



Myths Of Origin And Familial Traditions Among The Singpho: An Exploration Of Lineage, Custom And Modern Interface

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Abstract: North-East India holds a prominent place in the historical, social and cultural fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Among its many indigenous tribes, the Singpho tribe emerge as a significant frontier group, primarily inhabiting the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Historically, the Singphos also known as Jinghpaw or Jingpho or Kachin have been settled in the Patkai Hill range along the borders of Myanmar and China, maintaining a rich and distinct cultural identity over the centuries. At present, they are predominantly inhabited in the Tinsukia district of Assam and in the district of Changlang, Lohit and Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh with smaller populations across other district of Assam. The socio-economic and demographic profile of the Singpho tribe reflects a community residing mostly in designated tribal areas, often isolated from mainstream society. This relative seclusion has played a crucial role in preserving their traditional way of life, which is characterised by a patriarchal and patrilineal family structure, strong kinship networks and adherence to customary laws. The Singpho community stands as a testament to the resilience of indigenous culture heritage in the face of evolving socio-cultural dynamics.

Keywords: Myths, family, Singpho, lineage, customs, interface

Introduction

North-east India holds a significant place in the historical, social and cultural fabric of the Indian subcontinent. The North-East India serves as an ideal confluence of diverse racial and ethnic groups comprising 166 different tribes with 220 languages reflecting their settlement and various stages of migration. The Singpho tribe is one of the prominent frontier communities of North-East India, primarily residing in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Historically, they have inhabited the hilly outskirts of the Patkai Hills, along the border regions adjoining Kachin State in Myanmar and Yunnan Province in China, a region they have occupied for centuries with a rich and enduring history (Machey, 2015). The Kachin or Singpho people refer to themselves as Jinghpaw or Nh paw, or Dumhpaw (Lawn, 2016). Today, significant populations of the Singpho community are inhabited in the Tinsukia district of Assam and in the Changlang, Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Smaller groups of Singpho-speaking people also reside in the districts of Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong in Assam (Machey, 2018).

The Singpho tribe exhibits unique socio-economic and demographic characteristics, shaped by their historical settlement patterns and geographic location. According to Machey (2013), the Singphos primarily reside in designated tribal regions that remain largely aloof from the socio-economic mainstream, contributing to the preservation of their traditional lifestyles and cultural identity. They possess a rich cultural heritage reflected in their family customs and social organization. Traditionally, the Singpho community follows a patriarchal and patrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the male line. Families

typically reside in clustered village settlements and social cohesion is maintained through strong kinship networks and customary laws.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to investigate the Singpho tribe's origin stories and family-related traditions with a special focus on how these beliefs shape their understanding of ancestry and social customs.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research method was employed, as the study aims to investigate and understand the traditional aspects of the subject matter. The study is based on both primary and secondary data sources and primarily adopts a qualitative research approach. Primary data were collected through interview schedules, participant observation and focus group discussions. Secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles and credible web-based sources.

To spatial coverage altogether four villages selected purposively keeping in mind the interface of their tradition with modernity from four districts namely Tinsukia district of Assam, Changlang, Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. These villages are –

State	District	Village	Total Households
Assam	Tinsukia	Inthem	90
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao Singpho	70
	Lohit	Emphum	36
	Namsai	Enten	27

Source: Field study (by Village Headman)

For the personal interviews, the respondents included heads of households, knowledgeable individuals in the village, the village head, village council executives, and the community priest.

Findings of the Study

The exploration and observation have come out with some important findings. The findings are -

Myths of Origin and Familial Traditions

The myths of the Singpho people narrate the origin of their familial lineage. According to their myths, in a time long before the existence of human beings, a semi-mythological figure descended from the heavens. This figure split into two, and from it emerged six brothers, who were named *Gam*, *Nong*, *La*, *Du*, *Tang*, and *Yawng*. These names continue to influence the name nomenclature of the Singpho community to this day. Among them, *Yawng* also known as *Daru Tsinli Yawng* or *Shapawng Yawng* is regarded as the ancestral forefather of the Singpho people.

According to Singpho oral tradition, *Shapawng Yawng's* grandson, *Wahkyet Wa*, became the father of nine sons. Among these nine lineages, only five are traditionally recognized as chieftain families: *Marip*, *Lahtaw*, *Lahpai*, *Nhkum* and *Maran*. These families hold significant social and historical importance within the Singpho community. The system of naming sons and daughters in the Singpho tradition is outlined below.

Sl. No.	Son	Daughter
1 st	Gam	Ko
2 nd	Nong	Lu
3 rd	La	Roi
4 th	Du	Thu
5 th	Tang	Kai
6 th	Yawng	Kha
7 th	Kha	Pi
8 th	Shroi	Yune
9 th	Enking	Dim

Lineage

In Singpho society, the family operates within a distinctly patriarchal framework, where authority and leadership are traditionally vested in the male head of the household. The head of the family is referred to as *Intana Mitow*. The *Intana Mitow* oversees household affairs, manages property, resolves internal disputes and ensures the continuation of family customs and rituals. His role is both symbolic and functional, serving as a guardian of the family's honour, traditions and social ties.

The patriarchal nature of the Singpho family system also extends to inheritance patterns and lineage tracing, which typically follow the patrilineal line. The sons inherit the property because of the patrilineal nature of the society. All of the sons enjoy the family land while their father is living. However, the sons split up the family property once their father passes away. Each of them receives an equal portion of the family's assets. However, the person who stays with the parents to take care of their welfare receives a larger portion. Property and inheritance are transferred from one person to another through customary practices, and disputes along this concern are resolved through existing customs.

Sons are often expected to remain within the family unit, while daughters join their husband's family upon marriage and takes up her husband's surname though she can use the family property at will, a female member has no legal claim to it. However, the widow is entitled to a portion of her husband's estate.

The chieftainship of Singpho is inherited. The father is the Singpho family's chief. Everyone respects the father since he is regarded as the leader of the family, and the oldest son inherits the role upon his death. Each family member shares equal responsibility for the family and works together to support it. The oldest female member of a joint household prepares meals at one hearth. The family's immovable and moveable assets, including cultivable land, kitchenware, apparel, livestock and other items are held in common.

An individual's earnings are his own, but if he lives in a joint family, he must give the head of the household half of his earnings, keeping the remaining portion for himself. Each separate family is housed in a small compartment within the dwelling for a joint family. Through the male line, the Singpho culture sustains their link. Because of this, each phrase used to denote a relationship also denotes the group to which the relationship belongs.

Family Customs

The traditional Singpho family is largely extended in nature, often consisting of multiple generations living under a single roof such as grandparents, parents, children and sometimes the families of sons or within close proximity due to agrarian lifestyles, where multiple family members contributed to household, hunting and farming activities. Moreover, these extended families play a significant role in maintaining kinship bonds, social order, transmitting cultural knowledge and managing communal resources.

The income accruing from the agricultural product of the family is still kept in the common fund. But it is observed in the village that, the earning of the some of the joint family members from non-agricultural sources like postal service, engineering, shop keeping, teacher, earnings are kept by the concerned family members in bank or elsewhere instead of depositing it in the common fund of the family. The habit of small savings is being seen as developing among such persons (Machey, 2015).

Marriage customs

The marriage of a person is treated as one of the most important events of life. The marriage is called Numladat which actually means taking of a girl.

Marriage customs within the community are largely endogamous and regulated by clan-based rules that ensure harmony and cultural continuity. Elders are deeply respected and their guidance is central in both family marriage and community matters. In Singpho society, bigamy or polygamy are accepted though monogamy is the accepted norm for an ideal marriage. However, one woman cannot have more than one husband (Ningkhee, 2008). In some cases if the first wife is deceased or barren or no son or the man is wealthy he get married more wives.

Marriage within the same clan is not approved by the society. The bride and the bridegroom must belong to separate clan. Each clan of Singpho people is exogamous. The Singpho marriage indicates that each clan normally prefers to confine its marital alliances to certain clan only. Marriage of one's maternal uncle's daughter is admissible. Thus it happens that once an individual has married a girl from a certain clan, it becomes customary for his successors to obtain their wives from the natal lineage of his wife (Lakhendra, 2014; Machey, 2015).

Roles of Domestic Responsibilities

In Singpho family father commands respect and authority, while women play crucial roles within the household economy. They are expert handloom weavers, producing both day-to-day garments and ceremonial textiles. Their weaving skills are significant culturally and economically, contributing to the family's material wealth and cultural heritage. However both male and female member participates in agricultural and allied activities. Moreover their customary law gives men and women equal power in decisions regarding children's discipline. In case of illness of children parents perform prayer to Nat (spirit) but also go for medical treatment which is the father's responsibility in their tradition and born the responsibility of money.

Regarding agriculture women have to decide what type of crops or rice to grow as per family and community requirement. However man take lead to entire process of agricultural activities with the help of domestic helper.

Traditions and Modern Interface

The interface between traditional family structures and modern influences has led to both challenges and opportunities within the Singpho community. Migration for education and employment has weakened some traditional practices and intergenerational cohabitation. On the other hand, exposure to broader societal norms has encouraged greater gender equality, education for women and diversified roles within the family.

Family Structure

Although traditional joint families remain customary, in recent decades, there has been a gradual shift toward the nuclear family structure, particularly among younger generations living in urban or semi-urban areas. This shift is largely influenced by increased access to education, employment opportunities, and the spread of modern lifestyle patterns.

Family Size and Dynamics

Historically, Singpho families were larger in size due to agrarian lifestyles. With the adoption of modern education and economic changes, family sizes have gradually reduced. Young couples increasingly opt for smaller families, influenced by awareness of health care, job opportunities, economic planning and governmental family welfare programs.

Despite gradual shift toward the nuclear family structure, reduction in size, the core values of familial support, mutual respect and collective responsibility remain integral to Singpho identity. Even among nuclear families, ties to the extended kin group are maintained through regular visits, festivals and participation in customary ceremonies.

Conclusion

Despite the prominence of traditional structures, modern influences and social mobility are gradually transforming family dynamics in some Singpho communities. Hence community leaders and scholars are increasingly working to balance tradition with modernity, ensuring that the Singpho cultural identity is preserved even as families adapt to changing times. It is noteworthy that the Singpho customary laws are unwritten and are handed down from one generation to the next only by word of mouth. Thus the oral recollection of their customary laws is necessary to document accurately and systematically.

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