



Lost Traditions Of The Tangkhul Naga In The Wake Of Western Education,...But Not To Be Forgotten

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Abstract:

It is a paper that attempts to bring to light the traditions that our forefathers have practiced and handed down generations after generations. Traditions that have protected and kept the tribe from surviving the test of times. Traditions that kept the people simple, honest, generous, and committed. Despite the absence of written records and scientific methods, they have been able successfully continue with their activities depending on many such traditions which may seem unscientific, superstitious and ancient but was followed and adopted successfully. Unfortunately, such beautiful traditions have been discarded and lost for various factors especially the introduction of Western education and culture. It is a paper written with the sincere intention to keep it alive and remembered that those were the traditional practices that kept the community alive.

Terms:

Head hunting, Dormitories, omens, festivals, traditional house, tax, tattoos

Introduction:

The Tangkhul tribe is one of the biggest sub-tribes of the Naga tribe that inhabits the state of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal in India and the Naga administered areas in Burma. The Tangkhul Naga occupies the Ukhrul district of Manipur and another 23 villages are in Myanmar. They supposedly migrated to the present territory from elsewhere. Their migration from Samshok or "Thaungdut" in Myanmar is well documented and not contested but there is no historical record prior to that.

They arrive in the present settlement in waves and begin to settle on the mountain ridges taking into consideration security. The villages are independent republics and self-sufficient. They are simple agrarian people but very hard working. They are well known for their skill in jhum and terrace farming. One of the most prominent activities of this tribe is the weaving industry of beautiful shawls and wraparounds, which are beautiful and exquisite. It is truly their identity and mark of excellence.

The Tangkhuls never had any written script and so all their history and culture were handed down orally in the form of stories and folklore. The traditional practices were strictly adhered to because it was believed that anything against it would bring bad omens to the individual or the village. They lived in a self-sufficient republic village under the village chief and the council of elders. Each family rituals were performed by the father while the village rituals were done by the village priest. It is a very strong patriarchal society, but the women are

accorded very high status in the society. The people are very community-oriented society. All these witnessed drastic changes with the arrival of the missionary, introductions of western education instead of the dormitory system and paradigm shift of beliefs from animistic to Christianity and the introduction of a new political system.

The lost traditions, not to be forgotten:

1. Head hunting

The Nagas like many tribal communities around the world are known for taking the head of a declared enemy. This is one of the reasons why the Nagas were known to be “Headhunters” by the British and other communities. They termed them barbaric, uncivilized, and wild while not fully understanding the nature of this practice. The Tangkhuls as a sub-tribe of the Naga is also well known for this and the evidence is still visible in Hunphun village headman’s house.

Just on the surface, the practice seems very barbaric but understanding the nature and reasons for such acts will help us mellow down and change our perspective. No Tangkhul Naga will ever take the head of anybody unless the individual is a declared enemy. The head of a child or a woman of the enemy village is highly prized or valued and brings great honor to the warrior as it is supposed that he can break through the enemy line. Head hunting is not only an act of initiation ceremony but also an act of bravery and honor against an enemy which is believed to be evil. Thus, it is believed that the destruction of evil will bring blessing from the Almighty. It should not be forgotten that there is an established rule of law in head hunting.

When an enemy’s head is taken by ambush or in war it is brought home and the place is a designated spot known as “” or the altar. Then village priest performs the rituals and divinations to cleanse the head.

2. Dormitories

Every Tangkhul Naga village has one or multiple “Longshim” or dormitories for boys and girls. The dormitory for the boys is called “Mayarlong” and the girls’ dormitory is called “Ngalalong”. Every boy or girl is initiated into the dorms in reaching their puberty without exception. All the members sleep in one huge bed known as “Samkok”.

The dormitory is the educational and training hub of the village. There can be one common dorm for the village or a person who have performed the Merit feast and erected the “Tarung” can also host a dorm with the knowledge of the village authority. The members are taught the history, traditions, culture, etiquette, and basic skills of survival are taught in the dorm. The boys are taught warfare and the girls learn the skills of weaving. This dormitory system can be considered as the nerve center that ensures the continuity of the traditions and culture of the tribe. It created social bonds and comrades.

3. Festivals

a. Mawonzai phanit

This is a ritual performed by the priest “Sharva” to mark the ending of weeding of the paddy fields. The priest goes to the forest and cuts and Oak tree “Shirimthing” and keeps it in the yard. It is one way to count the years and age of a person or the priest. This also marks the beginning of the most leisure time of the year as now they only wait for the grains to ripen and harvest.

b. Rakhong Kakhon

It is the practice of cleaning pond from where the locality or the village draws drinking water. All villagers regardless of age and sex are expected to participate in this important activity of the year. This is preceding the Longra phanit. The following day, a virtuous woman is expected to draw the water first to signify good and bountiful year. The water drawn on the first day is used for preparing special rice beer.

c. Longra and Sharei kashak

This is the festival of the respective dormitories and celebrated for 4 days. It is also known as the festival of drinks or rice beer. It is marked with merry making, eating, eating, dancing, singing and games. The boys will visit the girls' dormitory in groups and socialize. On the final day a very special ceremony is performed in honor of the souls of the deceased members of the dormitory.

d. Chumpha phanit

This festival follows the harvest or signifies the end of harvest. It is a festival performed exclusively by the women in the night and it is a taboo for men to see or participate. The granary with the new grains is offered to the gods for blessings before it is consumed by the family. All the males apart from babies leaves the village in the night of the first day for two consecutive nights. All implements, instruments, and weapons of the men are kept outside the house. The men spend their time away in fishing and hunting to eat with the new grains on their return. On the other hand, the women need to ensure that they don't meet men, the grains are not eaten by birds and chicken as it is dried outside, and all the food prepared with the new grains are completely consumed to prevent any bad omens. On the return of the men, the piercing of the ear "Khanā kasa" takes place to initiate them into the society. The piercing of the ear is an important significant ritual as it is an identification mark and a qualification to the next world "Kazeiram".

e. Thishām phanit

This festival is one of the most important ones observed with respect, love and festivities. It is observed for 10 days within the family, locality "Tang" and the village. There are different rites and rituals to be observed for the souls of those who died naturally and unnaturally.

The ones who died naturally are buried after the rituals by the priest "Sharva" in the family vault while the ones who died unnaturally are buried outside the village. The death is buried with all sorts of gifts and his/her valuable belongings to be used in the life after. The old people, women are not permitted to attend the burial rites of a person who died unnaturally to avoid evil omens. The fire in the family hearth is completely extinguished so prevent any ill luck.

At the end of the year, the village observed the "Thishām Phanit" or the final rite to bid farewell to the departed soul. Claiming the soul of the deceased does not leave the village, it becomes necessary for the village to observe this festival to bid the final farewell and send the souls to the life after in the next world "Kazeiram". Effigies (basically a pole) of the deceased souls are made and erected. A simple wooden structure "Wonyaithing" is prepared over the grave to place vegetables, corn, sheaves of paddy, orchid to indicated good harvest and a gift to the departed soul. A special person "Thila Kapho" is selected to represent the death souls and is significant. The families and neighbours would weep over and gift the "Thila Kapho" as if they are communicating with the actual deceased person.

Finally, the Wonyaithing, the pole, the gifts, and the torch are all removed and prepared for the final procession to the "Zeiphar". Zeiphar is the designated place where the souls will be finally sent off to Kazeiram the Thila Kapho leads the procession but returns on reaching the designated spot. If he is from the village, he goes home and sleeps but if he is from another village, he must sleep in the field hut outside the village so that the departed soul does not return and roam around. On this night it is important to ensure that nobody stumbles and falls, should be hungry, should be dirty and should roam in the night to prevent their souls following the departed souls or being taken away.

4. **Laakhanganui:**

It is a music and dance exclusively performed by the virgin maidens of the village during the Spring or New year festival “Luirā Phanit”. It is sometimes known as the virgin dance. It is a very slow graceful dance accompanied by music/song by the dancers. All maidens of the village are expected to participate without exceptions. The chastity of a girl is questioned if they refuse to participate, or some misfortune happens during the dance. They were short skirt/wraparound (kashan) and ornaments “Khomashim” while living their upper body bare open or maybe ornamented “Kongsang”. It is like a beauty pageant contest.

5. **Marān Kasā/Merit festival**

This festival is usually observed in January before the commencement of the busy agricultural activities. It is a festival of merit or person who only can effort to host. It is less of a show of riches but more of gratitude and philanthropy to feed to the village and the less fortunate. The one who can host this feast is entitled to wear the special embroidered cloth and erect the wooden post “Tarung” in his yard. The hosting of the feast and erecting the wooden post is done only after informing the chief and proper propitiation and divination. When all is well feasting begins and continues for days with plenty of drinks and food to celebrate.

The person who desires to put up the special wooden posts goes to the forest and selects 5 bests of the best trees, and the “Sharva” performs the rituals and testing is done with the axe. On the appointed day all the abled men of the clan and village proceeds to the forest to cut, carved, and drag it home. First the smaller 4 trees are cut and dragged until the village gate. Finally, the biggest and the best tree “Akhoka” is cut and dragged/carried. All this while the women are expected to continually supply drinks and food. Once the preparation for the erection of the posts is made, the village chief is invited to be the special guest and with festivities and dancing the small 4 woods are first carried and erected in their designated places. The main one “Akhoka” is decorated with costumes of a man or woman as it is supposedly to be and smeared with chicken blood is erected with a human or a cat sacrifice.

6. **Onrāh kasem**

The families that are economically able will select a spot “Onrāh” on the pathway to the field to build a special memorial spot for the departed soul(s). The Onrāh is to serve as a prestige of the family, remembrance of the departed soul and also a resting place for all the tired villagers to and from the fields. It is a rectangular construction with stones as wall filled with mud and an erected huge stone known as “Ngalung Akhoka”.

7. **Family Titles**

One of social fabric that has significantly contributed to the peaceful co-existence is the family lineage and titles. The Tangkhul tribe does not have caste system but there is distinct titles designated on the basis of lineage of siblings. From time immemorial some clans are entitled “Amei and Achon”, some are “Achui and Ayai” and others as “Achei”. These titles are not on the basis of occupation but the hierarchy in the family. In a strong Patriarchal society, the oldest son and his descendants become “Amei and Achon”, the next “Achui and Ayai” and the others “Achei”. All live, eat, celebrate, and have access to the same resources of the village but by virtue of the inheritance the “Amei-Achon” are economically better off than the others but without any discrimination in principle. Thus, the rich ones are known as “Kharaknao” and the commoners or the pious ones are known as “Vāhongnao”. In the bygone days these titles were used strictly as a prefix to the name of the person. It is unacceptable to call someone of “Amei-Achon” family “Achui-Ayai” or “Achei”. And it was considered great offence to be called “Achui or Ayai or Achei” to someone of the “Amei-Achon” family.

8. **Lengcheng shim kasā** (A special traditional house)

Typically, in the days of recent past, A Tangkhul house is either made of thatch “Ngashishim” or wood “Lengchengshim” and the basic structure is of three rooms: The barn “Yāngkup”, the kitchen cum bedroom, and the storeroom “Pongrum”. In the Yāngkup things like implements, chicken, cattle, winnow, things to pound grains “Sikui” and “Shimkhur”, baskets, firewood etc. are found while in the kitchen; the hearth and the three stones “Meithrung” for cooking, carved out wooden stool “pamkhong”, layers “Chāngphong” above the hearth for drying grains, meat, food etc., utensils, corns and other farm produce hanging for preservation with the smoke. The third room “Pongrum” is the storeroom; stores rice beer, vegetables, and at times is also the granary “Chum”.

The rich and the noble construct a special house known as “Lengchengshim”. It is made of wooden blanks and a special horn like structure in the front known as “Lengchengkui”. Such a house is not exclusive to anyone clan or family but only the Noble and the eldest of the clan can carve images into the Lengchengkui while others can only imprint on it with charcoal. A detail divination and rituals are performed by the priest before the commencement of the Lengchengshim. The members of the Longshim help in collecting the materials needed for the house construction especially after the Longra phanit (the feast of drinks). But whether it is a thatch or wooden house, the internal structure is the same.

9. **Shai/Tribute**

The small and weaker villages pay tributes to the larger and stronger villages known as “Shai”. Shai or Tax also was paid to signify the origin of the villagers as in the bygone days there were times when a clan member or a villager would leave a village to search out for new settlement.

10. **Agrarian lifestyle**

The Tangkhul tribe is an agrarian community. Social and economic life revolves around agriculture. All the festivals and beliefs have much to do with agriculture and its cycle of activities. This was one of the reasons how the tribe had a very eco-friendly approach to life, knowing that their very existence depends on flora and fauna. They know that everything; food, clothing, shelter etc. is provided by nature and this is the reason why they fear to anger the forces of nature. The agricultural activities, rituals and traditions were all about the appeasement of nature. Everything they need is produced or collected from nature.

11. **Thari kashun**

In the bygone days it was of great evil and offence to remove boundary stones. The three stones (Thari) mark the boundary of a property and it is a taboo to remove it in the presence or absence knowingly or unknowingly. It is placed with rituals and expected to be respected perpetually regardless of the status of the individual. The individual(s) removing such stones without proper authorization are penalized heavily by the village.

12. **Pukreilā**

It is a very special title accorded to a woman married into another village. She is special and unique. She is the only guaranteed mediator, rescuer between village feuds and wars as she cannot be touched by anyone. The warrior dares not harm her or take her head in fear of the serious repercussions from all parties involved in the conflict.

13. **Tatooing (Phā khara)**

Tatoo was very much part and partial of the tribe. It was a tradition of great social importance as it signifies beauty, bravery, and nobility or royal status.

14. **Thari (Three stones):**

It is the border stones placed between two properties (like the border pillar erected at the international border). It was a taboo to touch disrespectfully or to remove. It was simple three stones buried with omens and rituals which seem insignificant but was strong enough landmark to keep away greedy unscrupulous encroachment of property. Today, greed over money and property has put this simple yet valuable practice to the cold vault.

15. Indications of Omens:

Observation and interpretations of phenomena in nature to foretell future events was very prominent and common. The most common ones such as

- a. Harra Khayang (observation of how the egg boils)
- b. Harkho Khayang (Observing how the leg of a strangulated chicken is placed along with the wings and the discharge of faeces)
- c. Makho Kakā or Kazang (ritual performed by the village priest by climbing a tree or burying something on the ground after divinations)
- d. Chakren (Thick Billed Warbler), Vāva (Jungle babbler), Paikhao Khanganā (listening to the chirping of these birds)
- e. Kapā khayang (observing the split bamboo)
- f. Listening to the sound of an insects such as Katydid “Kasikkha”/“Wukraikhao”
- g. Tongtila Khangpui (the swarm of dragon fly in an off season on season)
- h. Neina kakhanuk (earthquake)
- i. Driving away Pandemic and Endemic “Mimao” through Har Khari Kharān (weaving of Chicken intestine on the approach village path or banging on utensils)

It was these and many other norms, rules, regulations, and laws (Shiyan – Chikan) of the tribe that kept the people in order. It was the “Thou shall” and “Thou shall not” to be strictly followed by the villagers. The respect, the fear of consequences and the validation of obedience made the people follow these standards of the community. It was this that bind the purity of the social fabric, maintaining ecological balance and sustaining self-sufficiency of the village. Though it had no scientific explanation or seemingly absurd or superstitious but remember much of these traditional practices of the tribals are based on their centuries of experiences with the environment that they live in, on which their very survival depends. No wonder their lives revolve around nature and its appeasement.

Conclusion:

The disappearance and discontinuity of many of these traditional practices with the introduction of Western education and culture, the passing of time, and the change in the lifestyle need to be closely monitored or else the tribe will eventually lose its identity. True, it is natural that traditions and culture evolves to adapt to the change in the environment but when the change is overwhelmingly too fast and the general population is not able to cope, it can prove disastrous. These are practices that have kept the tribe alive for centuries and for it to be lost due to factors at such quick successions and in such short period of time should raise alarm and awareness in the community. Without an element of doubt, some of these traditions, if not all, may not be practical due to religious, social, and economic orientations but it will be a disaster to forget them intentionally or unintentionally.

Could it that our forefathers lived such honest and committed life, supporting every member collectively ensuring that not a single member of the village is left behind. They were so generous, self-sufficient, and independent under what is termed today as animistic and barbaric. We are who we are because of such traditions and the million-dollar questions that need to be asked are “Are we better off in terms of commitment, integrity, honesty, generosity, simplicity, and service to the community?”

True culture evolves to adapt to the dynamic world, but can we really try to discard them for the sake of change and modernity? Surely education and development are good, but it is better still if it only educates us to appreciate the past, the traditions, the culture and respect the environment and brings sustainable development. Remember our present is built on the foundation of the past, and realization of this will determine our future course of history. If we only copy and adopt others at the expense of our very own, where is our future except extinction. Traditions are the ingredients of a culture, and the very perpetual existence of a group of people depends on keeping alive the culture and traditions through research and documentations. Can we really effort to forget them at the cost of our cultural identity?

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**Interview and discussion with individuals

