



“Exploring Atojha Kapang: A Tangkhul Naga Custom of Restitution and Reconciliation Through Yarnao Feasts in Asünei Village”.

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Abstract: This paper explores the *Atojha Kapang* custom, a Tangkhul Naga tradition of restitution and reconciliation practiced in *Asünei* village. The custom involves a husband hosting a feast for his wife’s same-age group, known as *Yarnao*, as a penalty for any offense against his wife. The paper examines the origin, components, and significance of this custom, highlighting its role in fostering community harmony and preserving cultural identity. The paper also discusses the challenges and adaptations of this custom in the context of modern influences and changing social dynamics. The paper draws on folkloristic perspectives and oral narratives to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of this unique tradition. The paper argues that *Atojha Kapang* is not just a relic of the past, but a living tradition with contemporary relevance, offering valuable lessons for conflict resolution and social cohesion.

Keywords: Atojha Kapang, Tangkhul Naga, Yarnao, Feast, Asünei Village, Custom

Introduction

Customary laws hold profound importance for indigenous communities globally, serving as the bedrock of their social fabric. With a special focus on restitution and reconciliation, these laws play a pivotal role in fostering harmony and justice within indigenous societies. Human beings, inherently imperfect in their conduct, “it is natural that sometime knowingly and unknowingly make mistake and commit crime” (Horam, 2019: 791). This imperfection is deeply rooted in our nature where factors such as emotions, desires, and external influences play pivotal roles. Recognizing this reality, societies have developed customary laws as a means to address and navigate the intricacies of human fallibility. Customary law shaped by cultural norms, traditions, and shared values within a community serves as a framework for resolving disputes arising from human errors and transgressions. It acknowledges the nuanced nature of human conduct, understanding that intentions, circumstances, and personal histories contribute to the choices individuals make. Rather than adhering strictly to written statutes, customary law allows for a more flexible and context-specific approach in dealing with the imperfections inherent in human behaviour. One of the significant aspects of customary law is its emphasis on restorative justice. Instead of solely focusing on punishment, it seeks to repair the harm caused and reintegrate the wrongdoer into the community. This approach recognizes that individuals are capable of change and rehabilitation fostering a sense of accountability and responsibility for one’s actions. Moreover, customary laws often rely on mediation and community involvement in dispute resolution. This communal aspect not only provides a platform for the affected parties to voice their concerns but also fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility. It aligns with the idea that the community plays a crucial role in shaping and guiding the behaviour of its members.

The significance of customary laws in this context extends beyond legal structures; they encompass the preservation of cultural identity. Indigenous communities often face challenges from external forces that threaten their traditional practices and ways of life. Customary laws act as a shield, safeguarding the unique heritage and ensuring the continuity of indigenous wisdom through generations. Furthermore, it also contributes to the empowerment of indigenous communities by granting them agency in addressing internal issues. Instead of relying solely on external legal systems that may not fully comprehend their traditions, indigenous people find strength in resolving matters according to their own customary norms.

The Nagas, renowned for their innate abilities in peacemaking and reconciliation have long held a pivotal role within their communities, serving as the cohesive force around which all communal life revolves. Embedded in the cultural fabric of the Naga people, the art of fostering harmony has been a cherished tradition guiding their social dynamics for generations. At the heart of Naga society lies a deep-seated commitment to resolving conflicts through dialogue and consensus-building. The Nagas have perfected the art of peacemaking employing traditional methods that emphasize mutual understanding and collective well-being. Elders revered for their wisdom and experience play a crucial role in mediating disputes, drawing upon customary social equilibrium. Their ability to navigate complex interpersonal relationships and address historical grievances underscores the significance of peacemaking as a cornerstone of Naga identity. The communal life of the Nagas orbits around these peacemaking endeavors. Festivals, ceremonies, and everyday interactions are infused with the spirit of reconciliation, fostering an environment where conflicts are not only resolved but prevented from escalating. The Naga community, tightly knit through shared values of peace and unity recognizes the centrality of these peacemaking efforts in sustaining their way of life. “A number of rich and profound traditions of peacemaking and reconciliation have been practiced and transmitted from generation to generation by each of the Naga tribes. Different tribes have different names for such forms of reconciliation. The Sumi tribe calls it *Alu Pekili*, which means reconciliation; the Chakhesang people know it as *Küchene*, meaning the feast of peacemaking” (Vashum, 2020: 1). The peacemaking tradition among the Nagas is diverse, varying between tribes and villages. Focusing on the *Atojha Kapang* of Asünei village (Chingjui village) within the Tangkhul community provides a unique lens into the intricacies of Naga peacemaking. Examining its cultural nuances and practices unveils a rich tapestry of tradition and community-driven conflict resolution.

The *Atojha kapang* custom practiced by the Asünei village (Chingjaroi village) holds cultural significance, particularly in the context of marital relationships. This distinctive tradition involves a husband acknowledging an offense against his wife and seeking penance through a feast. The feast is thrown for his wife’s same-age group, known as *Yarnao* in the Tangkhul dialect. Rooted in the cultural fabric of Asünei, *Atojha Kapang* is a unique expression of accountability within marital bonds. It symbolizes the husband’s recognition of wrongdoing and a genuine effort to make amends. The act of organizing a feast for the wife’s *Yarnao* becomes a communal acknowledgment of the incident. The significance of this custom lies not only in the material offerings of the feast but also in the emotional and social aspects. It fosters a sense of community and support as *Yarnao* members come together to partake in the feast. This communal involvement helps in the healing process and reinforces the importance of resolving conflicts within the broader social framework. Furthermore, the *Atojha Kapang* custom reflects the cultural values of Asünei village, emphasizing the importance of reconciliation, community, and shared responsibility. It serves as a unique mechanism for restoring harmony within families and the larger social structure. Through this custom, the community not only addresses individual conflicts but also reinforces the collective spirit that defines the Asünei way of life.

Asünei village, situated in the northern part of Tangkhul hills, boasts a captivating geographical context that reflects the rich tapestry of its surroundings. Nestled amidst the undulating terrain of the Tangkhul hills, this village enjoys a picturesque setting characterized by lush greenery and a serene landscape. The topography of Asünei is defined by rolling hills, dense forests, and meandering streams, creating a harmonious blend of natural elements. The village is strategically positioned, offering panoramic views of the surrounding hills and valleys, showcasing the breathtaking beauty that is typical of the northeastern region of India. The climate in Asünei is influenced by its elevation, contributing to a temperate and pleasant atmosphere. The hills provide a natural barrier, shaping the local weather patterns and fostering an environment conducive to diverse flora and

fauna. This geographical setting not only enhances the village's aesthetic appeal but also influences the lifestyle and economic activities of its residents. Agriculture plays a significant role in Asünei, benefitting from the fertile soil of the hills. The terraced fields on the slopes demonstrate the resourcefulness of the community in harnessing the land's potential for cultivation. In the olden days, the village is known for its traditional farming practices, cultivating a variety of crops that thrive in the region's unique climatic conditions. Asünei is also connected to its neighbouring villages through a network of winding pathways, weaving through the hills and fostering a sense of community among the residents. These pathways, though challenging at times due to the hilly terrain, contribute to the village's charm and facilitate both trade and cultural exchanges.

The community's customs, rituals, and traditions are deeply intertwined with the village's daily life reflecting a unique blend of history and identity. The Tangkhul Nagas, known for their vibrant cultural practices find an epitome of these in Asünei village. The village's architecture is a testament to its cultural roots, with elaborate wall carvings and traditional thatched-roof houses reflecting a harmonious coexistence with nature. The arrangement of houses within the village symbolizes the interconnectedness of families and the importance of community bonds. Cultural festivals such as *Khamor Angkhui* highlight Asünei's significance in preserving and celebrating Tangkhul Naga traditions. Moreover, the elders play a pivotal role in passing down oral traditions, narratives, folk songs, and folk dances that anchor the village in its cultural moorings. The wisdom imparted by the older generation becomes a guiding light, shaping the values and ethos of the community. Hence, the village is not just a physical space but a cultural stage where rituals unfold. The *Atojha Kapang* custom deeply rooted in Asünei village serves as a linchpin in preserving Tangkhul Naga heritage. Studying and understanding the historical context and evolution of *Atojha Kapang* within this specific village setting will offer a broader perspective on how customs adapt to changing times while preserving their core principles. Furthermore, the exploration of *Atojha Kapang* will shed light on the role of restitution in traditional societies. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate how *Yarnao* Feasts act as a catalyst for reconciliation, providing a platform for open dialogue and healing from a folkloristic point of view.

Origin of Atojha Kapang Custom

The historical roots of *Atojha Kapang* trace back to the Asünei village's cultural evolution. Understanding the specific circumstances or events that led to the establishment of this custom requires delving into the village's history and the socio-cultural dynamics prevalent at the time of its inception. The oral account goes like this: In the village of Asünei, also known as Chingjaroi, the remarkable tale of Rajhelew unfolded. In the era when headhunting was a customary practice among the Nagas, Rajhelew achieved a feat that echoed through the hills. With unwavering courage, she single-handedly took down a formidable leopard and took the head of one of the most renowned warriors in the Poumai community. One fateful day, as Rajhelew and her friends went to the woods to forage a local mushroom called *rajheneivanei*, she found herself ambushed by the fierce Pasho (Poumai Nagas) warriors. However, every one of her friends quickly made it back home and told the villagers that the Pasho warriors had killed Rajhelew. When Rajhelew saw that all her friends ran away, leaving her alone, she thought that the enemies would kill her. She was hiding in a tree and swiftly climbed up to the top and started shaking it with all her strength accompanied by *kakahang* (a kind of loud shout/howling). The Pasho warriors then realized that their finest warrior's head had been taken by none other than Rajhelew. They promptly returned and made their way to their village. Rajhelew then made a safe return to her home. Following this, the Asünei village began the *Atojha kapang* custom as a way to honour Rajhelew and all the womenfolk.

The *Atojha Kapang* custom among the Tangkhul Nagas finds its roots in the awe-inspiring tale of Rajhelew's triumph. This tradition was established as a profound way to honour not only Rajhelew but also all the women of Asünei village. Rajhelew's victory served as a symbol of resilience and strength, inspiring the villagers to create a lasting tribute. The *Atojha Kapang* custom is significant in its role as a cultural expression, reflecting the community's deep respect for the contributions of women. It stands as a testament to the pivotal role played by Rajhelew and other women in the village, emphasizing their importance in shaping the community's history. This tradition goes beyond a mere celebration; it serves as a reminder of the collective

strength and unity within Asünei village. The observance of Atojha Kapang brings the community together, fostering a sense of identity and shared history. It highlights the endurance and courage of the women of Asünei, instilling a sense of pride and respect among the villagers. Through this tradition, the villagers sought to immortalize the courage of Rajhelew and celebrate the indomitable spirit of the women who played a vital role in the fabric of their society.

Components of Atojha Kapang

The Asünei village's *Atojha kapang* holds cultural significance, encompassing various components, with a focus on "Yarnao" (the same age group). A significant aspect of this celebration involves the husband preparing a feast for his wife's *Yarnao*, serving as a fine imposed by the wife's *Yarnao* for any misbehaviour or the use of derogatory language towards his wife. *Yarnao*, in the Tangkhul context, signifies a closely-knit community of individuals who share the same age group. The interconnectedness of these groups plays a crucial role in the social fabric of Asünei village forming the foundation of the *Atojha Kapang* custom. This custom becomes particularly noteworthy when a husband is required to prepare a feast for his wife's *Yarnao* as a penalty for any transgressions against his wife. The process leading up to the feast is meticulously carried out. The wife's *Yarnao* selects a specific date for this, often chosen after consulting with fellow *Yarnao* members. When the appointed day arrives, after returning from the fields, the entire group directly heads to the host's house to partake in the celebratory meal. The husband, bound by tradition and societal expectations, undertakes the responsibility of preparing the entire meal. This culinary undertaking serves not only as a culinary challenge but also as a symbolic act of reconciliation. The husband, by preparing and offering the feast acknowledges his wrongdoing and seeks forgiveness from his wife's *Yarnao*. The act of sharing a meal is infused with cultural significance, representing the restoration of harmony within the marital relationship. This custom underscores the importance of respecting women and maintaining harmony within marital relationships. Failure to comply with the feast obligation carries social consequences. If a husband denies providing the feast, the entire village may subject him to ridicule. In some instances, women within the community may take matters into their own hands, administering a unique form of punishment by squeezing the husband's balls. In a community where maintaining one's status is paramount, the pressure to adhere to the customs of *Atojha Kapang* is immense. Consequently, the husband yields to societal expectations, reinforcing the importance of respecting and valuing relationships within his wife's *Yarnao*. This practice not only emphasizes the necessity for husbands to rectify any transgressions but also underscores the communal nature of accountability within Asünei village.

Restitution and Reconciliation

In the traditional Asünei village, the *Atojha Kapang* custom serves as a profound mechanism for the restitution and reconciliation of a husband's wrongdoing towards his wife. This unique feast symbolized by the ritual slaughter of a pig or buffalo plays a pivotal role in resolving disputes within the community. The *Atojha Kapang* operates as a cultural bridge facilitating the healing of marital discord. By hosting this feast, the husband publicly acknowledges his transgressions and seeks amends, creating a platform for dialogue and understanding between the spouses. The act of slaughtering an animal carries symbolic weight, signifying the sacrifice and commitment required for marital harmony. Furthermore, the involvement of the wife's *Yarnao* in the *Atojha Kapang* feast underscores the communal aspect of conflict resolution. It fosters a sense of collective responsibility and support as the community actively participates in the restoration of marital harmony. The *Yarnao* acts as a mediator, guiding the couple through the process of reconciliation and contributing to the overall well-being of the community.

The *Atojha Kapang* custom extends beyond the immediate participants, leaving a lasting impact on community harmony. This cultural practice rooted in addressing and resolving conflicts openly cultivates an atmosphere of transparency, trust, and unity within the village. By providing a structured framework for conflict resolution, *Atojha Kapang* contributes to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships. The open dialogue and resolution process allows community members to express concerns, understand differing perspectives, and collectively work toward solutions. This, in turn, builds a foundation of trust among individuals fostering a sense of mutual understanding that extends far beyond the specific conflict at hand. Moreover, the practice

reinforces the fabric of the community by promoting a shared responsibility for maintaining peace and stability. As conflicts are openly addressed and resolved, community members recognize the importance of collective well-being over individual interests. This shared responsibility creates a sense of belonging and interconnectedness, emphasizing that the prosperity of one is linked to the prosperity of all. In the long run, the impact of *Atojha Kapang* on community harmony goes beyond the resolution of immediate disputes. It establishes a cultural norm of open communication, empathy, and cooperation, contributing to the overall social cohesion of the village. The enduring effects of this custom ripple through generations, creating a community that values unity and actively engages in conflict resolution as a means to uphold the shared values of peace and stability.

The broader society can draw valuable lessons from the *Atojha Kapang* custom. It highlights the significance of cultural practices in addressing disputes, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging wrongs and seeking reconciliation. The custom encourages a communal approach to conflict resolution, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals within a society. Culturally and socially, the implications of *Atojha Kapang* extend to the preservation of traditions and the promotion of mutual respect. By upholding such customs, Asünei village underscores the importance of balancing individual actions with communal well-being. This not only contributes to the resilience of cultural heritage but also serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of personal actions and community harmony. Therefore, the *Atojha Kapang* custom in Asünei village plays a vital role in resolving disputes between spouses, fostering community harmony, and imparting valuable lessons to the broader society. Its cultural and social implications highlight the significance of traditional practices in maintaining equilibrium within a community, offering a template for conflict resolution that prioritizes reconciliation, understanding, and collective responsibility.

Cultural significance

Atojha Kapang, a revered tradition within the Tangkhul Naga culture plays a pivotal role in preserving community cohesion and fostering harmony. This ritual involves a husband publicly acknowledging an offense against his wife and seeking penance through a feast in the Asünei village. The significance of *Atojha Kapang* extends beyond a mere act of contrition; it is deeply rooted in cultural values and social bonds. The public nature of this tradition underscores its communal impact, reinforcing the interconnectedness of individuals within the Asünei village. By openly admitting wrongdoing, the husband not only displays accountability but also emphasizes the importance of transparency and communal responsibility. This act serves as a powerful reminder that the community is not just a collection of individuals but a cohesive entity where relationships are acknowledged and mended collectively. The feast that follows *Atojha Kapang* is a symbol of reconciliation and communal celebration. It transforms a personal conflict into a communal event where shared meals and festivities become a conduit for healing and rebuilding the social fabric. Through this feast, the Tangkhul Naga community reinforces the idea that forgiveness and unity are essential for the well-being of the entire village.

Culturally, *Atojha Kapang* reflects the Tangkhul Naga people's emphasis on resolving disputes and maintaining social harmony. It serves as a mechanism for conflict resolution that goes beyond punitive measures, focusing instead on restoration and community-building. The tradition aligns with the cultural ethos of collective well-being where the actions of one individual have repercussions for the entire community. This symbiotic relationship forms a social contract where individuals contribute to communal welfare with the understanding that their endeavours contribute to overall harmony. The essence of this symbiotic relationship lies in the recognition that individual contributions, whether in agricultural activities, communal rituals, or social events, directly impact the well-being of the entire community. It transcends mere reciprocity, evolving into a holistic understanding of interconnectedness. Moreover, *Atojha Kapang* contributes to the preservation of traditional values by providing a structured approach to addressing interpersonal conflicts. In a rapidly changing world, rituals like these become crucial in safeguarding cultural identity. By adhering to such practices, the transmission of their cultural heritage to future generations. *Atojha Kapang*, therefore, stands as a testament to the Tangkhul Naga culture's commitment to community cohesion, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation. Through this tradition, the Asünei village exemplifies how acknowledging wrongs,

seeking reconciliation, and celebrating communal bonds can serve as pillars for a resilient and harmonious society.

Challenges and Adaptations

In our rapidly evolving world, challenges serve as a catalyst for cultural adaptations, shaping the dynamic landscape of societies. The importance of these challenges lies in their ability to stimulate resilience, innovation, and the evolution of cultural norms. As societies encounter diverse obstacles, be it technological advancements, globalization, or environmental shifts, the need for adaptation becomes paramount. Cultural changes often stem from the necessity to navigate new complexities. For instance, technological advancements necessitate adjustments in communication and lifestyle, influencing how people interact and perceive the world. The significance of such adaptations lies in the preservation of cultural identity amid transformative forces. Communities that successfully blend tradition with innovation foster a dynamic cultural ecosystem. Globalization, while fostering interconnectedness introduces challenges to local customs and traditions. The ability to navigate this tension requires cultural flexibility and openness. Adaptation here becomes a bridge between heritage and the globalized world, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural roots while embracing diversity.

Maintaining cultural authenticity is crucial for preserving the unique identity of communities such as the Tangkhul Nagas celebrating the *Khamor Angkhui* festival in *Asünei* village. This festival serves as a cultural cornerstone, embodying the rich traditions and heritage of the Tangkhul Naga people. The *Khamor Angkhui* festival is a vibrant celebration that harmonizes with the emergence of the new moon in March or April. Initially spanning a week, the festivities now unfold over five days, offering a captivating glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of the community. Commencing with fervor, the first day witnessed the ritual slaughter of animals, setting the tone for the entire festival. The *yarnao* (same age group) play a pivotal role, each having a designated host aligned with their age cohort. This fosters a sense of camaraderie and shared experiences, essential for the festival's communal spirit. Traditional games take center stage, echoing with the laughter and exuberance of participants. Folksongs and folk dances weave through the air, narrating tales of heritage and tradition, ensuring the preservation of cultural identity amid the festivities. Culminating in a crescendo, the final day unfolds with all *yarnao* converging on the fields for fishing and hunting expeditions. This collaborative venture not only symbolizes unity but also harks back to ancestral practices, emphasizing the community's connection with nature. As the day concludes, a grand feast awaits, laden with the fruits of the *yarnao*'s collective efforts. This culinary spectacle not only serves as a feast for the stomach but also nourishes the bonds forged during the week-long celebration. The *Khamor Angkhui* festival not only serves as a cultural celebration to the villagers but also marks a crucial agricultural transition. This festival is deeply rooted in the agrarian lifestyle of the community, signalling the optimal time for the commencement of paddy seed sowing.

The *Khamor Angkhui* festival holds significance in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity among the community members. It acts as a thread connecting generations, transmitting values, rituals, and customs intrinsic to the Tangkhul Naga culture. The celebration becomes a living testament to the resilience and enduring spirit of the community. In the context of the *Atojha Kapang* custom from the *Asünei* village being tied to the *Khamor Angkhui* festival, it exemplifies the interconnectedness of traditions within the broader cultural landscape. This interweaving of customs not only reinforces the cultural fabric but also signifies the dynamic nature of traditions, adapting to the evolving social dynamics while retaining their authenticity. The *Khamor Angkhui* festival becomes a platform for the *Asünei* to showcase their unique art forms, traditional attire, folklore, and culinary delights. The festival's authenticity is paramount in providing an accurate representation of their cultural heritage, allowing outsiders to appreciate and understand the depth of the Tangkhul Naga identity. Moreover, cultural authenticity fosters a sense of pride and self-respect among the community members. By preserving their customs like the *Atojha Kapang* within the context of the *Khamor Angkhui* festival, the Tangkhul Nagas ensure that their cultural narrative remains intact, resisting dilution or distortion. In a globalized world where cultures often face the risk of homogenization, the maintenance of cultural authenticity becomes a means of cultural resistance. The *Khamor Angkhui* festival, rooted in the *Asünei* village

serves as a stronghold against the erosion of Tangkhul Naga traditions, safeguarding their unique identity for future generations.

The *Atojha Kapang* custom in Asünei village is a crucial facet that demands contemporary attention. This ritual is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, reflecting the community's values and traditions. However, the lack of awareness among the youth about its significance poses challenges. The *Atojha Kapang* custom is not merely a traditional practice; it serves as a bridge between generations, connecting the past with the present. Its contemporary relevance lies in fostering a sense of identity and continuity, reinforcing the unique Tangkhul cultural heritage. Asünei village, with its rich history, relies on customs like *Atojha kapang* to preserve its distinctiveness in the face of modern influences. In the fast-paced world, the younger generation may overlook the deeper meanings embedded in such customs. Educating them about the significance of *Atojha Kapang* is essential to ensure the preservation of Tangkhul culture. This custom promotes unity, social cohesion, and a shared sense of responsibility which are vital aspects in navigating the challenges of the present. Moreover, the *Atojha Kapang* custom embodies values like respect, gratitude, and reciprocity, principles that have the potential to guide the youths in their contemporary lives. By understanding the cultural context of this custom, the youngsters can draw parallels between tradition and the challenges they face, fostering a harmonious integration of the old and the new. Efforts should be made to create platforms for intergenerational dialogue, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from elders to the younger generation. Embracing the *Atojha Kapang* custom can instill a profound sense of pride and belonging among the youths, empowering them to navigate the complexities of modernity without losing touch with their roots. Therefore, *Atojha Kapang* custom in Asünei village is not just a relic of the past but a living tradition with contemporary relevance. Its significance extends beyond the ceremonial aspect, offering valuable lessons for the youths. Preserving and promoting this custom is crucial for sustaining its continued resonance in the dynamic landscape of today.

Conclusion

Atojha Kapang custom in Asuneii village serves as a crucial mechanism for restitution and reconciliation, addressing a husband's wrongdoing towards his wife. This age-old practice plays a pivotal role in restoring harmony within the community by emphasizing accountability and resolution. The significance of this tradition lies in its ability to provide a structured framework for acknowledging and rectifying marital transgressions. By fostering open communication and involving community members, it creates an environment conducive to reconciliation, ensuring that the grievances of the wife are heard and addressed. In promoting reconciliation, *Atojha Kapang* serves as a cultural anchor, reinforcing the values of empathy, understanding, and forgiveness. This practice not only repairs fractured relationships but also acts as a shield, safeguarding the unique heritage and ensuring the continuity of indigenous wisdom through generations.

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