



Social life of the Sangtams

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ABSTRACT

This journal examines the social life of the Sangtam community, one of the major tribes of Nagaland. It explores the traditional institutions, customs, and cultural practices that have shaped sangtam society over generations. The study discusses important aspects of village life, family structure, social organization, marriage customs, naming ceremonies, and village administration. It also highlights the significance of the Morung and Women's dormitory as centres of social learning and cultural transmission. In addition, the journal examines the festivals, religious beliefs, and rituals that reflect the spiritual and cultural identity of the Sangtam people. The study emphasizes how these institutions and practices contributed to social cohesion, governance, and the preservation of cultural heritage. While modernization, education and Christianity have brought significant changes to many traditional customs, the Sangtam community continues to preserve important elements of its cultural identity. This journal contributes to preserve important elements of its cultural identity. This journal contributes to a better understanding of Sangtam society and the importance of safeguarding its rich cultural heritage of future generation

Keywords: Village life, Family, Social life, Engagement, Marriage, Naming of child, Heritance of property, Divorce, Village administration, Morung, Women dormitory, Festival, Religion and beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

The Sangtams are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. They mainly inhabit in the Tuensang and Kiphire Districts. The Sangtams those who dwell in Tuensang district are known as the Upper Sangtams and those people dwelling in the Kiphire District are known as the Lower Sangtams. They possess a rich cultural heritage that has been preserved through generations by means of custom, traditions, oral history and social institutions. The social life of the Sangtam community reflects their values of kinship, cooperation, mutual respect and collective responsibility. Although modernization and Christianity have brought significant changes to their way of life, many traditional practices continue to play an important role in preserving their cultural identity.

The purpose of this journal is to examine the various aspects of Sangtam social life of the Sangtam community by exploring the major institutions and practices that govern individual and community life. It discusses village life, family structure, social organization, marriage customs, the naming of children, inheritance of property, divorce, village administration, morung, women dormitory, festival, religious and beliefs. These significant role in maintaining social order, promoting unity and preserving the cultural heritage of the Sangtam people.

The main objective of this study is to present a comprehensive understanding of the traditional social system of the Sangtams and to examine how these customs have evolved over time under the influence of modernization and Christianity. By studying these aspects, the journal highlights the richness of Sangtam culture and emphasizes the importance of preserving its unique traditions for future generation

Sangtam tribe includes the four different dialects such as, the general Sangtam, Alisophur, Phelungrean and the Sanphurean. Including of all these four, it is known as the United Sangtam. The Sangtams have rich cultural heritage and a well-organized social system based on tradition, customs and community co-operation.



Village Life

The village is the centre of Sangtam social life. The village life includes of whole of their activities starting from the jhum cultivation to the celebration of the feast of merits which they called Müshodi, which was celebrated after harvesting all the crops. In the Village, the Village council plays an important role in maintaining law and order in the community. The community activities such as house building, granary, clearing the forest for jhum cultivation, festival, etc. are often carried out collectively which strengthens social bonds among the people. The village life keeps all the villagers busy throughout the year. In the village life, there was no question of unemployment.

Family and Social Organization (check again this part -social organization)

The family is the basic unit of Sangtam society. Family is defined as a specific group of people living together including parents and children under one roof. The Sangtams practised patriarchal and patrilineal form of family. In the family, father is the head of the family and the name of the clan passed on from one generation to another from the father's clan. The Sangtam families are nucleus. The children join the dormitory or Morung when they attain the puberty. The Sangtam families are usually large because unlike today, there was no family planning. Moreover, it was the generation where more family members were feared by the rest of the villagers and they could cultivate vast acres of land to support the family.

In the family, there was division of labour between men and women. All the hard works such as fetching the house construction materials, carrying the main pillars of the house, taking care of the cattle in the forest, hunting, warfare, trade, etc., were all performed by men. On the contrary, women took care of the domestic works such as taking care of the children, agricultural works, fetching water, fire-wood, cooking, etc. The family decision was taken by the father as the head of the family. In the absence of the father, it was the eldest son who took the decision.

Engagement

In the past, it was the parents or the intermediators who used to go between the boy and bride's parents to seek her hand. The intermedior would go on the first day and share the intention of a boy to get marry and leave them to discuss among themselves by saying that he would come again on the next day or after few days to get proper information. During this period, even if the intermedior was given a liquor or food, he or she won't drink or eat until the proposal was ascertain. If a girl accepts the proposal to get marry, then a spade was given as a sign of engagement. After this, the fiance parents would offer a boar as a sign of engagement party to the fiancee parents. It was on the engagement party that they would discuss about the marriage party. During the ancient period, the marriage party was celebrated usually on the month of January or February when they used to celebrate the feast of merits, which they used to called "Müshodi," which means 'greatest feast.'

Marriage

When the engagement was settled, the parents from both sides would discuss and the fix the date for marriage party. The marriage party usually took place during the festival period, i.e., either on January or February. During the ancient period, the marriage party takes place between the two clans of fiance and fiancee relatives. After the marriage party, the family members and relatives from both the families. In the Sangtam community, all the marriage expenses were done by the fiance parents. When the marriage party was over, after few days, the parents and her relatives would send her off to her husband's house with all the necessary domestic goods such as, crops, fire-wood, machete, axe, shawl, weaving materials, winnow, baskets, etc. After bringing all the goods to her husband's house, they would start a new life.

Naming of Child

When boy and a girl marry, naturally they would be blessed with a child unless either male or female is barren. When the new child is been born in the family, they would shut the door and remain in the house until the naming party is over. During this period, husband is also restricted to move around in the village unless there is an emergency work, and even if he goes out, he doesn't eat or drink here and there. When a new child is born in the



family, they would name a child after few days of its birth. According to S. Ritsakiu, (personal communication, December 20, 2015), “If a child is a male, then they would name him on the sixth day. And if a child is a female, then she was been named on the fifth day of her birth. While naming, they used to perform a local magic by cutting a few pieces of stick and drop from about the height of one foot uttering whether what they want to give name for a child would suit him or her. If it suits, they would give that name to a child. But if it doesn’t suit him or her as per to the local magic, then they would continue to take different name and go on. So, on the naming day, we would take the child at the door and cut his or her hair little bit and throw outside the house uttering this is her name or his name.” They usually slaughtered a cock and they used to invite the grandparents and they used to name the child. After the naming party was over, they would eat away of all the meat that was used for the party, and not even a single piece of meat was dried on the furnace or carried in the field. According to their believe, if the naming party meat is been dried on the furnace, then as the meat keeps on drying, the child would also become weaker and weaker and would die soon. And they believe that if they take the naming party meat in the field, the spirit of a field may eat up the soul of a child, and he or she may die fast. Therefore, in order to avoid all the untoward incident, they don’t dry on the furnace or take it in the field. Moreover, when the naming party is over, then they would tie thread on the child’s hands so that, whenever they carry a child in the field, a spirit may know that the child belonged to others and a spirit may not touch the child.

Inheritance of Property

The Sangtam community is patriarchal and patrilineal. In this case, unlike the matriarchal family, women were not entitled to inherit any of the immovable property of the parents. Women usually get all the movable property when they get marry and move out to their husband’s house, and all the immovable assets are inherited by the male members of the family. If a man had only a daughter, then she enjoys and use her parent’s property until she get marry. But if she marry, then her rights on her father’s property ceased as she moves out to her husband’s house. In this regard, their property would be used and taken by her father’s cousins and relatives. Moreover, even in the case of a widow, she may also continue to used her husband’s property as long she remains in her husband’s house. She would continue to cultivate all her husband’s fields along with her children. But if she re-marry, then her rights on the property of her husband’s ceased and the property was inherited by her sons. Therefore, a widow can enjoy over the property of her husband if she remains in her husband’s house along with her son. When her children get marry, then the immovable property was divided among her sons. In this case, the eldest son gets the lion share, and succeeded by the second, third and fourth, etc. If a man had many sons, and if they don’t have sufficient, then the youngest son gets only the homestead and not the field. This custom is followed by the Sangtams even today. But today, unlike during the ancient period, the well to do families used to give enough money even for their daughters if not the immovable assets.

Divorce

When one compares the modern society and the ancient period, the world is upside down. During the ancient period, unlike today, there were less cases of divorce between husband and wife. The society truly lived in harmony besides the attacks of the neighbours or other tribes. There were rare cases of divorce in their society. Once they get marry, then they are bound to live for whole of their life until they are parted by natural dead. Divorce case was very rare and it was permissible if woman was barren or if any of the spouse was found unfaithful. In the former case, the husband has to make a suitable settlement so that his wife does not become a burden to her relatives. Whereas, extra-marital affairs was not acceptable. If husband was found unfaithful, but if both the wives agree to stay together, then the community have nothing to say and they don’t interfere in the domestic life. But if the first wife wanted to return to her parents, then she would get back all the materials she brought during their marriage, such as, the household materials, knitting materials and her belongings, but not his personal belongings and weapons. Besides that, the husband would pay a fine to his wife and send her back to her parents. On the contrary, if the wife was found unfaithful, then husband would send her out of his house, and she won’t get anything except her basket and knitting materials. In this case of misunderstanding between the husband and wife, if the they are not able to settle the case by themselves, then the family members and relatives try to resolved. But if the matter is not able to settle by them, then the village elders involve to settle the dispute. Husband and wife may quarrel and there may be misunderstanding in many ways, but when they are to divorce, once the husband collects all her knitting materials and arranged in her basket and hands over to her, then she has to move out from her husband’s house. This custom is practised even today. In this context,



Hodson writes that, “Divorce is common and result from infidelity or incompatibility of temper.” (Hudson T, C. Nagas Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. IX, 1930, 130). The divorce woman can re-marry as there is no restriction on her in the Sangtam community.

During the ancient period, the fine between husband and wife was taken in terms of cattle, field, homestead, etc. But today, they are made to pay a fine only in terms of cash as many would become landless. In some instance the guilty would be fined by the respective clan and the Citizen Union for defaming the organization.

Administration of the Village

During the ancient period, all the villages did not practise the same administrative system. Some villages were governed by the great warriors and some villages were governed by the village founders. In the past the village administrator was not hereditary if it was not governed by the village founders. Since the village was guarded by the warrior, the villagers used to listen to his order and sought his opinion for any problems or dispute in the village. In some villages, the administration was managed by the person under whose leadership village was established, and in this regard, the headman of the village was hereditary by nature.

During the colonial period, the Britishers introduced the Gaon Bura (Village elders) in the villages. In the modern age, most of the villages are administered by the Village Council members. In the village council, all the clans in the village are involved. The village council members are selected according to the clan wise. Therefore, in the modern age all the clans are directly or indirectly part and parcel of the village administration. Unlike the hereditary system of administration, the Village council members would administer the village only for five years and it dissolve after five years and new members are been elected by the village Gaon Buras who hold the post till they die.

Morung

During the ancient period, there was no institution nor shrine to educate the young boys. There was only Morung (boys dormitory) which they called as “Kuying,” where they young boys learn different cultures from their elders. They join in the Morung when they attain the teenage. Boys learn the folksong, folktales, how to knit the basket, etc., from the elders. J. P. Mills (1937) writes, “The old men tell of the great deeds of the past and coming generation is taught to carry on the old tradition in the future.” (49) As they grow older, the Morung boys also learn the war and warcraft from the great warriors. During the ancient period, they used to keep the war trophy in the Morung or hung in front of their morung. Today, the modern youngsters may not able to sleep in the Morung along with the enemy’s head. The duties of the Morung boys were divided between the seniors and juniors. The Morung construction materials, bringing the swine from the neighbouring villages whenever there was shortage of boar in their village, especially during the Morung feast, guarding the village from the enemies, etc., were all performed by the elders of the ward. Whereas, the young boys were entrusted to fetch water to be used in the morung, collect fire-wood to be burned at night. For lighting, they either collect dried reed or pine sticks from the forest. Morung was a place where they find solace even when they are been chided by their parents. Moreover, even the enemies, if they enter in the Morung, then it was the duty of the Morung boys to protect him and no one was allowed to touch him. All the ward members will continue to sleep in the Morung until they get marry.

Women dormitory

The Sangtam villages are all divided into five to six wards which they called as Asak. In all the wards they used to have respective wards dormitory which they called as “Romlarü yüpji.” The ward ladies and girls used to sleep in their dormitory. The young girls join in the dormitory when they attain the teenage. During the ancient period, the dormitory was an institution where the young girls and ladies learned how to remove cotton seeds, how to spin yarn with the help of spinning whorl, making shawl knot, how to stitch shawl, listened folk songs and folk tales as they work on. That was how they passed on the oral history from one generation to another.

Therefore, when one introspects about the past society, the tribals possessed a wonderful culture. The Morung and Dormitory system in their community was a skill base education. During those days, there was no idea what is unemployment. They were employed throughout the year. Today, if we observe carefully, all these good virtues



had vanished from their community. The whole life is centred with oneself. There is no sharing of anything, there is no physical communication, there is no physical game. Everything is done through the phone.

Festivals

Festivals are an important part of Sangtam social life. There are many minor feasts which was celebrated within the families, but the most important festival is Mungmung festival, which is celebrated to seek blessings, prosperity and a good harvest. It was celebrated from 1st to 6th September. During festivals people wear traditional attire, perform folk dances, sing folksongs and share food with relatives and friends. The Mungmung festival is celebrated for six days.

According to Shri. Mungtising G.B., (personal communication, January 30, 2014 of Phirü Ahi), “The village Priest performs the rituals before the real festival begins. During midnight of the first day announcement, an elderly man from Anar clan would announce; ‘Zangnyü Mungmungnung- ele-he’.” Which means after five days ‘Mungmung festival’ will be celebrated. After the first day an announcement, they would start brewing the alcohol for the feast. The next day also the old man would make the same announcement in the village. The Mungmung festival was celebrated for six days by the whole Sangtams.

First Day (Jangshika)

On the first day all the agricultural activities and trade in the neighbouring villages was stopped, and they are busy purchasing of domestic animals like swine, cow, bos frontalis in the village, and men are busy roping and fetching the bos frontalis from the forest. Moreover, they also arrange all the food stuffs for the main feast.

Second Day (Singkithsa)

On the second day, swine and bos frontalis were slaughtered, preparing for the feast. After having slaughtered, they would share a piece of meat to neighbours, relatives, elders and friends. Besides sharing of the meat with friends, they also keep the separate portion of meat for the main feast. In the villages there used to be a weeding groups where they used to earn a lot by weeding others fields in a group. With that fund, they used to buy either boar or bos frontalis and having slaughtered they used to share among themselves. Some poor people used to relay this meat to celebrate the feast as all the families cannot afford to slaughter swine or bos frontalis.

Third Day (Müsü yangtöp)

During the ancient period, all the people used to erect hearth stone in the middle of the house. During the Mungmung festival, the third day is celebrated as the most important day for the feast. It was on this day, that they would mix the sticky rice with meat, liver and liquor and feed the hearth stones. This is known as ‘Müsü yangtöp.’ They would either paste or hit on the hearth stone with the mixture. During this ritual, none of the family members were allowed to eat or drink until the ritual was accomplish. This ritual was performed by all the head of the families, and when the ritual was over, then he would sip his cup and it would be followed by all the rest of the family members would eat and drink and enjoy the feast. The feeding of the hearth stone was a sign of worshipping the house deity and it was performed by all the families in the village.

Fourth Day (Kikhalangpi)

On the fourth day, all the youths and elders would go and clean the footpath of the village spring. The village priest shall be the first person to start the clearing of the footpath and was followed by the young people. On that day they would clean the weed and plants of the footpath. They would also clean the village spring and maintained in a better way. The lunch for the social work was prepared out of the donation from the well to do families.



Fifth Day (Shilang pinung)

On the fifth day, the young boys along with the elders would clean the footpath between the neighbouring villages. Moreover, it was on this day that all the relative those who had married to the neighbouring villages would pay visit to their parents, relatives and friends. It was on this day that they get together, share the meat and drink together which strengthens their relation.

Sixth Day

On the sixth day of the feast, while some people keep on celebrating the feast among the friends, some people can start living as a normal life, going for fetching fire-wood, fetching water, going to field, collecting vegetables, etc. Moreover, the same feast is described by C. Tsalongse (2014) in his book “Traditional Culture of the Sangtam Naga (90).

Thus, the Upper Sangtams had celebrated the Mungmung festival for six days, and today, the whole Sangtams celebrates the Mungmung festival. During the Ancient period, the Lower Sangtams did not know what was Mungmung festival. They celebrated the feast known as Dhrütsu and Müshodi. Whereas, the Phelungrean celebrated the Nyingtü which was a feast of merits, which was celebrated on January and February, and Sanphurean celebrated the feast known as Luthsuhnyi.

Religion and Beliefs

During the ancient period, the Sangtams live a pagan life and their religion was animism. According to their life style, animism cannot be performed if they live a pagan life. In the past, all the festivals were accompanied with the worship of spirit when they perform rituals. The rituals during the feast could be performed only by the pagan. Therefore, paganism and animism are like the coins of different side which cannot be separated. During the festival, they first blow off the liquor outside by standing inside the house uttering “we are feeding you first, may you bless us with prosperity.”

Before the spread of Christianity, the Sangtams followed traditional religious beliefs connected with nature and ancestral spirits. As their religion was animism, even when there was a dispute between the two persons within the village or between the two villages or tribe, they used to take an oath by uttering, “Hey, Moon and Sun, watch over me if I am found guilty.” They worshipped the benevolent spirit to bless them with all their needs and to protect them. At the same time, they also believed the existence of evil spirit. Whenever they are ill, they believed that evil spirit might have caught and harm their spirit or soul. If their soul or spirit were been caught by the evil spirit, then they used to seek the help of a quack who would check the patient spirit in three different world, i. e. Death Men’s World, Lycanthropy’s World and the world of spirit. In this case a quack would check in all these, three different world consecutively, and if a quack finds the spirit of the patient in any of these world, then he or she would bring back the patient spirit. In this case the patient gets alright within few days. But if a quack cannot bring back the spirit of a patient, then quack would ask his relatives to look after well, which is telling the relatives that the patient would die very soon, and it had happened in their community. Today, most of the Sangtams had embraced Christian faith, and Church activities play significant role in their community life. starting from birth to death, they pray and invoke God’s blessing or thank God for the blessings that He had blessed them.

CONCLUSION

The social life of the Sangtams is characterized by strong family ties. Marriage was not just dwelling between the two married couple, but it was through them that the two clan members and relatives help each other in clearing the jhum field, weeding, harvesting, and all walks of life. During the ancient period, the marriage party was held between the relatives of bride and bridegroom, but today as it is celebrated in the Church or Modern style, it is joint by the whole village. The naming of a child is done as they wish without any significance. In the past, the house, granary, Morung, etc., were all constructed within a day. At that time, it was the community who used to help each other in bringing the construction materials by the relatives as well as by the ward members. They co-operation and help each other even if it they are not their relative, provided they are free from work.



Today, this culture is seen no more in their community. The construction is all done by an individual and it takes for months or years as the houses are all been constructed with the bricks, sand iron and cement. In the past, they had the high social value, they had the great respect for tradition particularly of marriage party and festivals, where meat and liquor was shared out to all the villagers as they considered as a guest during the festivals. But today, most of their traditions, especially the minor feast which were celebrated by all the families had vanished from their society. The marriage is done in the Church. The rich people invites the crowd to celebrate the party, whereas the poor people celebrate with the relatives and friends. In the Modern Age, they had given up many taboos or fasting especially when they first clear the jhum forest, after burning the jhum field, for constructing the barn in the field for planting the first seeds in the field, which was to be performed by a priestly clan called Thungrü. All these traditions are no more in practise. Despite of modernization, the sangtams continued to preserve their customs and cultural identity, making them an important part of Nagaland's diverse heritage.

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