

The Mamoh Taboo and Cultural Beliefs Among the Sangtam Naga

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Abstract: This article explores the cultural beliefs and taboos of the Sangtam tribe, one of the major tribes in Nagaland, India. Residing primarily in the Kiphire and Tuensang districts, the Sangtam people uphold a rich tradition of practices designed to maintain cosmic balance and protect their community from misfortune. The term “Sangtam” reflects their heritage, symbolising their connection to elevated living structures. Central to their customs are strict taboos (mamoh) concerning various aspects of life, especially regarding the treatment of animals and plants. These taboos are rooted in their spiritual beliefs and are intended to prevent supernatural justice. The article examines specific taboos related to accidental death, animal sacrifice, and the handling of certain flora, illustrating how these practices continue to shape Sangtam society despite modernisation. Through the lens of taboos, the Sangtam tribe’s efforts to preserve their identity and maintain social harmony are highlighted, emphasising the interplay between tradition and contemporary life. The qualitative research methodology employed a variety of secondary sources, encompassing published and unpublished articles, academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and reputable internet resources, to establish a strong foundation for the investigation. Both the primary data and secondary data were used to study the taboo.

Keywords: Cultural beliefs, Sangtam tribe, taboos, cultural legacy, Mamoh

Introduction

The **Sangtam** is one of the major tribes in Nagaland, living in the two districts of Kiphire and Tuensang in the eastern part of Nagaland, known as frontier Nagaland^{1,2}. The word ‘Sangtam’ is a two-syllable word. The word “Sang” signifies wood, while

“*Tang*” means floor, which means a house built on an elevated platform. They had a superstitious notion at the time that if a ‘Shahfü’ (pangolin) dug a hole inside the house, it was a bad sign for the family. To evade such an animal, they built a wooden floor within the house. There are many theories about the word ‘Sangtam.’ Sangtams observed strict taboos to overcome misfortune and curses and to seek blessings for themselves or their society; they had to follow strict rules. Many of the rules people used to follow about taboos might not be appropriate in the present situation. It is impossible to keep track of all the valuable and relevant activities. However, some practices, such as clan marriage, are still considered taboo and necessary for maintaining kinship structure. The taboo on shifting the boundary stone without the landowner’s permission is still enforced to maintain land demarcation. Taboos connected to death in an accident and incurable sickness are still practiced in relation to Christianity by praying without killing any animals for the grieving relatives and friends.

The Sangtam tribe follows strict taboo (*mamoh*) practices and beliefs. Their cultures, beliefs, and practices are geared toward protecting themselves from danger and maintaining balance in the cosmic order. For the Sangtam, the taboo means an activity that is not permitted or is socially disapproved. Anyone who goes against it suffers severe consequences. According to Jonathan H. Thumra, taboo is “a caution or prohibition against supernatural objects, plants, animals, or human beings who possess manna.” Thus, anything that is believed to be taboo should not be touched, smelled, tasted, or heard, as such an act would lead to automatic supernatural anger and penalty. Countless taboos cover the entire activity of the Sangtam society. It is said that during pregnancy, the husband should not kill any animal, reptile, etc. It was considered taboo to use wild boars’ or tigers’ teeth that have holes in them. A cow or gazal killed by worms or stung by bees is taboo to either touch or kill. A gazal with one black hoof and the other white is taboo to be slaughtered during festivals. A type of snake called ‘merü’ is tabooed by people because it brings death to the family. The strict practice of *the mamoh* taboo is not a random prohibition; however, it is a significant spiritual structure designed to maintain space balance and protect society from supernatural harm. Because they believed that a component of the natural world possessed spiritual power, those who failed to follow the taboos against forbidding objects faced immediate supernatural justice.

Research Methodology and Significant

The qualitative research methodology employed a variety of secondary sources, encompassing published and unpublished articles, academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and reputable internet resources, to establish a strong foundation for the investigation (Cinnirella & Loewenthal, 1999). The study used both primary data and secondary data. The significance of this paper is that, by balancing its sacred traditions with modern life, the Sangtam society keeps its rich heritage alive within Indian culture.

Taboo Regarding Animals

During a woman's pregnancy, her husband should not kill any animal, reptile, etc. When a new domestic animal is born, the entire household observes a taboo, and no stranger is allowed to enter to preserve or dedicate the newborn. Wild boar or tiger teeth with a hole are taboo to use. Blind pigs, chickens, or any other animals are taboo to kill or eat. A cow or gazal killed by worms or stung by bees is taboo to touch or kill. When a pig gives birth to only one piglet, it is taboo to rear it. A gazal with one hoof black and the other hoof white is taboo, and also a black-striped gazal is taboo to slaughter in festivals. The "*Sahfü*" pangolin is taboo to see in daylight. A gazal with a whorl of hair on the forehead and middle of the head is taboo for sacrificial purposes. It is a taboo to kill or use blemished animals, particularly mithun, for a feast of merit or an important celebration. Thus, the observance of taboos applies to all beings, regardless of whether they are human or animal. Otherwise, the owner may face misfortune, such as death or an accident. It is taboo to eat *mamoh shuh*, taboo meat, which is being offered to God during the Mungmung Festival³.

Taboos Related to Plants

A tree struck by lightning/thunder is restricted from being cut, burnt, or even touched. It was taboo to cut down large trees, as it was believed that the spirits dwelled in them unless a priest sanctified them through certain rites. It is a taboo to use agricultural seed for cultivation from the house of people victimised by unnatural deaths, such as maternal death, drowning, being killed by lightning, being killed by animals or stones, etc. It is also taboo to use trees or other objects struck by lightning. The Sangtam Nagas believed that the spirit of God dwelled in trees, plants, animals, birds, and rocks. The Sangtams were headhunters in ancient

times, so they strictly considered it a taboo to engage in sexual intercourse with women for six days before any hunting expedition or before going to war (Thonger, 2006). One must look past the modern scientific lens and understand the animistic worldview of the Sangtam Nagas. In their traditional belief system, taboos are not merely irrational rules; they are highly logical mechanisms designed to maintain equilibrium between the human world and the spiritual and natural realm.

Taboos Related to Sex

Like other tribal societies, the Nagas and Sangtams believed in strict taboos. Sexual relationships are forbidden when a person wants to go fishing, hunting, playing games, or doing anything else that is not related to the relationship. Any sexual intimacy between father and daughter, mother and son, between siblings, and even within the same clan relationship was unthinkable and taboo among the Sangtams. A fine imposed in cash or in kind (animals) as a penalty for adultery is offered to the old folks only, and a bad thing happened to them. Offenders to such taboos were expelled from the village community; there would be a curse on the family and children in the form of abnormal births or a short life. Therefore, before going to war, the warriors maintained abstention from sexual intercourse with their own wives for six days. One who fails to observe this taboo is believed to put them in danger and to invite the enemies' defeat. An engaged girl is forbidden to eat the meat offered as her (pride's) price. Narrating a false history of forefathers or customs is taboo (Sangtam, 2006). The traditional Sangtam, sexual discipline and truth-telling were vital for communal survival. Sexual abstinence before activities like hunting, fishing, or war was required to maintain spiritual focus and purity, as breaking these rules was believed to invite physical danger or military defeat. Severe penalties like fines, banishment, or generational curses for incest prove that strict moral boundaries were essential to protect the community from spiritual contamination.

Taboos Related to Women and Man

Women are not free from observing taboos. A pregnant woman is tabooed from drinking water from yam leaves and not allowed to eat twin bananas. During wars, wives were forbidden to go out, meet others, or even wash their hair. Taboo is also maintained during menstruation and childbirth. It is taboo for women to hunt, climb on the roof, and carry corpses. Women were tabooed from touching spears

and shields, which were used for warfare by menfolk. Women were also forbidden from performing rituals during *mamoh* days, except during *Mungmung* festivals⁴. Women are also tabooed from eating various wild animals and various portions of meat. Menfolk also maintain certain taboos. When his wife is pregnant, the husband is restricted from killing any animals and abstains from eating honey. A warrior, before going to war, abstains from sexual relationships. Men are tabooed from weaving, husking rice, etc. A man who did not bring any enemy heads is forbidden to wear a warrior's dress like 'Rongshü' with cowries and conch shells. An ordinary man should not make a bamboo post to hang an enemy's head near the morung, except for warriors. When killing occurred between brothers or any two families, it was taboo for them to eat food from each other's homes. A man, while proclaiming news, if he made a mistake, or while dancing, if he missed his steps, it is taboo for him. It was also taboo for a man to support his family from his wife's income or earnings. It was taboo for a man not to have more than one wife. It is a taboo to hurt the sentiments of a maternal uncle, as it would cause sickness to the nephew (Longchar, 2013). Strict restrictions on women during pregnancy and menstruation protected vulnerable life stages from spiritual contamination and kept them separate from the male-dominated spheres of hunting and formal ritual. For **men**, taboos enforced an economy of honour and merit; warriors were banned from domestic tasks like weaving and husking, while ordinary men were strictly prohibited from wearing warrior ceremonial objects (tiger teeth, rung shawl, wild boar teeth, and making tattoos on the body) or building head-hunting monuments (Kuhying ko kuh ayehzeh) unless they had earned the social right through battle.

Taboo Related to Death

There are certain taboos regarding death, like women who died during delivery, drowned in the river, committed suicide, smashed or fell down from a tree, had an accident, were struck by lightning, were killed by animals, were stoned, etc., which are taboo. Those dead bodies were not allowed to be brought inside the village; otherwise, they believed that the same accident would again take place in the village. They were buried outside the village. Those who go to pick up such dead bodies are barred from wearing the clothes worn during that time. Mourners mourned outside the village, and the entire household's things were burned or buried, and they rebuilt a new house to restart their lives afresh⁵. The village bans bodies of people who died

unnaturally—like from drowning, accidents, or lightning—because they fear their bad luck or evil spirits will spread to others.

Taboos Related to Children, Youths and Birth

There are certain prohibited birds that children should not eat. There is also a certain portion of meat they should not eat. They are tabooed from having sex before marriage; if not, they will not be granted permission by fellow morung mates to get married. During pregnancy, a woman receives special attention⁶. Even though there are no professional midwives in the community, childbirth is handled by an older woman in the family, or another older woman is summoned to help. Immediately after the delivery, the mother is fed rice, beer, and chicken soup. After the mother and children are bathed, the umbilical cord is cut. Then the placenta of the child is properly washed by the older woman, or generally the father, and buried. For one week, the mother is intensively cared for with a good diet. During that period of time, the husband and the family members observed strict taboos, believing that Satan would call the child, and he would not live long. The taboos relating to this topic are as follows. a) The meat prepared for the mother is not shared with the male members but only with the female members. b) The family members should not go out of the village during these taboo days. c) The new-born baby is not exposed to the fear of the evil eye. d) Outsiders and strangers are not allowed. When the taboo is completed, 6 days for males and 5 days for females, the mother goes out⁷.

Other Taboos

Many other taboos exist: when a family returns from an outing or journey, it is taboo to eat anything before lighting a fire in the house. It is taboo to cook in a new house before the housewarming ceremony; if not, household members will be paralysed. Stripped bamboo cups were taboo to use, and wood with a decaying area was also taboo for carving plates. When women weave clothes, if one part of the shawl is longer or shorter than the other, it is taboo. While making a basket, if a man makes a mistake, it is taboo. It was also taboo to stay in a house struck by lightning or with any goods; they had to destroy all remaining goods, build a new house, and start all over again⁸. We can learn from the passage that the taboos believed and practised by the Sangtam community served as a strict framework for spiritual safety, perfectionism, and maintaining daily peace between the human and the spiritual worlds.

Findings and Discussion

The Sangtams' taboos serve not only as rules of conduct but also as a means of social cohesion. By adhering to these practices, community members reinforce their connection to cultural heritage and collective identity. The observance of taboos is a rite of passage that binds the tribe together and showcases a shared commitment to ancestral traditions. Many of the taboos reflect deep-seated beliefs in the supernatural. The community believes that disobedience to these norms can result in immediate and severe consequences, including misfortune or illness. The fear of supernatural retribution serves as a deterrent against taboo violations, reinforcing behavioral expectations within the society.

Taboos significantly shape daily practices among the Sangtam. For instance, prohibitions concerning animal sacrifice during pregnancy or specific relationships safeguard family well-being and promote a nurturing environment for new life. Additionally, measures are in place to ensure the respectful treatment of animals and plants, emphasizing a harmonious relationship with nature. While many traditional taboos continue to be practiced, some have evolved or become less relevant in contemporary society. The findings suggest a gradual adaptation of practices in response to modernization and intercultural influences. However, core beliefs regarding certain taboos, particularly those related to kinship and land usage, still prevail, underlining their importance in maintaining social structure.

The persistence of specific taboos indicates the tribe's resilience in preserving its cultural identity amidst changing societal dynamics. The commitment to maintain these practices speaks to the Sangtam tribe's dedication to their heritage, ensuring that future generations understand and appreciate their cultural significance. The interplay between Christianity and traditional beliefs is noteworthy. Many taboos related to death and mourning practices have coexisted with Christian practices, illustrating a unique blending of spirituality that respects both indigenous and modern faiths.

Conclusion

The Sangtam tribe's adherence to taboos reflects a deep-rooted cultural framework that reinforces their identity and social cohesion. These practices, deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs, serve as protective measures against perceived supernatural dangers while promoting respect for the natural world. Despite the challenges

posed by modernization and external influences, many of the Sangtams' traditional taboos remain revered, especially those related to kinship, land, and sacred rites. The observance of these taboos not only preserves their cultural heritage but also fosters a sense of community and continuity within the tribe. As society evolves, it is crucial to recognize the significance of these practices in understanding the Sangtam identity and their contributions to the diverse mosaic of Indian culture. The balance between tradition and modernity remains pivotal in ensuring the survival and flourishing of the Sangtam tribe's rich cultural legacy.

Notes

1. Frontier Nagaland is a region comprising the eastern districts of Kiphire, Longleng, Mon, Noklak, Shamator, and Tuensang of the Indian state of Nagaland.
2. Bouchery, P., & Sangtam, L. (2012). The kinship terminology of the Sangtam Nagas. *European bulletin of Himalayan research*, 41, 9-29.
3. Interview Tsipongchem Chungto pungyung , Chimonger
4. Interview , Thsatsa, Chimonger Village
5. Interview, Akhamong , Chungtor khel, Chimonger
6. J. H Thumra, " The Primal Religious Tradition in North east India.
7. Interview, Litsa, GB
8. Interview, Tsipongchem, Ex-Village Council Chairman

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