

Cultural Practices and Social Taboos of Konyak Nagas before the Advent of Christianity

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ABSTRACT

The Konyak customary practices have a very unique position in the entire history of Naga Tribal Cultures and Traditions. For every death the Konyaks have ritual performance beginning from day one till one year is over. The old men of the clan were entitled to perform the ceremonies. The whole clan stays at the village and takes part in the funeral. The death body was kept in a platform and after few days the head was wrenched from the body and kept in an urn. The death body of chiefly class was placed in coffins and were covered with palm leaves and the skull was place in a stone cist outside the village.

Konyaks were also known for taking the heads of their enemies in the war. It was a sense of pride to bring home enemy's head. With the bringing of the head to the village there were number of rituals done by the eldest member of the clan. The head was hung outside the morung and at the time of disposal of the head there was great merry making and celebration in the village. The Konyak warriors were given respect with the number of heads they brought from the war. The greater the number of heads the more respect were gained.

The Konyaks were superstitious and believed in Sky God called 'Gawang'. Before they carried out any works they seek the blessings from Gawang. They believed that he was the creator and destroyer of everything. Therefore, the Konyaks perform several rituals to please Gawang. The Konyaks society was deprived of any misconduct as they fear of punishment by Gawang. There were many other gods but Gawang or Sky God was greatest of all.

In this paper an attempt has been taken to understand and analyse the various cultural and early practices prevalent among Konyak Nagas since time immemorial. Also the tribe had their peculiar social taboos that are very famous as their identity. So in the present research all the traditional customs and practices will be analysed.

KEYWORDS

Konyaks, Naga, Thendu, Thenko, Koongdu, Yimbu, Gawang, Morung, Kinsmen, Neingba.

INTRODUCTION

Until 1948, the district which is situated on the North Eastern part of Nagaland was an administered area. In the beginning of nineteenth century, a vast tract of land lying between the administered areas of Assam and

Burma (Myanmar) was not brought under the Civil Administration by the Britishers. In 1914, the Foreign Tract Regulation and Political Department of the Govt. of India by a notification extended the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation of 1880 to the hills which were inhabited by the Abors, Mishmis, the Nagas, the Khamtis, the Bhutias, the Akas and the Daflas. Through this extension of the aforesaid Regulation, the government of India brought the area under some administration in 1914 and the area was named as the North East Frontier Tract. Mon district which was part of the then Tuensang District was also under the purview of the same notification, but practically there was no Civil Administration till 1948.

The Konyak families are found in the North-East of India and in the North-West of Burma (Myanmar) inhabiting the ancestral land from ancient times. The Konyak family was divided when demarcating the so called boundary between India and Burma. Half of the Konyaks are in Burma and half are in India. Again the Konyak are further divided during the demarcation of the interstate boundaries under Indian Union while creation of Nagaland state and Arunachal Pradesh. Some of the families of this area were Konyak, Phom, Wancho, Pangmi, Nokti, Tangsa and Leinung. The Konyaks which is one of the biggest of the sixteenth recognized Naga tribe have a distinct cultural practice. They are easily recognized by their tattoos which they have all over their face, hands, chest, arms and calves. The Konyaks may be categorized into three groups i.e (1) Thendu or Tattoo face (2) Thenko or Non Tattoo Face (3) Koongdu or Tattoo on the nose .Majority of the Konyaks belong to Thendu group (Tattoo Face)¹.

In Nagaland, the Konyaks inhabit in Mon district which is one of the biggest district is also known as the 'Land of Anghs'. The Anghs or Wangs are their traditional chiefs whom they regard in high esteem. The district of Mon covers an area of 1786 sq. km bounded on the North by Sibsagar district of Assam, Tuensang district of Nagaland and Myanmar in the south and Longleng district of Nagaland in the west. On her North-East lies the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. The district can be divided into two topographical areas namely the foot-hills adjacent to the plains of Assam i.e Tizit and Naginimora areas and the hill ranges extending from the foot-hills the slopes of Naga Hills and Patkai Range in the Eastern side of the district. The altitude of areas varies from 100 meters in foot-hills to 2000 meters in the interiors of the district. Mon district has a population of 2,50,641 and literacy rate of 56.60% as per 2011 census. There are 123 recognized and 16 unrecognized villages and 15 towns or administrative headquarters.

The Konyak nagas also celebrate their festivals with great pomp and show where they show cast their traditions and custom. The main festival of the Konyaks is Aoleang Monyu. It is celebrated in the spring season i.e, after sowing of seeds. The festival is observed from 1st to 6th April. It is celebrated to seek blessings from God "Yongwan" so that the farmers may receive good harvest for the year. Everyone seems to enjoy this festival. Young and old dress up in their traditional attires and head gears decorated with

¹ Phejin Konyak, "The Last Of The Tattooed Head Hunters", Roli Books, New Delhi, 2017,P.2

feathers and wild boar tusk. The people spent their whole week in merry making. Log drum beating, folk songs and dances can be witnessed all throughout the festival time.

The Konyaks apart from Nagaland are also found in districts of Tirap, Longding and Changlang of Arunachal Pradesh; Sibsagar district of Assam and Myanmar. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh the Konyaks are known as 'Wancho Konyak'. Ethically, culturally and linguistically the Konyaks of the same neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh are closely related to Konyaks. The language of the Konyaks belongs to the Northern Naga sub branch of the Sal sub family of Sino- Tibetan. There are numerous different and mutually not understandable dialects. All 139 villages both recognized and unrecognized villages in Mon district speaks their own dialect. This great linguistic diversity is a characteristic feature of the Konyaks and one which distinguishes them from many linguistically more homogenous Naga tribes.

The word Konyak is derived from the word "Keniak" which means "man". It was first heard in the village of Tamlu, which together with the whole new tract of country west of the Dikhu River was taken under British administration as early as 1889. The Konyaks of all villages had traditions regarding the origin and migration of their forefathers, and many of these myths refer to the circumstances of the foundation of their villages. Some of these mythical accounts are contradictory, but several main motives occur in the traditions of many villages. According to one tradition, the ancestors of the majority of Konyaks came from a mountain called Yengyudang situated to the south of the present Konyak territory. Another and equally widespread tradition tells of a migration from the Brahmaputra valley along the Dikhu River and into the hills flanking that river. The tradition of the people of Wakching which is one of the villages in Mon district was more specific. They believed that their forefathers came from a mountain beyond the Brahmaputra known as "mountain beyond the great water". On their way from there they crossed the Brahmaputra valley and followed the Dikhu as far as the present village of Chongwe. Finding that the land there was not sufficiently fertile, they migrated to the ridge on which the present Wakching and Wanching village is situated. However, these early migrants were believed to have been only part of a tribe the other half of which had remained in the hills beyond Brahmaputra².

The Konyak Nagas are rich in its distinctive cultural practices and traditions. It has rich cultural heritage. Wooden effigies and statues of Stone Age and medieval periods are objects of wonder and awe, depicting the human craftsmanship and skill. The Konyaks are skilled in the art of making firearms. They are also skilled in handicrafts like basket making, cane and different kinds of bamboo works, making of necklaces, wristbands, garter with beads. The economic conditions of the people lag behind when compared to other districts in Nagaland. Being located in one of the remotest part of Nagaland, its economic development has not been satisfactory. The district of Mon has great potential for economic development if her forest resources, manpower resources etc. are fully explored. Due to ignorance, lack of capital, scientific and

² Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf, " The Konyak Nagas", Holt McDougal Publication, New York, 1969, P.5

technical knowledge, infrastructure inadequacies, etc. the district has lagged behind as compared to other districts³.

Literature Review

A couple of works have been written so far regarding the present theme particularly “*The Last of the Tattooed Headhunters*” by Phejin Konyak and Peter Bos”.The book produces an intensive research on the vanishing tattooed tradition and seeks to preserve the customs and beliefs that form the bedrock of the Konyak community. Another book entitled “*The Konyak Nagas An Indian Frontier Tribe (case studies in Cultural anthropology)*” by Christoph Von Furer- Haimendorf (1969)”.This book gives a detailed description about the social structure and its different units. He also touches on the phases of life and religious beliefs and practices of the Konyaks.

The cultural practices and other traditional activities prevalent among the Konyak Nagas are as under:

Death and Funeral Rites

Konyaks had very clear ideas about the fate that awaited after death. Old men spoke without any sign of emotion of their entry into Yimbu, the land of the dead. For their journey they needed their weapons, for on the way to Yimbu they would meet all those men whom they had killed in battle and would have to fight them once more. Life in Yimbu was considered similar to life on earth. The departed cultivated the land, celebrated the annual feasts, married, and had children. People who had been married on earth lived in the land of the dead with their original spouses. Even if there was no physical relation in a marriage, it was the partners of a first marriage who would be re-joined and live together in Yimbu⁴.

Illness was usually attributed to the action of supernatural beings and seers and shamans were employed to discover the cause of an affliction and placate the spirit or god responsible. Some seers claimed that in their dreams they were able to enter the land of the dead and if they encountered there a man or woman who was still alive on earth, they knew that the person’s soul was already disconnected from its body and that the man or woman concerned would die soon. However, sacrifices to Gawang or other gods could avert death and lure the soul back from the land of dead⁵.

If all attempts to save sick man failed and he died, not only the members of his household and his closest kinsmen but also other members of the village community were under an obligation to assist in the disposal of the corpse. This cooperation and the sequence of ritual acts can best be demonstrated by the description of an actual funeral.

³ A. Roy, “The Konyak Nagas: A Socio-Cultural Profile”, Upfront Publishing Ltd, Leicester, 2004, P.16

⁴ Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf, “The Konyak Nagas” Holt McDougal Publication, New York, 1969, P.89

⁵ K.S Nagaraj, “Konyak Folk Literature”, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, 1994, P.14

Chingak, a young married man of the Oukheang morung, had died after a long illness. All his livestock had been used up in sacrifices to the sky god and the spirits of the earth and finally, convinced that his own house was pursued by misfortune, he had moved to the house of a kinsman. On the morning after Chingak's death the members of his own age group gathered outside the village and assisted by their traditional partners, the girls of the Balang and Ang-ban, erected a monument consisting of a bamboo structure and a crudely carved human figure. The girls made two head coverings of fresh leaves, one of which was placed on the wooden figure; the other was taken to the house of mourning to be put on the head of the deceased. When the monument was completed the girls returned in single file to the village, scattering large green leaves as they went. This last act of friendship was always performed by girls who were the potential mates of the departed, but was omitted at funerals of older men⁶.

On the day of the funeral all the men of the Oukheang abstained from work on the fields, but only those women belonging to the deceased's clan observed ritual abstention and remained in the village. The unmarried girls of the Balang and Ang-ban, both former partners of the deceased, also observed a day's abstention from work. All morning the dead body of Chingak lay in the house in which he had died; men of Oukheang morung built a corpse platform close to the rear verandah of Chingak's own house; Chingak's widow, his mother and his sisters sat wailing close to the corpse. Small groups of clansmen and friends of the dead man entered the house, bringing beetle leaves and small gifts of food, which were later tied to the funeral platform. Among the mourners were men as well as women and as they left the house they dipped a finger into a bamboo vessel filled with water, which had been specifically placed in front of the dead man's house for the purpose of this ritual purification.

An old man of Chingak's clan, wearing the dead man's ceremonial headdress and carrying his spear and dao, left the house and was followed by the bier, which was carried by four men. Relatives and friends as well as young boys and girls followed the bier. The bier was placed on the platform was placed on the platform and the old men covered the body with a cloth and palm leaves. Then they tied small packets of food onto the platform. After a few minutes the mourners dispersed, but as long as the deceased's head remained on the platform, the family members continued to bring meal at usual times. Six days after the funeral the head of the corpse was wrenched from the body, and the old men and women of the deceased's family had the task of cleaning the skull. The skull was placed in an urn hollowed from a block of sandstone on the edge of the village, close to one of the main paths. According to Konyak belief, it was only the skull to which a portion of a dead man's soul substance continued to adhere, even though his personality had long since completed the journey to the land of the dead.

While the dead of commoner status were put on bamboo biers, those of chiefly class were placed in canoe-shaped wooden coffins, the ends of which were decorated with life-sized carvings of hornbill heads. The

⁶ A Roy, "The Konyak Nagas: A Socio-Cultural Profile", Upfront Publishing Ltd, Leicester, 2004, P.22

platform was erected near the chief house. When the corpse had sufficiently putrefied, the head was wrenched off and cleaned by old men of chiefly clan. They filled the eye sockets with the white pith of a tree, painted the skull with a pattern similar to the deceased's own tattoo and using resin, stuck some of his hair to the crown of the skull. The coffin was covered with palm leaves and laid on a platform outside the village, while the skull was placed in a stone cist and covered with the type of bronze gong which the Konyaks obtained from Burma. For the first five year the skull was so placed that it overlooked the village path, but later it turned away from the path⁷.

Head- Hunting Rites

The idea that the powerful magical forces adhering to the human skull could be manipulated for the benefit of the living explains not only the care bestowed on the skulls of the deceased kinsmen but to a large extent, the practice of acquiring heads of strangers, either by capture or slaughter of human victims procured by purchase. Though we are hardly justified in assuming that only motivation of so widespread a practice as head-hunting was the desire to acquire the fertility promoting force of human blood and the power emanating from human skulls, there can be little doubt that, at least among the Naga tribes, this belief was an effective incentive to the hunting of heads. The quest for prestige gained by successful head-hunters and the desire to avenge the losses of one's own clan or village by killing enemies and capturing their heads were certainly additional motives, but they do not explain all of the ritual associated with the bringing in and disposal of a head trophy.

While head-hunting cannot be considered simply as a result of tribal warfare, the wish to capture heads seems to have been the cause of many war between villages which had otherwise no conflicting interests. Konyaks did not normally go to war to enlarge their territory or to loot their opponents. There were cases of chiefs expanding their domain by attacking and subjugating a smaller village but most villages coexisted for generations without disputing the boundaries separating their territories and periods of peace, intermarriage, and a limited barter trade alternated with times when the neighbors faced each other as enemies, each side eager to capture heads if the opportunity arose. Even then there were few large-scale battles or attacks, but after an incident, sparked perhaps by a dispute over the breakup of a marriage between a chief and his wife belonging to another ruling house, there would be ambushes on lone villagers venturing too close to hostile territory or perhaps an assault on fishing or hunting party⁸.

Only in exceptional cases did warriors set out on a raid with the intention of wiping out an opposing village. The main aim of raiding was the capture of heads and when the score of those gained and lost was more or less even, negotiations tended to lead to the re-establishment of peace. The only gains of such a period of warfare, extending perhaps over five or six years, were the heads captured from each side. They were

⁷ Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf, "The Konyak Nagas", Holt McDougal Publication, New York, 1969, P.90-91

⁸ K.S Nagaraj, "Konyak Folk Literature", Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, 1994, P.19

carefully preserved and fed with rice beer at all feasts. There was the definite belief that their presence enhanced the fertility and prosperity of the village. The sex, age, and status of the victims were of little relevance. Old people, women and children would be killed as occasion offered, and the capture of their heads earned the slayer hardly less prestige than the killing of armed warriors. Konyaks avoided open fights whenever possible, for to die in battle was considered not a glorious but a disgraceful fate⁹.

When a head was brought to the captor's village, all the men of the village and in particular the village elders turned out to welcome the head-hunters. The first rites were performed outside the village on a spot not far from the place where the skulls of dead villagers rested in sandstone cists. There, the captured head was put down and the senior men of all the clans involved in the capture smashed raw eggs on the head, intending by magical means to blind the kinsmen of the dead foe. Then, a clan elder poured rice beer into the mouth and said, "May your mother, may your father, may your elder and younger brothers all come, may they drink our beer and eat our rice and meat. May they all come!" These ritual words were intended to compel the deceased to call his relatives so they might fall victims to the spear of the victors.

The senior male of the head-taker's clan carried the head into the village, and if the hands and feet had been cut off and brought in, the younger men carried these in their decorated hip baskets. Next, in procession the men moved to the open space in front of the chief's house and danced for some time; later, they went to their morung, where women were waiting with bamboo vessels filled with water. With this they washed off the blood of the enemy and this ceremonial purification was performed by those who had not touched enemy blood. The head was placed in a basket and tied, along with other additional trophies, to the great log gong. First the young warriors and then the women beat the gong in the rhythm which announced the capture of a head. In the evening the captured head was tied to the main posts of the morung, and the warriors danced the whole night¹⁰.

The next day all the men of the village dressed in ceremonial attires and painted their bodies and faces with lime. In solemn procession the head was carried to either to two stones standing in front of the chief's house or to an upright stone newly set up in a ritual place. There, the senior descendant of the village founder, acts as a priest (neingba), cut off small pieces of ears and tongue and called again on the kinsmen of the dead man. He took a small chicken and sprinkling its blood on the stones, repeated the same incantation. Next he examined the intestines to see whether the omens were favorable for the slaying of more enemies. The remains of the chicken were left on the stone but the enemy's head was taken to a tree close to the morung of the captor and hung them up to dry. Throughout the day there was dancing and feasting and the whole village restraint themselves from going to fields.

⁹ K.Yadav, "The Glory Hunt: A Socio-Cultural Spectrum of Konyak Nagas", Indian Publishers Distributor, Delhi, 2001, P.33

¹⁰ Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf, "The Konyak Nagas", Holt McDougal Publication, New York, 1969, P.97

Approximately one month later a great feast was celebrated to mark the final disposal of the head. Many of the prominent men of the morung of the head-taker slaughtered pigs and after much dancing, drinking and eating the captured head was taken down from the tree on which it had hung all that month. Once more the head was fed with rice and beer and in doing so the priest chanted the magical formula which was intended to attract the kinsmen of the dead. Finally, the head was deposited either in the morung or in the ancestral house of the clan head-taker¹¹.

The Cult of the Sky God

The Konyaks view of the world of supernatural forces resembles the religious ideas of most other Indo-Burman speaking tribes of the hills of Northeast India in the sense that they saw their environment as populated by innumerable spirits, partly friendly and partly hostile to men, but uncontrollable by the performance of the appropriate rites. While the many spirits and godlings whom the Konyaks propitiated when their help was desired or their unwelcome attentions warded off cannot be dealt with here in detail, it will be rewarding to discuss in some detail the cult of the one deity who stood above all the others and may well be described as dominating the Konyaks religious ideas.

In the language of Wakching the name of the deity is Gawang which literally means 'earth-sky'. It reflects the idea of a universal deity comprising or dominating both sphere of the world. To the Konyaks the name Gawang denoted not the spiritual essence of the universe but a deity of highly personal character associated with the sky more than with the earth. The people of Wakching imagined Gawang as dwelling in the sky and as having existed before all other beings and things. It was he who created the sky and who caused the thunder to roll and the lightning to flash. The Konyaks firmly believed that the small Neolithic celts which they found occasionally on their fields were the thunder bolts of Gawang. When lightning hit a tree near a village the oldest men sacrificed a chicken and begged Gawang not to harm the settlement¹².

Konyak thought of Gawang in anthropomorphic terms, and though his name meant 'earth-sky', they imagined him in the likeness of a human being in immense size. There was no clear tradition as to Gawang's role in the creation of the world of man. At most cardinal events in the life of Konyaks, Gawang was invoked. There were innumerable prayers and incantations by which he was asked to bestow blessings and success on individuals or on the whole community. An unusual feature of the beliefs concerning Gawang was the idea that he cared for the moral conduct of men and fulfilled the role of a guardian of a moral order. Konyaks believed that whoever stole his neighbour's rice or domestic animals, who was unjust and cruel, who beat his covillagers in quarrels, or who bore false witness, incurred the wrath of Gawang. Other offences as well were punished by Gawang. Men who were unfaithful to their wives and slept secretly

¹¹ A.Roy, "The Konyak Nagas:A Socio Cultural Profile", Upfront Publishing Ltd, Leichester, 2004, P.25

¹² Phejin Konyak, "The Last Of The Tattooed Head-hunters", Roli Books, New Delhi,2016, P.5-6

with other women were punished by being deprived of male offspring. All Konyaks believed that it was Gawang who bestowed children on people.

It is a matter of some surprise that Gawang was believed to disapprove of certain customs well established in naga society. We have seen that Konyaks though not keeping slaves themselves occasionally bought slaves and killed them in order to gain head trophies but some old men of Wakching spoke with great indignation of the villages to the east, where people used to sell even their own children and kinsmen into slavery. As Gawang punished those guilty of misdeeds, so he rewarded those who excelled in social virtues. He was also regarded as the guardian of the oaths. When two villages decided to terminate a feud and conclude a peace pact, they invoked Gawang, swearing that any who broke the peace and disregarded their solemn oath should meet a speedy death. Such supernatural sanctions mobilized by swearing of oaths were the only coercive force which could ensure the maintenance of peace between two autonomous communities, for none of the moral rules which regulated so efficiently relations between kinsmen and covillagers extended to the interaction between different villages and an appeal to a higher power- in this case Gawang- was necessary if after a series of raids and counter raids, a state of peaceful co-existence was to be established¹³.

The belief in Gawang as the arbiter of human behavior can perhaps be correlated with the emergence of a sense of public concern with the conduct of individual members of a community, a concern absent in many less well-organized tribal societies. While in a society where conditions are in more or less permanent flux, individuals can pursue their own ends without being disciplined by public opinion, the Konyaks were bound by a code of behavior enforced by the members of their own in-groups. Compared to Gawang, the spirits of earth, the forests and the rivers were not very important though at times it was necessary to please them with offerings of chicken and pigs. Occasionally, ordinary people could see the spirits of wood, springs and streams as they slipped by, but only men endowed with special gifts could see Gawang in their dreams, and they described him as a tall naga with spear and dao.

Though Konyak spent a comparatively large part of their time and resources on ritual activities and took the performance of sacrifices and the observance of taboos seriously, they did not seem to be open to religious experiences of great emotional impact. There was little room for mysticism in the world view of the Konyaks and even the seers who could bring about trancelike states appeared as down to earth persons in ordinary daily life. Some claimed that while their bodies slept, their soul could enter the body of a tiger, and in the shape of weretigers they had experiences which they remembered in their waking state. According to Konyak belief, the bond between such man and his tiger familiar was very close and the death of the tiger was invariably followed by that of his human double. There were sceptics, however, even among Konyaks few men claimed to be weretigers. Skepticism did not extend to the belief in Gawang and the host of earth-

¹³ Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf, "The Konyak Nagas", Holt McDougal, New York, 1969, P.100-101

bound spirits, however, and all Konyaks considered their fate to be dependent on the will and actions of invisible beings of whose existence they entertained no doubt¹⁴.

CONCLUSION

The history of Konyak Naga belong to an oral culture where written records are not available and the culture has developed since time immemorial where every part of life is governed through time-honored customs and practices. The Konyaks were animistic they believe that every objects and creatures had some forces. Sacrifices and prayers were made to seek blessings before they are set to perform their daily activities. The spirits and gods have a particular relationship to the Naga concept of 'fertility'. They place a great deal of power in the hands of their High God, Gawang, who exerts a direct influence on earthly masses i.e, his subjects. Thus, the chief or the angh had a special relation with the powerful god, Gawang.

Konyak Nagas like many other primitive people, believed that the dead returned to the original homeland, whence their mythical ancestors had come. According to the beliefs of the Wakching men, the departed soul traveled to the land of the dead through the village of Chingtang, Chinglong and Chongwe, and the southern direction of this route suggests that at least some elements among Thenkoh group may have had old associations with that southern region through which the dead were supposed to travel on their way to the never world.

The Konyaks were fierce fighters and collected human skull as trophies. They mostly fought for territories. Besides, they believed that one can acquire greater power with the killing of man(enemies).When the head were brought to the village the oldest clan member perform rituals especially to the supreme god 'Gawang'. Lately with the arrival of Christianity all these practises were stopped and war with neighbouring villages were condemned.

¹⁴ A Roy, "The Konyak Nagas: A Socio-Cultural Profile", Upfront Publishing Ltd, Leicester, 2004, P.31