even if they couldn’t dance, pretty girls were always worth looking at. In all public activities, it may be noted, it was the men who figured. Girls made only their brief and formal appearances with their appropriate ‘*kiangna*’; married women had no part in public life at all. They never appeared in court in person, but were represented by a male relative. They could not enter the main hall of the morung;

132 Tingneichong Gangte, Women’s role in the Twentieth Century Manipur, A Historical Studies, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of History, Manipur University, 2008 p 191

to do so was not taboo but most immodest.¹³³

In the past women were not encouraged to participate in social life, they were confined within the house. But as a result of social change taking place outside and inside the Zeme society, women are now encouraged to come out of their houses and take part in social activities. Except for some few conservative families, most of the Zemes do not oppose female participation in social life. However women participation is still marginal not only because of her responsibilities and obligations at home but also because of their inferior mind-set.

Her Political Role and Power in Decision Making

Women occupy a very important position in the family, and children love and respect her. At home, a seat near the hearth is always reserved for the mother. It is believed that if any other family member occupies her seat, it shortens the life of the mother. This practice is paradoxical; on the one side is a sign of respect shown to her, but on the other side she is the one who does the entire menial works inside the house. A seat near the hearth reserved for mother is positioned at the place where all the kitchen stuff required for cooking are all placed within her reach. She decides the menu of the daily food at home and organises the house but has no freedom of speech to express her needs and feelings and has no place in decision making in public arena. Her territory of freedom of expression and power of making decision is limited within the four walls of her house which concerns only the welfare of the family and does not include her own needs. In the olden days, women were prohibited from attending any kind of public meeting in the village. Even if she has any grievance to be brought to the 'Village Pai', she cannot come directly to the Pai; she has to be accompanied by any one of the male family members. While she stands a few meters away or outside the 'Village Pai', her male representative speaks for her in the Pai. In most of the time '*Pui-na let lutewmaklei*'¹³⁴ meaning women and children's words are not to be taken into account is the

133 U.G. Bower, op.cit. p 77

134 Literal meaning:- Pui- woman, na – children, let- words, lutewmaklei – cannot be accounted'

usual comment women received while expressing her opinion on any issue. Her complaint is ranked equal to the children's complaint.

But today we see that there is a huge change in the way women are treated in the Zeme society. With Government's initiative to empower women and other social organizations campaigning for the upliftment of women, the Zeme society is encouraging women's participation in socio-political arena. The Zemepui Baudi under the guidance of Zeme Council has taken steps to ensure women's representation in the Village Authority as instructed by the Indian government. The Zemepui Baudi has given a strong instruction for women's representation in Village Authority to all the Zeme villages in Manipur under Tousem district failing which the Baudi will take action against it. The result was very positive; today we have women representatives in almost all the Zeme villages under Tousem sub-division, Manipur, except for a few villages where there are no suitable candidates. However, that does not mean that the problems of participation of Zeme women in socio-political affairs have been solved. Blaming on their ignorant and illiterate life, most of the Zeme women still refuse to come out of their cocoon and participate in social life for greater benefit. They are still very ignorant about the importance of women's participation in the social and political life. The Zeme women still need encouragement and motivation to take active part in social and political life.

Impact of the Western Ideology: The Practice of *Leurebe* versus Holy Living

'*Leurebe*' is a practice where young men would come to court the girls secretly at night and which eventually leads to wedlock unless there are objections from the parents. In this respect, the Zemes have restricted code. If there is objection from the parent's side or from the inmate, and if the man is caught red-handed he is liable for punishment.¹³⁵ Pre-marital sex was permitted in Zeme society with a certain degree of freedom, provided that incest taboo and exogamous laws were not

135 Th. Baba Chandra Singha, *The Socio-economic Life of the Zeme in the Twentieth Century*, Ph.D. unpublished Thesis of Department of History, Manipur University, 1996 p 82

violated. The practice of a young lad going out secretly at night to sleep with a girl is called *Leurebe*; it is a part of tradition. Though freedom of sex before marriage does not mean random or irresponsible sex, pre-marital sex is a normal and an accepted way of life. In fact, it was a matter of pride for the male folks to sleep with many girls. On the naming ceremony of a baby boy on his fifth day of birth, he would be blessed by the village priest to sleep with many girls. Any boy who fails to woo girls and sleep with girls is considered weak and not manly. But on the contrary virgin women are appreciated and valued and sought after by boys. According to Zeme culture, virgin women are identified by the fringe on the foreheads. When a woman loses her virginity she has to part her front hair in the middle. No woman who has lost her virginity is supposed to keep fringe. Virginity was not a strict rule on her marriage day and it is not common due to the practice of *Leurebe*.

Leurebe is no more in practice with the coming of Christianity. The Bible teaches holy living and prohibits fornication.¹³⁶ When the custom which the Zeme observe as normal and commendable is clearly contrary to the Biblical teaching of holy living, the culprits caught in the trap are women. This conflicting clash between a deeply entrenched cultural custom compounded by the essentially sinful nature of men and the Biblical teaching of holy living hit hard the already wounded women folk.¹³⁷ Her behaviour and character is always put to judgement; she is expected to keep herself pure until marriage and remain faithful to her husband till her death. However, the same measure of judgement is not meted out against male folk due to the old traditional influence. A woman is considered immoral with loose character or no character when she loses her virginity and has no place in the society and the Church. But when a man does the same and commits pre-marital sex, he is looked at as a person who violates God's commandment but the society pardons him and accepts him. The society is considerate by saying '*Npeumi a pesedelei*' (Npeumi-man, Pese-normal/usually

136 1st Corinthian 6: 13b,15,18 (KJV)

137 The conflict between the Christian teaching and Zeme customs and traditions are discussed in detail by Dr.RabiPame in his book *Culture and the Church: History of Zeme Naga Church* N.C.Hills, Assam 1910-1995. Published by Nzauna Baptist Church, Nagaland, 2015, p. 255, 256

happen); and the degree of objection is much lighter in case of man; he may be considered immoral but his character is not judged. The social stigma is worst when a woman is a rape victim; she is not only discriminated, but also mentally tortured when the society blames her as her fault for her failure to take care of herself. But to make things worse her character is judged even as a rape victim. Though it is not her fault that she loses her virginity she has no place in the society and the church.

Diminishing Women's Identity

The identity of a woman is generally defined by her role within the family. She is identified as a daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, wife, etc., and not as an individual with distinct identity. A traditional practice found in the Zeme society, however, is that though it is patrilineal society, a daughter does not lose her birth clan. She is always identified by her birth clan and not her husband's. For example, when a person wants to know her before meeting her, the first question asked to identify her is '*Saukileulau?*', meaning "Which clan does she belong?"¹³⁸ An old woman, even on the day of her death is identified by her birth clan.

But with the influence of the western male-oriented ideology, married women are now identified by her husband's surname. This practice is mostly found in Church where wife is addressed by her husband's surname. This has destroyed the advantageous position of woman which she had earlier. The elimination of the practice of head-hunting has been one of the greatest positive contributions made by the British not only to the Zeme but to the whole Naga country. However, the British influence on the shift of woman's identity to her husband's title after her marriage creates negative impact on the status and position of women. On my interview with Zeme elders on this issue, some shrugged the issue off and said that woman's name had nothing to do with her status and position. But there were also some who pointed out that changing her surname is detrimental for a woman; it signals their submission to their husbands reinforcing the idea that women

138 Literal translation:-Sau-who, Ki-house/clan, Leu-woman.

are inferior to men. With the coming of Christianity, the Biblical view which says, “And the twain shall be one flesh: so they are no more twain, but one flesh”¹³⁹ gained ground and so did the clerical habit of designating a married woman by her husband’s surname as a symbol of their legal and spiritual unity. The above cited Bible verse conveys the substance of partnership and fellowship in marriage; however, it has been wrongly understood and interpreted in terms of the husband domineering over the wife. The norm of identifying a married woman with her husband seems to make her lose her independent will and freedom. In the name of being submissive to her husband that is prerequisite of a good wife, her basic rights to express her opinion and freedom of her will is surrendered; it has often led to exploitation by her husband and even an abusive relationship in some extreme cases. Two images of women are found: 1) of the strong and resilient woman, 2) of the suffering and tolerant woman. The strong and resilient women are always judged as not possessing the qualities signifying a woman and are often subjected to ridicule and bad reputation. Women’s pain and struggles are therefore muted and silenced; most women sacrifice their needs, they struggle and endure pain just to preserve their reputation and to save their marriages and families.

Current Challenges of Zeme Women: Women’s Education

In the olden traditional life, Morung was a very important institution which acted as a learning centre in Zeme society. As soon as they attained adolescence, boys and girls no longer slept at home but at their respective morung called Leuseuki for girls and Hangseuki for boys. Young girls were taught how to spin and weave by the elder/senior members of the same *Leuseuki*. The spirit of community living, social etiquettes, moral values, etc were taught and passed down from generation to generation.

But with the introduction of modern education system by the British and the Indian government after independence, the significance of morung has become extinct. Though there is no total restriction against girls’ education, most families in the villages prefer education

139 Mark 10:8 (KJV)

for their male children. Most of the poor farmers who could not afford education for all their children usually choose to send their sons for education. Thus, poverty is one factor for selective male child education. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that poverty is not the only reason and that there is another important reason for less girls getting education. People in the Zeme society have a mindset that girls will become others' property after marriage and therefore it is not worth investing in educating girls. Thus, when faced with financial constraints they prefer to give education only to male children. They often quote '*heleume du anemirammekibakpui du nkutpenainjua lei*'¹⁴⁰ meaning to say that "Girls will become other's property." In this regard, parents should understand that sending children for education should be based not on the sex but on the calibre and capability of them. A child, whether a boy or a girl, with higher I.Q should be given first preference in case the parents cannot support all the children.

With the initiative of *Zemepui Baudi*, awareness campaigns on the importance of women's education were organised at several occasions at the village level, but no impressive changes could be seen till today because there are no proper educational institutions in the Zeme villages. Most of the primary schools function only in the Government record but not in the villages. In the Tousem sub-division, under Tamenglong District where most of the Zeme villages are concentrated, out of the total 64 villages there are only 3 high schools.¹⁴¹ Thus parents have to send their children to towns far away from home for education. In such a situation parents do not want to send girls for education away from home for security reason on one hand, and on the other, they also want their daughters to stay with them at home and help them in cultivation and agricultural works.

The Zemes are not very receptive of change. They do not appreciate people who easily embrace new practice and ideology and they consider those people as unstable and flexible with inferior personality. The value of education was realized very late among the Zemes. The

140 It literally means: Rearing a girl child is like rearing animal for others.

141 The information is primary data collected by the writer

first matriculate among the Zemes in Manipur was Mrs. Sangjingle Newme of Magulong Village, Tousem sub-division in 1960. The growth of education is very slow and negligible. The first to graduate came after three decades, when in 1995 Mrs. Sambuile Newme became the first lady to graduate. Even till today, Zeme women who come up to university level are very few. There are in total five Zeme women who have completed their master's degree in 2014 out of the 26 Zeme villages in Tousem sub-division.¹⁴²

Woman and Her Health

James Johnstone stated: "The Naga women are not handsome but very pleasant looking and many of the girls are pretty, but soon age with the hard toil they have to perform; working in the fields and carrying heavy loads up the endless hills".¹⁴³

T.C Hudson also says:

Before aged by the cares and troubles of motherhood and maturity, they are often comely, with handsome figures. The habit of suckling children until they are 4 years of age or even more soon destroy the soft fullness of the bosom and women of thirty are to all appearance aged has worn and wrinkle. They are industrious but the unpleasant task which makes up the daily work all fell to the women who take at least their fair share in the work of cultivation. Due to their hard work she takes no further care about her personal appearance.¹⁴⁴

These descriptions of the Naga women by the British give a clear picture about the health status of Zeme women also those days and are still very true today. T. C Hudson's description of breastfeeding till four years of age however seems to be not realistic. In Zeme society, babies are breastfed for hardly a year. Because of the work pressure, in most cases women are forced to go to work as soon as possible after giving birth. Women who are healthy and strong go to field even the next day

142 The information is as per the Zemepuibaudi Manipur record

143 Sir James Johnstone, 'Manipur and the Naga Hills' (reprinted in 2010) Gyan publishing house, New Delhi p.49

144 T. C Hudson, The Naga Tribes of Manipur, Low Price Publication, Delhi 1911 (reprinted in 2013) p. 6

after they give birth. It is a matter of pride for them to be able to get up from their bed soon after giving birth and go to the field and work or else they are considered as weak and lethargic. To save their reputation as hard working mothers is much more important than taking care of their bleeding body. The importance of a healthy baby and a healthy mother is still very new in the Zeme region.

There is no prescribed age for marriage nor do we find any child marriage in the Zeme society. But early marriage is very common. There are many mothers who did not experience and enjoy single life of a girl.

A few years back Zemepui Baudi invited me to be one of the resource persons at a seminar organized by them in one of the Zeme villages under Tousem sub-division. On the last day of the program, when we were having a time of social gathering and entertainment, I learned that since they were not used to sitting down for a long time to listen they were bored by the long lectures from resource persons. In one of the entertainment items, a group of young girls from the local village presented a traditional dance; I thought that they were all young unmarried girls. But to my surprise, I came to know that they were all married. Incidentally, a small girl was consoling her crying baby brother at her back woken up by the sound of the beating of drums saying: “*Look mummy (apui) is dancing. She will come for you after dancing, stop crying.*” I was told by the local church elders later that evening that there were no more young unmarried girls in the village because they all get married soon after they attained puberty.

Early marriage reduced her power to exercise her rights and has to a great extent affected her health.

Zeme villages are located in the remote borders of the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland at the steepest and most interior part of the Barail range. Government schemes and facilities to promote the living condition of the people hardly reach the Zeme villages. The PHC (Primary Health Centre) in Tousem sub-division runs without

Prejudice is a learned trait. You're not born prejudiced; you're taught it. – Charles R. Swindoll, radio preacher, USA

proper amenities and doctors; there are only two nurses. Medical team from the Tamenglong head-quarter pays a visit two in a year. The local newspaper, The Sangai Express, on 3rd August 2014, reported of a woman from

Tousem delivering a baby in a forest. It reads as follows:-

In a bizarre incident a woman is said to have given birth to a child in a forest on her way to the hospital. The expecting mother, a resident of Tousem village, was referred to the Tamenglong District Hospital by the two nurses posted at Tousem PHC, said a press release issued by Tousem Village Authority. The mother had to journey a distance of 45km across jungles on foot to reach the hospital. The baby was delivered unaided in a jungle in Tamenglong district without much complication. However the mother was rushed to District hospital bleeding profusely. The press release said the incident is the testimony of how people are suffering due to Government apathy at this interior part of the State.¹⁴⁵

This is just one of the many incidents that happened in the Zeme region every now and then. There were many mothers who could not make it and left their children to grow up without their mothers.

Another factor for poor health condition of women in the Zeme area is the traditional gennas. The Zemes in olden times observed numerous gennas; gennas of village, crop, sickness, death, household, and individual gennas like gennas for mother during child birth, food gennas, gennas on natural calamities etc. The birth of a child at home calls for the observance of domestic genna. When a woman delivers a child, a plant will be placed on the front wall of the house to indicate that the household is under genna. Soon after the birth, the mother will begin to abstain from eating any curry. She is permitted to eat only plain rice with salt. She is not allowed to sleep on bed, but on the ground on a mat beside the hearth till five days is completed. She should also not take bath for five days after delivery. Only after five days, she is allowed to take bath and wash her cloths used during the delivery. If the child died before the performance of ritual on the fifth

145 Sangai Express, Imphal Sunday, 03 August 2014

day after the birth, the infant will not be counted as a human being. No death ceremony will be performed. The dead body will be buried under the bed. Genna will be declared and it shall be observed strictly by the whole village.¹⁴⁶ A genna called Nkeunna (genna of wonder and awe) is observed when triplets or more are born to a mother, it is a village genna where the people remain in the village, and by strict custom no outsiders are allowed into the village.¹⁴⁷

The traditional practices are so firmly implanted in the minds of the Zeme, that even after becoming Christian, these non-Christian traditions continue to have great influence upon the lives and actions of many people. It is still believed that violation of taboos and gennas would bring misfortune and curse.¹⁴⁸ These traditional gennas are still in practice in some of the Zeme villages in Senapati District of Manipur and Dima Hasao of Assam. Such traditional gennas observed during mothers' pregnancy and birth greatly hampers the mothers' health.

Human Trafficking

One of the most recent issues arising among the Zemes is child trafficking and human trafficking. Many a times parents are lured by the tall promises from the child trafficking agents to send their children to other parts of India with the promise of free education and good boarding facilities for their children; such advertisements by trafficking agents who came at their home easily attract them because they are poor and cannot afford even their basic needs, not to mention of good and quality education for their children. Most of the parents are illiterate; they are gullible and become easy prey in the hands of the traffickers.

Though the Zemes resides in the remote border of the three states, they are not immune to social evils of the global world. The present poor living conditions combined with their innocent simple mind and the desire to improve their life as they see the outside world make them gullible and easy prey to human trafficking. In the past few years

146 Rabi Pame, *Church and Culture: History of Zeme Naga Church*, N.C. Hills Assam 1910-1995. Published by Nzauna Baptist Church, Nagaland 2015 p 111

147 Ibid p 95

148 Ibid p 94

Human Rights team from Tamenglong have taken initiatives to rescue girls from the border between Assam and Bangladesh. The victimized Zeme girls do not want to come back home (to Assam) because they are afraid of being stigmatized.

Lack of proper education among the Zeme women is one of the most crucial problems today not only hindering their empowerment but also making them fall easy prey to all those false promises.

Profile of Zemepui Baudi

Zemepui Baudi (AMN) is the apex body of the women organizations of the Zeme society. Zemepui means Zeme women (pui-women) and Baudi means Union. It was started in Tamenglong district head quarter of Manipur in the year 2003, and it later spread to other two states of Nagaland and Assam. It was known as Zeme Women Union when it first started. Zeme Women Union was formed on 10th October 2003 under the guidance and supervision of Zeme Council, the apex body of the whole Zeme organisations. The need for the establishment of women union was often brought up in the Zeme Council meeting but since there was no urgency, it was not given a primary importance. The real need for the establishment of women union was acknowledged and taken into consideration when a letter from the GPRN (Government of People's Republic, Nagalim) addressing the Zeme women organization if any under the address of the Zeme Council office, Tamenglong, asked for Zeme traditional attires needed for Indo-Naga Peace Talk at Bangkok. Zeme Council general meeting was called on 10th October 2003 inviting the whole Zeme women to attend at Tamenglong. And on that day, Zeme Women Union was formed. The Zeme leaders and elders decided that the name Zeme Women Union would be appropriate because there was already in existence Zeliangrong Women Union, where Zeme women representatives were present. The founding President was Mrs. Sambuile Newme and General Secretary was Iluneile Newme.

Wherever the torch of truth shines it is advantageous to all, and it must not be seen who the torchbearer is. – *Hazrath Sayyidah wife of Prophet Muhammad*

Logo: Zemepui with traditional attire fetching water from a stream

WATER signifies peace and lives; a woman carrying TEKEUPING (bamboo container for storing water) on her back signifies women as one who sustains and preserves life, tradition and culture from generation to generation

Motto: Peace and Sustainability

The Zeme women believe that women are the peace keeper of the society and women are sustainers of life.

Since its birth, the Zeme Women Union has been playing active role in looking after women issues within the society, encouraging women's education to reduce and eliminate ignorance which they believe is the main problem leading to underdevelopment of the society. They also take part along with the Zeliangrong Women Union in Nisabandh, checking and controlling anti-social elements such as smuggling and selling of liquor and other intoxicants, gambling and sexual immorality, etc.

Brief Report on the Activities of Zemepui Baudi (M)

The main aims and objectives of Zemepui Baudi are as follows:

- To protect women against domestic violence and to help them stand up for their rights and dignity.
- To encourage and promote women's participation in decision making body.

To promote and enrich cultural and traditional values and preserve the existing ones.

To contribute and participate in the socio-economic development of the Zeme society.

- The Zemepui Baudi is affiliated to the Zeme Council but not to any other Government body.

On the first Foundation day, the 10th October 2004, a seminar was

War is over ... If you want it. – *John Lennon, musician and peace activist, UK*

organized where lectures on the importance of women's role in the family and society for development were given.

Over the years since its inception, Zemepui Baudi has organized several seminars and workshops on the topics:

- Girls' education
- Women and child health awareness
- Women's role in economic development
- Importance of women's right in decision making
- Women and her time and financial management, etc

Zemepui Baudi has taken initiatives for promoting traditional attire. On few occasions, they have organized weaving competition where the best weavers of traditional attires were awarded. They have re-introduced Zeme cultural wrap-around skirts called 'minis' which were on the verge of extinction since they were long forgotten by the present generation. And at the same time, several new attires have been introduced by the Zemepui Baudi. The most remarkable ones are:

- Giakterinine – for married women to wear so that the married and unmarried can be identified by the *minis* they wear.
- Hegirapani – (hegi-evening, rapa-flower, thus evening flower, to symbolize the evening stage of human life) to be worn during funeral to mark the day of mourning and to let people understand the occasion from the dress.

Zemepui Baudi also takes very important part in many social activities. They are at the front in solving conflict and maintaining peace in situations where it is risky for man to take the lead, especially while confronting the military.

Zemepui Baudi undertook a great responsibility when fifty-two children (mostly Zeme children) were rescued from Chennai in 2009.

Ms. Ramningle Pame, the then General Secretary, Zemepui Baudi (M) personally went to Imphal to receive the rescued 12 children and took care of them and brought them to Tamenglong. The children were provided shelter and relief by the Zemepui Baudi until their parents and guardians could come to take them home. The Zemepui Baudi also helped the parents of the rescued children in finding schools for the children and sponsorships for those poor children and orphans.

Spread of Zemepui Baudi to Assam and Nagaland

The first Zemepui Baudi (Manipur) conference was held from February 8th-10th 2007 at Tousem. Prior to the conference, Zemepui Baudi went to Nagaland with the aim of introducing Zemepui Baudi (Manipur) to their fellow Zemes in Nagaland. The Zemes in Nagaland welcomed them, appreciated them and encouraged them. Soon after their visit and conference, Zemepui Baudi (Nagaland) was formed.

Special invitation was also given to fellow Zeme women at Assam. During that time, there was one Zeme women organization in Assam called 'Zeme Mother Association'. The mothers who came to participate in the conference were inspired and motivated, and later on they established Zemepui Baudi (Assam) which is now recognized by Zeme Council (AMN).

Conclusion

There are two things which can be observed about the Zeme tribes today. First, the Zeme society is in transitional period, from traditional to modern living. The traditional socio-economic and cultural life of the ancient past is slowly ebbing away to be taken over by the influence of the modern world. The transition is slow and difficult but it surely is taking place. Second, though they have set their foot toward modernism, the Zemes are still one of the least developed tribes among the Nagas and in India. They are at the margin in every aspect of life: socially, politically and economically. Many reasons could be pointed out for the underdevelopment of the society such as the geographical

condition dividing them into the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland and living as minority in the remote borders of the three states, lack of government's support, transport and communication problems, etc. But this is nothing less than trying to describe the elephant's anatomy as perceived by five blind men, each describing the facets of the elephant anatomy but not the complete whole.

As long as the Zeme society is blinded by ignorance, the whole truth of the cause of underdevelopment will not be understood. Thus, education has a very crucial role in the development of the society as a whole. Women's education therefore stands as one of the remedies to the problem of Zeme society because there can be no development in the society if women who consist of half of the population in any society are not uplifted. When women are empowered through education and her status – socially, politically and economically – is improved, it ultimately leads to the development of the whole society.

While promoting women's education on the one hand, depriving women of their rights, be it of inheritance of land or other property, of guardianship of children, or of participation in decision making processes at the level of family, society, village council, church and tribe council should be re-considered simultaneously for a just society. Lastly, in the Zeme society, women's contribution in the family and society are acknowledged and valued but are not given due honour. Thus, to pave the way forward for gender equality which in turn will bring about positive development in the society as a whole, the Zeme society should, in the first place, learn to rightfully honour women and at the same time women should emancipate themselves from anything that restrict their positive development.

Appendix

Short biodata of Contributors, Editors and Writers

Editors



Ajuna Pame

MA in Sociology, B.Ed.

Married to Dr. Engam Pame, IIS, with two children, a girl and a boy.

Areas of interest: Education, editing works, music, interior designing, culinary art and organic gardening.



Dr. Achan Mungleng

Shirui Village, Ukhrul District, Manipur

Academic Degree: PhD (anthropologist), Independent

Researcher & Consultant and a Trainer

Experiences:

- Worked extensively on Burma for more than a decade promoting development of democracy and Ethnic rights.
- Working with various sections of the society – youth, students, women and community leaders.



Ngachanso Luithui

Langdang, Ukhrul District, Manipur

M.Th. (OT)

Profession: Theologian

Experiences: Teaching



Leiyolan Vashum

Talui, Ukhrul District

M.A. in Public Affairs, University of Madras – (2012)

Experiences:

Founder, Hill-Wild Pvt. Ltd. (2017)

General Secretary, Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong (2014 – 2017)

Contributors



Dr. (Ms.) Gina Shangkham

Komlathabi (Kapaam) Village, Chandel

Ph.D (History)

Experiences: - Teaching: 1981 – 2011 (South East Manipur College, Komlathabi)

- Research: Research Associate (Manipur University)

- Member: Governing Body of South East Manipur College, Komlathabi (2014 – 2017)

- President: Naga Women's Union, Manipur (NWUM) 1994 – 2004

- Convenor: Indigenous Women Forum North East India (IWFNEI)

- Secretary General: Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) 2010 – 2014

- Consultant: Naga Women's Union (NWU)

- Advisor: Indigenous Women Forum North East India (IWFNEI)

- Executive Member (Social and Culture Secretary): Moyon Naga Council – 2014 – 2016



Dr. Kc. Adaina

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Christ University, Bengaluru, India.

Obtained PhD from Indian Institute of Technology, Madras (IITM), Economics in 2013.

His research interests are largely in the fields of Gender economics, Development economics and Environmental economics.



Aram Pamei

Inriangluang village, Tamenglong, Manipur

B.A., B.D., M.Th.

Experiences:

- Project Coordinator: NWU since 2011 – 2017

- President: Naga Women's Union, Manipur, 2011 – 2013

- Secretary: All Manipur Christian Organization (AMCO), July 2003 - May 2006.

- Convener: Citizens Concern for Dams & Development (CCDD) and Co-Chairperson: 1999 – 2004 – 2005 – 2006 – 2015

- Convener: Committee against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD) from 2001 till date

- President: Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) in 1997.
- Co-Convener: Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) from 1993 – 2001
- Secretary: Naga Women's Union Manipur (NWUM) from 1994 – 2001.
- Convener: Member of Peace Core Team Manipur (PCTM), Co-convener at Present.
- Secretary: Association for Development of Indigenous Women & Child Care from 1994 till date, a founder member too.
- Honorary Secretary: Baptist Women Fellowship of North East-India (BWFNEI) 1993-2009
- Women Secretary: Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) 1978 – 1990
- Teaching: 2 years (1976 – 1977) at Manipur Bible Institute (MBI), Now as Manipur Theological College (MTC), Kangpokpi, Senapati District, Manipur



Kc. Ahouna Gangmei

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Experiences: - Teaching in Private Schools for four years
- Office Assistant, NWU (2012 – till date)

Writers



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PhD in Sociology

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Experiences: - Prera Junior Adult Education Volunteer
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- President, Chothe Women Union



Lazarus Noela Khumba (Inpui)

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M.A. (Linguistic)

Experience: Teaching in Semi Govt. School



Warneijang Jaiche (Kharam)

Phaijol Village, Senapati District, Manipur
B.A.



Sumshot Khular (Lamkang)

Thamlakhuren, Chandel District, Manipur

MA Human Rights, Essex University

MA Linguistics, Manipur University

15 years of work Experiences:

- Centre for Social Development (CSD) Imphal
- Foundation for Social Transformation (FST) Guwahati
- Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF) Delhi
- Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, (NPMHR)
- Indigenous Women's Forum for North East India (IWFNEI)
- Other networks and groups of Indigenous Peoples
- Worked as a Visiting Scholar at the University of North Texas (UNT)
- Creation of pedagogical materials of Lamkang

Translated into the Lamkang language:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights-(UDHR)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).



Dr. Mary Maheo (Mao)

Mao, Senapati District, Manipur

Ph.D

Experiences: Assistant Professor, D.M. College



Kanga Dishung (Maram)

Maram Khullen, Senapati District, Manipur

B.A.

Experience: - Worked in HIV Field for 7 years

- Teaching under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) as Assistant Teacher for 4 years

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Renie Wanglar (Monsang)

Liwachangning, Chandel District, Manipur

B.A, B.ed.

Experiences: - Deputy Inspector of Schools, Education Department, ADC Chandel

- NWU Former Speaker

- Worked with women groups; NWU, NWUC, ATWO in the upliftment and promotion of the rights of women, empowerment of women through workshops, seminars, advocacy and awareness programmes.



Dina Serbum (Moyon)

Kapaam (Komlathabi), Chandel District, Manipur

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Experience: PWD Department



L.M. Tabitha Trumy (Poumai)

Tungjoy Village, Senapati District, Manipur

M.Sc. Life Science (Botany)

Experiences: - Teaching in Private School for six years

- Former General Secretary, NWU (2011 – 2013)

- Former President, NWU for a term (2014 – 2016)



Chonchuirinmayo Luithui Pheiray (Tangkhul)

Phungcham Village, Ukhrul District, Manipur

LL.M.

Experiences: - Member of Naga People's Movement for Human Rights

- Worked at ILO, Geneva as an intern and as Programme Officer

- External Consultant for ILO DWT for South Asia and Country Office in India.

- Main area of interest is legal research related to indigenous peoples.



K. Choirita (Tarao)

Leishokching, Chandel District, Manipur

M.A. Philosophy in Religion

Experience: - President, Tarao Chotnu Jurrei



Pongdeila Kadeikeimi (Thangal)

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M.A

Experiences: Work for the upliftment and promotion of rights and also for the empowerment and upliftment of the socio political and economic status of women. Attended and presented papers in the national and international seminars and conferences.

Zeliangrong



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Ph.D. Scholar in the Department of Economics, Manipur University

Experiences: - Lecturer, Don Bosco College, Maram 2 years
- Resource Person in various seminars organized by Zemepui Baudi (Zeme Women Union)



Kawichamthiu Charenamei (Liangmai)

Tamei, Tamenglong District, Manipur

M.A. B.Ed.

Experiences: - Advisor, Liangmai Women Union
- Advisor, Tamei Women Front
- Lecturer, DIET, SCERT Govt. of Manipur



Enoch Newmei (Liangmai)

MSc. Biotechnology, B.D

Tamei, Tamenglong District, Manipur

Experiences: - Principal of a School
- General Secretary, Liangmai Naga Council (M)



Lungsanliu Panmei (Rongmei)

Inriangluang (Tamenglong) village

Master of Theology (Communication)

Experiences: - Teaching in Private School (2000-2001)
- Youth Director, New Hope Ministry (2005-2006)
- Written various articles to various local publications and journals including several from women's perspectives.
- Exchange student to University of Toronto, Canada under International Network for Advancing Theological Education (2007).
- Member of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).



NAGA WOMEN'S UNION (NWU)

TO IWGIA OUR WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Violence and conflict tore us apart and threw us into total disarray

We were just in our infancy, vulnerable and defenseless!

How beautiful is the benevolent hand that reaches us, extending
support and helping us walk our own path
through our childhood and adolescence.

You have given the Naga Women a wonderful legacy
with your generosity and inspiration.

Having walked 23 years of journey today

We have yet to walk through our struggles
for equality, justice and peace as women.

WE CONVEY OUR HEARTFELT GRATITUDE TO

International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

Copenhagen, Denmark

For giving us

The direction when we needed it most,

The strength to face the challenges
when we were at a loss,

The support to write our own stories
And the continuing support and solidarity
through our journey as Naga women.

20th November, 2017

President

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