



Review Paper

Gender, rituals and customary law among the Sumi Naga of Nagaland, India

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Abstract

The Sumi Nagas of Nagaland in Northeast India are considered an epitome of a patriarchal society. An investigation into their traditional beliefs and customary law will reveal a complex gender relations and 'disparity' passed down generations. Importantly, the many rites and rituals, which form the basis of Sumi traditional religion, also reveal the gender differences and differentiation of gender roles, as reflected in the ritual complex. This article seeks to understand the rites and rituals pivoting around Sumi Naga women, and analyse them through the lens of gender relations, religious symbolism and community life. Notwithstanding, the article will also shed light on the agential aspect of Sumi Naga women where they have been able to creatively negotiate the social institutions and cultural practices that many a time favour their male counterparts of the society.

Keywords: Sumi Naga, customary law, rites and rituals, gender relations, patriarchy.

Introduction

Rites and rituals occupies an important space in the traditional Naga society. They accompanied every important social activity, celebrations, and achievements of both the social group and individuals¹. Scholars who have worked on the religious life of the Nagas have underscored a critical role that rites and rituals play in the social and cultural life². For instance, J.P. Mills had argued that, 'The religion of the Ao is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies (rites and rituals)³. Considering the significance of rites and rituals in the 'economic livelihood' of the Sumi Naga, Chophy writes that, 'The rites and rituals reflect the capriciousness of nature and the harsh environment that the Sumi have to negotiate to survive'⁴. Both the native and Western scholars have studied rituals from various dimensions, but as I see it the study of rites and rituals in relation to gender has received less attention, barring the analysis of the rites of passage⁵. Rites and rituals in the Naga society are gendered, and they lend legitimacy to gender identity and gender roles; also, it is through rites and rituals that the patriarchal values of the Naga society is maintained and perpetuated.

With coming of Christianity, the rites and rituals in the Naga society has undergone a tremendous change, but even within the new worldview the notion of gender and its function is determined to a great extent by rites and rituals⁶. Notwithstanding, this article will seek to understand the gendered aspect of Sumi Naga rites and rituals, and locate the Sumi women within the framework of the rites and rituals and customary practices.

The distinctive cultural identity among Sumi the Naga tribe is that religious rites and rituals form an important aspect of customary law and practices⁷. This is an important point of departure since in a society like the Sumi Naga the legal and jurisprudence and religious beliefs and practices inform one another giving rise to a peculiar cultural complex. The customary practices of the Sumi Naga are in most cases similar with other Naga tribes, with some exceptional variations. The Sumi customary laws are not written law, but it is based on the oral tradition that has been passed down generations. Thus, the article will focus on two important variables, rituals and customary law, to understand the gender relations and status of women among the Sumi Naga of Nagaland in Northeast India.

The Sumi Naga ritual complex and customary law: towards a gendered analysis

The Sumi Naga are one of the major tribes of Nagaland belonging to Zunheboto district, but almost equal number of villages have settled in Dimapur district. (The sixteen official tribes of Nagaland are the Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Chang, Lotha, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Kachari, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Kuki, Phom, Pochury, Yimchunger and Zeliang.) The Sumi Naga are identified on the basis regional settlement such as northern, southern, eastern and western (for instance, the Sumi settlers in Dimapur district are known as western Sumi). There are some Sumi settlements (villages) in Kiphire, Mokokchung and Wokha district. Like other Naga tribes, the Sumi Naga belong to the Mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burman family of language. The Sumi Naga are known for sharing a homogenous language and culture cutting across

regions and villages, unlike among other Naga tribes like the Konyak and Khamniungan Naga where inter-village language difference is a norm. With regard to physical traits that Sumi Naga are to be known of average Indian built with wheatish complexion (like any other tribes of Nagaland), and most notably the Sumi Naga were known to be more warlike and labelled as a warrior tribedue to their daring nature in the headhunting days⁸.

Headhunting: According to Nekha, members of a village, which was the basis of the Sumi Naga society in the past, were guarded and their movements were monitored by the warriors, especially when they go to the field and return home, lest the community members fell victim to the headhunting raids⁹. In such a social milieu, women and children were given extra care and protection from the enemies. And for this reason, the man who brings the head of a woman used to be honoured as the most courageous man, since women and children were guarded the most in the first place. The Sumi Naga believe that the main reason why men hunted for women's head was because of the natural hair that was used for adorning a male's back basket (*asaphu*), regarded as a prized trophy accentuating a warrior's traditional attire.

The tradition of head hunting was in practice for many generation, and a series of *genna* and rituals accompanied this 'much-dreaded' practice; but most notably, headhunting was a domain of the men folk among all the Naga tribes, and therefore the rites and rituals associated with the practice was usually a prerogative of the male members of the society, except in cases where the entire community had to observe headhunting *genna*. Being a male dominated activity, women were sidelined in the rites and rituals, thereby the symbolic importance, status and valour that was legitimated through the ceremonies were invested only in the male members, subsequently reinforcing the patriarchal values of the Sumi society. The practice of head hunting, which is attributed by some scholars as the core of Naga culture, was highly 'unpleasant' by the modern standards¹⁰. And this practice was put to an end through the implementation of the colonial laws and due to the spread of the new faith that was brought by the American Baptist missionaries during the British rule¹¹.

Life cycle rituals: Among the Sumi Naga, life cycle rituals played a significant role in establishing gender difference and assigning the status and role of a person in the community: on one hand, life cycle rituals, also known as rites of passage, was related to the health and well-being of an individual, while on the other hand it played an important symbolic role in establishing the status of a person based on gender and class, etc. In this context, the hierarchies and social conventions of the Sumi Naga society was established through life cycle rituals, and the acceptance of an individual as a legitimate member of the community came only through the observance of the prescribed rites and rituals, without which the identity of a person remained nebulous and illegitimate¹².

In the Sumi society, the most important life cycle ritual begins at the birth of a child (naming ceremony). When a male child is born, a cock is culled, cooked and the new born child is fed with freshly cooked liver paste after giving a bath. In the case of a girl child, a hen is culled for similar ritual which is called '*akipixi*'. The meat of the sacrificial chicken, which is usually done after ascertaining the gender of the child, is called '*akipixishi*' (*akipixi- ritual, shi- meat*). The preparation of *akipixishi* is to be taken by the child's mother alone, since it is strongly believed that if the meat is shared among the family members, it would create hatred between the new born child and other members (excepting the mother). If there is any left-over of *akipixishi*, it is carefully discarded and buried in the ground, since the leftover meat is considered a taboo. The traditional belief in selecting a cock or a hen for *akipixishi* according to the sex of a new born child is that: if a cock is killed for the girl child, the saying goes that the same child as a grown-up would roam outside the house (domestic space) like a cock, and would not inculcate femininity (feminine values) as is expected of the girls in the Sumi society conforming to the cultural values.

Also when a new child is born, there is usually a traditional way of informing the villagers or community people whether the child is a male or a female. After the completion of ten days, on the eleventh day, if it is a baby boy, a male member of the family would carry the child and go around the village making it known that it is a male child. On the other hand, if it is a girl child, a female member of the family would carry the baby signifying that it is a girl child. This is how the community used to know the gender of the newborn baby after completing ten days, that is, on the eleventh day. During the restriction period, the child's mother is not supposed to talk to strangers or passers-by whom she does not know. It is believed that speaking to the strangers would delay the healing of the umbilical cord wound, and would lead to an insufficient secretion of breast milk of the mother, increase the infestation of worms in the newborn child, and generally lead to a lethargic condition of the child later in life. Before the completion of ten days *genna* period, the mother should not have vegetables in her diet¹³. And if the husband goes out for work or hunting, etc., he should come back before sunset, and after which he should warmed himself in the fire in a neighbour's house, or else it is believed that evil spirits would follow him and harm the newborn child. When a child completes the tenth day after birth, the mother would take the child in her arms and stand on the porch of the house facing east on the eleventh day, and the grandparents of the child would name the baby according to the socio-economic status of the child's parents. Before a proper name is given to a child, they are traditionally called as *Khümütsa/Khakhu* for boys, and *Akhüshi* for girls – *Khümütsa* (translated as bitter) or *Khakhu* (*akhakhu*), which isa kind of a local fruit having a bitter taste; and *Akhüshi* is the literal translation of a bitter gourd. It is believed that evil spirits do not like anything that has a bitter taste, and therefore, if the child is addressed as *Khümütsa/Khakhu* or *Akhüshi* as per their biological sex, the evil spirit would not touch or harm them. In other words, naming the child

after the bitter vegetables would ward off any bad omen that may afflict the 'vulnerable' newborn child.

In addition, it is also believed that, if a woman declares the child's name, the child would become cranky and therefore, men are the ones who announces or declares the name of the child: this particular belief reflects the cultural belief regarding women in the Sumi traditional society. Soon after the naming ceremony is over, a leaf of an *ayilo* plant (*Elsholtziablanda*) and leaves of *akuwu* and *awusü* (two local varieties of ginger) are threaded together and put around the neck of the child as a necklace, claiming that the child is ours, and the evil spirit has no right to kill the child (*Ayilo* is a locally found herb with a strong pungent smell that is traditionally used for treatment of certain ailments in the past; meanwhile, ginger is believed to have a potent effect against malicious spirits due to its strong smell and a peculiar flavour).

Twin birth: Another ancestral belief of the Sumi Naga is that if a woman bears a twin child in her womb, she is considered fortunate. If both the twins survive, it is considered 'very lucky'. But, if any one of the twins passes away, it is considered 'a bad omen', believing that the twin child does not have support of his or her other twin sibling to lead a prosperous life. If a pregnant woman delivers twin babies who are a boy and a girl, it is considered that the woman was not faithful to her husband, and thus the twins must have been conceived outside the marriage, and so women in their reproductive age used to avoid other women with such history of pregnancy.

It is believed that women in their reproductive age should not pluck and eat the fruit from the trees, believing that such women would bear twin babies. It is also believed that conjoint fruit, vegetables and nuts should not be eaten by a woman in her reproductive age, for a fear of experiencing twins or multiple pregnancies in the future. Young boys and girls are forbidden to eat certain portion of the flesh of either domesticated or wild animals which breed more than one offspring at a time. It is also believed that consuming uterus of such animals would lead to multiple pregnancies.

The belongings of the woman who gave birth to twins are not to be borrowed or exchanged with other women, especially *asiipe* (a basket made of bamboo strips with a circumference and depth of approximately 8x7 inches with a string made of cotton cloth to tie at the level of belt line and holding the basket at the back which is usually worn by women when they work in the paddy field) and weaving equipments. In doing so, the women in the child bearing age is believed to follow the same fate.

Maternal and child death (MCD): The case of stillbirth is considered a taboo and a misfortune that put Sumi women at a disadvantage. This is one important area where the onset of modernity and conversion to the new faith has brought about substantial change with regard to this aspect of traditional belief, and its entailing genna and rituals. If a woman dies during

pregnancy or during the process of child birth, or if a child dies within ten days delivery, that is, during perinatal period, such a case is known as *nhapithi*. With regard to the traditional belief, the term '*nhapithi*' is used when a pregnant woman or a child dies before the requisite ritual, which symbolises the child as a legitimate member of the community, is performed: the ritual which is performed after the completion of ten days after the arrival of a child into this world.

Such type of death (*nhapithi*) was believed to be unnatural. And so women in their reproductive age were not allowed to use or touch the belongings of such deceased women, fearing that they would also face a similar fate. Thus, the ornaments, weaving implements, cloths and utensils, etc., of the deceased person were used by elderly women who have already attained the menopause. In case, there is no one in the family/community to use the belongings left behind by such a deceased woman, it is used to be discarded in the outskirts of the village. In the case of perinatal death of a newborn child, who has not completed ten days stipulated period, the death body is buried at the basement floor in the kitchen.

Social conventions and gender difference

Congenital deformity in economic Role: In the traditional Sumi Naga society, people with bodily deformity occupied a relatively low position, irrespective of that person's family background. The Sumi believed that any person (both male and female) having congenital deformity like stump or ill-formed fingers, toes and ears are unfortunate and inauspicious. When such a person laid their hands on food grains in the barn, it is believed that the quantity of the food grain decreases, and if they take out rice beer from the vat to drink or to serve others, the rice beer quantity would decrease, and thereby not meet the requirements of the family.

With regard to gender distinction, these type of women are considered as women of '*a-u la müpa*' (*a-u la müpa*, which means whatever food items these women lay their hands on, the quantity of that food items tend to decrease, or in other words, such a woman are believed to have inherent capability to decrease any food items by merely touching them, which is purely of bad luck and not by choice). Therefore, when it comes to the prestige of women with deformity, they occupied the lowest status, since they are considered as ritually inauspicious, and this group of women are usually look-down-upon by members of the community. The general belief is that family members suffer from shortage of food grains because of the ill-effect of the *a-u la müpa* of a woman with congenital birth defects.

Festivals and gender relations: The Sumi Nagas celebrate their traditional festivals with utmost importance, which signify the importance of the cultural identity and tradition of the community. One of the most important festivals celebrated by the Sumi Naga is *ahuna* that falls on 14th of November every

year. The celebration of *ahuna* festival signals the consumption of the newly harvested rice, and also welcoming the new agricultural year. After the harvest is over and the paddy are transferred to the village and kept in the granary; and on the occasion of *ahuna*, a temporary extension of a room is made on the porch of the house with the help of bamboo wall known as *atozū* or *ayephu*. Here an eldest male member of extended family would assemble the entire male members into the newly constructed room/enclosure for observing *ahuna* ritual as well as feasting. Women are barred from entering into the enclosure for fear of bringing injuries or misfortune during the new agricultural year. During this seclusion period, which lasts up to three days, the male members sleep separately from wives, and even abstain from touching the hem of a woman's cloth. Khashito Aye has mentioned that this period of separation of the male from the female during the *ahuna* festival, and the seclusion of the former within the enclosure is known as *ahuvū* or *abosūhu*¹⁴. The Sumi believed that laying with a woman or touching a woman's attire during the ritual period brings ill omen or misfortune in the male-related activity like hunting and warfare. There are several rituals which were prerogative of the male members that not only reinforced the patriarchal values of the Sumi society, but also brought about gender differences through the ritual space.

Social institutions: In the early days, the Sumi Naga had educational institutions to train and equip the young members of the society indispensable life skills, so as to sustain them when they grow up as adults. The Sumi Naga had the tradition of maintaining dormitories separately for boys and girls at different locations in the village, known as *apuki* and *iliki* respectively. During their time in the dormitory (*apuki*), young boys were taught the art of handicraft, folk dance, folk songs, hunting, and several other life skills, besides the important art of warfare. Likewise, girls too in the dormitory (*iliki*) learnt the art of spinning, weaving, farming, cooking, and other skills that would sustain them in later life as responsible adults, wives and as mothers. However, despite the inculcation of life skills among the members of the community, irrespective of gender, it is usually the girl child or grown-up woman who shouldered most of the responsibilities of the family, thereby contributing the larger chunk to an 'unseen' workforce in the Sumi society.

The Sumi Naga women in the past, especially during the period of head hunting, had to bear children, look after the household, and struggle on a daily basis to support the family, while the menfolk used to go out for headhunting raids or carry out inter-village fighting. The daily life of a Sumi Naga women included chores such as pounding and cleaning rice, fetching water from the spring, fetching firewood from the jungle, rearing chicken and domestic animals for food security, which are all in addition to women forming the backbone of *jhum* cultivation. In the villages, the expectant mothers would work continuously in the field or at home until the time of delivery. There are cases where women had to deliver babies in the jungle or while working in the fields. Generally, after a few day of rest a mother

had to resume her regular work in the field and at home. Also in some cases, if a mother is late from working in the fields, a baby sitter would usually take the baby to another nursing mother for breast feeding. This cooperation among the nursing mothers was a social obligation that reflected the mutual cooperation and esprit de corps of women in the Sumi society. The argument is that the social institutions and customary practices have generally favoured men, but nevertheless Sumi women have been able to create a space for themselves through ingenuity as well as out of necessity¹⁵. Modernity has created more opportunities and avenues for women in the Sumi society, but in the process there are several aspects of social and cultural life where gender parity has to be achieved.

Conclusion

The American Baptist missionaries first came with the message of Christianity to the Sumi land at the end of nineteenth century¹⁶. Ivulho of Ghokimi village became the first convert, who embraced the new faith in 1903¹⁷. Since then, the Protestant form of Christianity has grown rapidly and today has remarkably impacted the social and cultural lives of the Sumi Naga in all fronts. With the change of the religion from 'animism' to Christianity, the age-old traditions and rituals are slowly vanishing due to the rapid transition¹⁸. The impact of Christian mission and British rule has generated a great deal of debate, but there is no arguing that modern education that came about because of the cross-cultural contact, which has brought about a great change in the status of women, as education is seen synonymous with empowerment in the Sumi society¹⁹. In fact, education has somewhat levelled the playing ground as more Sumi Naga women are creating a space for themselves in the modern Sumi society.

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