

The Status Of Education Among The Tangkhul Naga Prior To Christianity

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Abstract

This paper explores the status of education among the Tangkhul Naga prior to the arrival of Christianity, focusing on the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shaped their educational practices. The Tangkhul Naga, an indigenous community in Northeast India, possessed a rich oral tradition and a structured system of knowledge transmission that encompassed various aspects of life, including agriculture, governance, and spirituality. Through a review of historical texts, oral histories, and anthropological studies, this research highlights the methodologies employed in education, the roles of community elders and practitioners in knowledge sharing, and the significance of education in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity. The findings reveal that education among the Tangkhul Naga was not merely an informal process but a vital institution that fostered communal values and skills necessary for survival and development. By understanding the educational framework of the Tangkhul Naga prior to Christian influence, this paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous educational systems and their evolution in response to external factors.

Key words: Education, Tangkhul, Naga, Christianity, Manipur, Ukhrul

Introduction:

The Tangkhul Naga community, residing primarily in the Ukhrul district of Manipur, India, is part of the larger Naga ethnic group, known for its rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. With a history that stretches back centuries, the Tangkhul Naga have cultivated a unique social, political, and religious identity that predates the arrival of Christianity. Their society is characterized by intricate kinship ties, community cooperation, and a deep connection to the physical environment, which have shaped their cultural practices and way of life.

Before the 19th century, the Tangkhul Naga existed in relative isolation, with limited contact with major civilizations. This period fostered a distinctive socio-cultural landscape marked by oral traditions, communal relationships, and subsistence-based economic systems. The framework of their education was informal yet vital, relying heavily on communal interactions and the passing down of knowledge through generations. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the pre-Christian social and cultural practices among the Tangkhul Naga, focusing on their educational systems, social structures, and the interconnectedness of their villages.

The significance of understanding the status of education among the Tangkhul Naga prior to Christianity lies not only in recognizing the rich heritage of indigenous knowledge systems but also in establishing a baseline for assessing the transformative impacts of colonialism, missionary activities, and modern educational practices. By examining the pre-Christian era, we can better appreciate the enduring values, traditions, and communal ties that continue to shape the identity of the Tangkhul Naga today. This exploration invites a

deeper understanding of how historical contexts influence contemporary practices, emphasizing the importance of cultural continuity in an ever-changing world.

Pre-Christian religious tradition

The Tangkhul community is part of the Nagas, a group of tribes in North East India, with a population spread across Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. They share similar social, cultural, political, and religious traditions and identity markers. The Tangkhul Nagas are mainly located in the Ukhrul district of Manipur state. They were a village-based community with little contact with major world civilizations. Their simple and little tradition was gradually molded into a concrete shape through natural interaction with the physical world and neighboring environments. However, their interconnected culture was dismantled and reduced to ruin since the late 19th century.

The present paper explores the pre-Christian social and cultural practices of Tangkhul Naga society, providing a comprehensive analysis of socio-cultural patterns, political organizations, economic systems, and religious beliefs. It serves as a baseline for measuring changes since embracing Christianity and modern education over a century ago.

Māhthei Māhlang/Māhchang, a system of non-kinship-based social relationships, was developed over years of mutual friendship, cooperation, affection, care, and trust. This system allows members from distant villages to build strong social bonds and connections among the Tangkhuls during pre-Christian times. These relationships are maintained and passed down to the next generation, even if older generations are gone. This system of social relationships is a testament to the importance of maintaining and preserving social connections among the natives of Tangkhul villages. Tangkhul villages formed alliances and confederations known as luiyan, which were loosely formed by nearby villages to ensure friendly relationships. These organizations included Kasomkong Luiyan, Shongva Luiyan, Vārā Luiyan, Masai Luiyan, Ngachāng Luiyan, Yakrei Luiyan, Maham Luiyan, Lamvā Luiyan, and Lungrā Luiyan according to Luikham, T. (2013). Tangkhul villages also had a system called Raishai, a war tax paid by a protectorate village in return for protection from threats. The tribute was in kind and included goods like buffalo, pig, cow, salt, chilli, and rice (p. 129).

Inter village social and cultural contacts occur through organized trade and commerce activities, such as Peh Langchin, a festive occasion hosted by Peh village (Kharay, 2016). This platform allows people from different Tangkhul villages to interact and trade goods, fostering commercial interdependency for example Longpi and Hungpung villages supplied earthen pots for cooking, while western Tangkhul villages were the main producers and suppliers of traditional shawls as mentioned by Hodson, T. c. (1911). Other villages depended on Raphei villages for salt supply (Luikham, 2005: 136) while southern villages were skilled manufacturers of cane and bamboo-based products (Horam, 2019: 196) Inter-village marriages occurred frequently, serving as carriers of cultural items and facilitating the diffusion of social and cultural practices among the native villages. This inter-village social and cultural diffusion has been a significant aspect of Tangkhul society.

Tangkhuls have a long history of cultural diffusion and commercial exchanges with neighboring tribes and ethnic groups, including the Ava Myanmarese as seen in the ethnographical records of the colonial times according to T. C. Hodson (1911). Their unique house construction style, originating from the Kabow valley, is believed to be influenced by Burmese. Tangkhul natives also circulated and distributed skills related to fire arms, agriculture, and traditional goods among the tribes of Kukis, Nagas, and Meiteis. They also frequented plain areas inhabited by Meiteis to exchange cloths, daos (machete), and spears for salt (Brown, 1873: 490; Cf. Hodson, 1911: 55). Despite the absence of a common language and governing body among Tangkhul villages, they have exchanged cultural items, social practices, religious ideas, goods, and knowledge, resulting in a homogeneous social and cultural milieu (Cf. Horam, 2019: 92-93; Cf. VashumA, 2014: 26). Differences in patois have not prevented the diffusion of social, cultural, religious, and political

details, with some minor variations. The most fundamental traditions and customs are shared among the villages of Tangkhul country.

Tangkhuls, shaped by their rich physical environment and harsh conditions, have a cultural proclivity towards Dionysian values (Kharay, 2019). They value physical strength, violent contests in war, frequent indulgence in alcoholic drinks, and an uninhibited appetite for food and meat. On festive occasions, domestic animals are killed and savored on their meats, along with rice beer (Cf. Woodthorpe, 1882). Fermented soybeans, putrefied pork fats, and aged eggs are also enjoyed (Johnstone, 1969: 494).

Men compete for physical strength by carrying heavy loads of paddy, while women are tattooed with dye made from wild indigo (Hodson, 1911: 6; Angkang, 2018). They also manually convert centuries-old tree trunks and stones into totemic posts, house-posts, and stone megaliths. Medicine men and women, or shamans, often escape the physical world to rescue and restore the souls of the sick, held captive by the spirits of the dead in kazeiram or the land of the dead (ibid.: 135-136; Cf. Makan, 2020: 4-12).

borrowing and exchange among various Naga tribes by observing the similarities in their political, economic, religious systems, and their thought processes (pp. 19-20).

Marān Kasā, a communal feast organized by wealthy individuals and those who have demonstrated their strength in warfare, was a way for the villagers to earn prestige, respect, and improve their social position (Luikham 2013: 72) The feast was a tedious process that could not be performed by ordinary members, but could be achieved by anyone with great personal and social achievement, such as a great warrior. Marān Kasā is a cultural apparatus that provides individual freedom and rights to the general public to multiply prestige and social position, except for village chiefs and heads of clans who have already occupied noble positions. After completing the feast, the individual is entitled to erect totemic poles and construct houses with distinctive structures and designs (Cf. Furer-Haimendorf, 1971; Johanna and Patuleia, 1992). The process is motivated by the desire to feed the hungry and outdo their economic rivals, ultimately raising their dignity, self-respect, and social position. (Cf. Gachui, 1986; Luikham, 2013) A Tangkhul adheres strictly to social, cultural, and religious norms, ensuring conformity in all actions and speech. Deviants are either rebuked by supernatural beings or chastised and shunned by the living.

Traditional warfare is a system where justice, rights, dignity, and self-respect are restored through violent means. It is a form of conflict resolution where disputes cannot be resolved peacefully. This practice is similar to culturally allowed hostilities found in small-scale societies. The execution and launching of war are guided by traditional wisdom, ethical norms, and laws called raiyan, albeit unwritten (Gachui, 1986; Ruivah, 1993; Luikham, 2013; Kharay, 2016). It is internalized within the tribal socio-cultural complex after years of practice, with a socio-cultural theme and religious sanctions as a means of achieving certain goals (Kharay, 2019).

War is a violent and culturally accepted means of achieving justice, prestige, and respect among rival individuals or groups. It is typically initiated by consulting supernatural beings, performing divination rituals, and sacrificial killings of animals. After a positive reading of the omen, the group proceeds to the battle ground and engages in a bloody contest. The group that receives the most casualties admits defeat, and the dispute is ruled in favor of the other in the presence of a third party. The loser is then required to pay war tribute or raishai, officially marking the end of the dispute (Ruivah, 1993, cff. Shimray, 2001; Khongreiw, 2013; Luikham, 2013: 83). War can occur in various forms, such as Rairei or Chungvun Rai (Open/Declared War), Ngathi-rai or Ngathut-rai (Undeclared War), Shimen-rai or Kharingtuk-rai (War of Hostage), and Ngasung-Rai or Machak-rai (War of Challenge). Yet killing happens only in the context of war. All killings for whatever reason outside the purview of war was considered miyum or murder. Penalty for such crime results in complete seizure of one's property including house and paddy fields, and in some

cases properties of his nearest kin group members were seized, too (Luikham, 2013: 155). Hodson (1911) had mentioned that accidental killing is fined up to six cows or its equivalent (p. 106).

When heads are brought home, the whole village or clan celebrates the victory, as their clansmen have won trophies of justice, dignity, and self-respect. Heads taken in raids are placed at the village altar for five days, and warriors consign themselves to *genna* or *kaphanii* (Hodson, 1911: 117). After five days, the skin decomposes, the scalp is removed, and the remaining skull is washed in rice beer and preserved at *makho*. This is a symbol of attaining manhood, granting the warrior the right to wear a traditional shawl, build unique houses, and erect *marāntarung*. This sets the warrior apart from ordinary people and sets them apart in terms of social standing and personal reputation.

The Tangkhul Naga tribe's cultural behavior is centered on prestige, dignity, respect, truth, and justice, deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs. They strive to outdo their economic rivals and achieve superior social status, leading to the exhaustion of their wealth. Their obsession with human head aims to achieve justice and social status.

Social structure and institutions

The family, or *shimkhur*, is the fundamental social unit with reproductive and socialization functions. It consists of a husband and wife, their unmarried children, and sometimes a Tangkhul family living with their parents and siblings in the same household (Hodson, 1911: 70). However, the family is never an isolated unit, as children freely interact with their own and other kin groups. Peer groups also play a role in the socialization process of their children, similar to the "open lineage family" proposed by Stone (1977). The modern family structure has evolved through three stages from the 16th to 19th century.

The first was the "open lineage family", which was nuclear but open to community and kin group involvement. The second was the "restricted patriarchal nuclear family", which shifted domestic obligations to the state. The third type is the "closed domesticated nuclear family", where parents vacate the house with their unmarried children when their eldest son brings home a new wife. As the eldest son inherits property, the responsibility of the well-being and security of his immediate kin group rests with him.

The Tangkhuls have a patriarchal family structure, with the father as the head, overseeing all family matters, making important decisions, and owning all family properties. He is the breadwinner, protector, and face of the household, and heads social, religious, and economic functions. The mother manages domestic affairs and prepares food for all members. The family is an economic unit, with members working together under the father's guidance. Each family has its own religious altar, and the father serves as the family priest.

Hoskins, J. (1996) states that reasons or the motivating factors for taking head differ from society to society depending on their own cultural patterns. In Tangkhul society, husbands and wives use the terms *ipreiva* and *igahara*, respectively, to address each other. It is considered disrespectful to address one's husband by his personal name, while a wife may refer to her husband as *ishipā* (*igahara*) and husband to his wife as *ishipāva* (*ipreiva*). Parents and children maintain close relationships, with some unease between fathers and sons. Children refer to their parents by their personal names or *inao* (my child), and *āva/ āvā* (mother/ father) or *ishāva/ ishāvā* (my mother/my father). Addressing elders by personal names is considered uncustomary and bad-mannered.

Siblings use terms like *āgato/igato* (older brother to younger brother), *āzarva/izarva* (older brother to younger sister), *āpā/āpānao* (older sister to younger brother), *ākaduiva/ikaduiva* (older sister to younger sister),

āmei/ishāmei/ or ājei/ishājei (younger brother and younger sister to older brother), āchon/ishāchon or āgā/ishāgā (younger brother and younger sister to older sister).

Tangkhum kitchens feature a meiphung fireplace, a symbol of family hierarchy and forbidden disrespect. The meiphung is made up of three oval and elongated stones, known as meithalung, which support cooking wares and are installed after ritual observation. The stones represent the father, mother, and son, respectively. The meithalung arrangement is deeply structured around the kinship and genealogical arrangement of Tangkhum society, with all members except daughters considered permanent members. The saying “Mayarnao meithalungna kha shanao mazungmuyāna” (Men are meithalung, three stones of hearth that never move) signifies the patrilineal social structure where family and/or clan lineage is based on male members. Female members, specifically daughters, automatically detached their membership from their original kin group upon marriage solemnization and became embedded into their husbands’ kinship identity (Luikham, 2013; Angkang, 2018). Shangnao is an exogamous social unit in a village, focusing on religious and economic aspects.

Each clan-head has a sacred place called rihai lung, where important rituals and ceremonies are held. Elder members guide disputes and strained relationships between clan members. Despite being independent economic units, clans are bound together by a system of social and economic interdependence and cooperation. Members often seek consultation and assistance from their clansmen when faced with difficult situations. Ancestral properties, such as paddy fields and woodland, should be retained within the group unless demanded by irredeemable circumstances. Construction, farming, and agricultural activities are done through mutual labor exchange and cooperation among clan members as mentioned by Hodson, T. C. (1911).

In Tangkhum society, marriage is a norm between two or more unrelated individuals, with monogamy being the generally accepted norm. However, some wealthy individuals may marry multiple women, with the first wife having better rights and privileges. A man is considered married when he enters into union with a woman of his choice, approved by their parents. Marriage is based on free will and minimal involvement of a woman mediator. There are no known cases of same-sex marriage in Tangkhum society, as it is considered socially and culturally inappropriate. Bride prices, usually in kind, are paid to the bride's family. The practice originated from the social conception of women as potent contributors to the family workforce in the tribal socio-economic setting. To compensate for the loss of labor, the boy's family is obliged to pay a certain amount of wealth known as manho in Tangkhum according to Luikham, T. (2013).

Traditional political and economic system

The Tangkhuls, a pre-Colonial community of scattered villages, shared a common belief as descendants of the same ancestor. Colonial ethnographer T.C. Hodson noted loose alliances between some villages, with Hunphun village maintaining political supremacy over neighboring villages (Hodson, 1911: 82-83). Six cloth weaving villages in the western Tangkhum region prohibited their women from marrying people from other villages who did not practice weaving. Range-based grouping of villages formed bigger organizations (Luikham, 2013; Peter, 2004). with no evidence of tribal organization in Manipur before British rule. Alliances and contacts between villages were limited to trade, commerce, cultural collaboration, or law and order, with no common political organ to govern the entire Tangkhum village.

The village was a natural unit of political organization, economic, social, and religious organization. Each village had its own independent political entity, under the guardianship of a Chief called Awunga. The village state had both monarchical and democratic characteristics, with a hereditary Chief balanced by a democratically represented Council of clan elders. The formation of the village state was influenced by territoriality, where each clan had an attachment to their land. Each clan agreed to merge to form a

territorially bigger political institution through an ethnogeographic community social contract. The Chief, or Awunga, did not hold absolute rights over its territory, unlike powerful and sometimes autocratic Chiefs of neighboring tribes. The common people owned the land, and householders could own private land and use public land when needed.

The Awunga is a respected figure in Tangkhul polity, holding both secular and religious functions. As the political head of the village, he consults with the council of elders and is the highest priest, presiding over important religious rituals and ceremonies. The Awunga is also responsible for social and cultural functions and is a respected figure without whose sanction the common people cannot commence their yearly agricultural activity. The social, cultural, political, and religious prerogatives associated with the Awunga may be democratically shared among the various clans in some villages. The Awunga is often addressed by the nobility title Amei Kharar (elder brother), wearing a special shawl, and receiving the head portion when animals are killed. He is also restricted by certain food taboos, such as avoiding cat meat, believed to be as old as man in the descent line.

The Awunga's political powers and authority are effective only until he enjoys the confidence of the council members, who form the Village Authority, known as Hanga as mentioned by Luikham, T. (2013). The Hanga is the highest body of administration and governance, and disputes between individuals and/or groups are considered final and binding on all members. The Awunga acquires maximum authority as the religious head of the village, and the whole village can only begin sowing seeds after the sacrificial ritual performance of the chief.

Hodson, T. C. (1911) mentions that the Tangkhul community's economic activities were primarily focused on a subsistence economy, with traditional modes of production aimed at producing non-commercial outputs that could sustain families throughout the year. Cotton was the only commercial crop grown in the hills of Manipur at the time. The focus was on meeting immediate bodily needs, as the fruit of labor ended up in the stomach, which was an essential aspect of rituals and festivity. The natives believed that daily provisions for sustenance were earned through physical hard work and sweat.

In Tangkhul society, economic activities were primarily done in groups through cooperative labor exchange. Groups of individuals, known as yarhot, completed tasks such as clearing the field, tilling the soil, sowing and transplanting seedlings, harvesting crops, and transporting the harvest to home. Relatives and friends may offer assistance to those in need. Labor hiring was not monetary commission-based, and most tasks were accomplished through mutual labor exchange without spending a penny. Economic exchange occurred through barter systems, with free giving and mutual sharing of goods and services being the hallmark of Tangkhul moral economy (cf. Luikham, 2013: 197-198).

As per Heberer, T. (2007), The Tangkhul Naga community's traditional economy is characterized by value injections, reciprocity transactions, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust. This economy aligns with Karl Polanyi's concept of a "reciprocity economy", a non-hierarchical, kinship-based small-scale society without short-term loss-profit calculation. The giver receives prestige, unlike the capitalist market economy, where the receiver receives it. The Tangkhul Naga community's traditional economic activities can be further explored under various sub-themes.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Tangkhul Naga's pre-Christian societal framework reveals a complex interplay of social structures, cultural practices, and economic systems that formed the foundation of their community life. Rooted in a rich tapestry of oral traditions and communal values, the Tangkhul Naga cultivated a distinctive identity characterized by intricate social networks, as exemplified by the Mähthei Mählang

system of relationships and inter-village alliances. These practices not only fostered unity and cooperation among distant villages but also established a resilient social fabric that endured through generations.

The Tangkhul's approach to education, largely informal yet deeply embedded in their cultural practices, allowed for the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values essential for their subsistence and social cohesion. The emphasis on communal activities, trade exchanges, and cultural festivals like Peh Langchin facilitated cultural diffusion and reinforced interdependence among villages, highlighting the importance of collective identity in their societal framework. Furthermore, the political organization led by the Awunga, alongside the council of elders, underscores a unique blend of monarchical and democratic elements that enabled effective governance rooted in community consent and collaboration. The communal labor systems and reciprocal economic exchanges illustrate a moral economy based on trust, solidarity, and the pursuit of social prestige, distinguishing the Tangkhul Naga from more individualistic economic models.

The pre-Christian era of the Tangkhul Naga, thus, stands as a testament to their capacity for resilience, adaptability, and cultural richness, providing valuable insights into how indigenous communities navigate their social realities. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the transformations that have occurred with the advent of Christianity and modern education, as it lays the groundwork for further exploration of identity, continuity, and change within the Tangkhul Naga community.

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