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## **Explicating the Dynamics of Gender Representation in the Practices of Headhunting and War of the Tangkhul Nagas**

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**Abstract:** The paper intends to study gender representation in the practices of headhunting and war of the Tangkhuls Nagas. Unlike the misconstrued conception of the practice given by the colonial ethnographers, the Tangkhuls never literally go for hunting human heads but a warrior brings the head to prove that he is the victor. The practices of headhunting and war are intricately linked in the context of the Tangkhuls. Despite the pivotal roles played by Tangkhul women in war and headhunting practices of the tribe the patriarchy deliberately downplayed the status of women as inferior to that of a man. The women are categorically sidelined and shunned from the defense system of the village. In such patriarchal society that glorifies the practice as an honourable act of men, Tangkhul women have to yield under the artificial protection of men ungrudgingly forgoing her freedom and rights.

**Keywords:** Tangkhul Nagas, headhunting, war, gender role, patriarchy

The Tangkhul Naga is a small ethnic group who resides in Ukhrul district of Manipur. The hilly terrains of the Tangkhuls span over 1823 sq. miles. The northern side of the district is surrounded by Nagaland and the Mao Hills, on the south by the Sardar Hills and Imphal valley, on the east by the Kabo valley of Myanmar and in the west by Tengnoupal hills (Arokianathan 1982, x). The Tangkhuls do not have a written record since the script, believed to be written in a scroll of hide, was believed to have been eaten by a dog. In the absence of written account one has to heavily depend on the oral tales to look at the past – be it social, cultural and religious practices of the tribe.

Colonial ethnographers have always tagged the practice of headhunting as an act of savagery without trying to understand its cultural significance. They distort the practice to be an act where a man is always on the look out to chop off another man's head. The observation given by the colonial ethnographers in the context of the Tangkhuls is a misnomer because the tribe never literally goes for hunting human heads. Unlike Ibans<sup>1</sup> and Ilongots<sup>2</sup> who practiced headhunting in association with economic and religious reason, the Tangkhuls do not resort to headhunting in isolation of war. To study the headhunting practices of the Nagas or the Tangkhuls in particular, one has to understand the nature of relationship between headhunting and war. The Tangkhuls are warlike people; yet this does not mean that the people did not value friendship between villages or that there were constant inter-village wars. They only resort to war when a peaceful negotiation could not be achieved. A.S.W. Shimray (2001) detests the British ethnographers for construing the Tangkhuls as headhunters:

History is full of incidences how soldiers collected the heads of fallen enemies, yet they are not called headhunters. This derogatory term has been applied to tribes such as the Nagas because they procured human

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<sup>1</sup> Ibans resides Sarawak of Malaysia. The tribe practice headhunting in association with taking prisoners and use them for ransom and sale.

<sup>2</sup> Ilongots are the inhabitants of Sierra Madre; in Southern Philippines. The tribe has a ritual that involves human heads. Therefore whenever the ritual is to take place, the men go for hunting human heads.

heads fallen in the war. This is the wrong approach of people to Naga war and they are wrongly branded as head hunters. (172)

The practice of Tangkhuls is primarily not to hunt human heads. The cutting of human heads, however, is merely a proof that they have defeated their enemies and that they are the victors, as A.S.W. Shimray says:

According to the nature of the Naga war, how can the society know that a warrior kills the enemy without the head of enemy being produced by him? Therefore, collection of the enemy heads killed in the war was a must for a Naga warrior to testify his achievement of killing the enemy in war. (170)

In this regard Hutton (1921) also comments:

What man or at least what Naga, who has killed his enemy, does not want to boast about it? And unless he can show the body, where is the proof?... If the slayer can produce the body of the slain, his statement is likely to be accepted as true, and since retrieving the body would be laborious, not to say often dangerous, proceeding the head is the natural part of it to bring back as testimony as it gives a definite assurance that the foe has been killed, not scotched. (157-58)

The practice of head hunting among the Tangkhuls is visibly a way of undermining the status of women. The infamous practice which is an expression of bravery and manliness posits women and children to be protected at all times. Children and women are the privileged people who stay within the, so called, secure protection of men. Throughout the year, women enjoy such protection whether at home or in the paddy field. Since women and children are well protected, the man who manages to hunt a woman's or a child's head is considered a true hero. At the surface level, women are placed in a privileged position where men serve to their needs out of care and respect. But the same

protection which women enjoy becomes a testament of their inferiority. It purports that women cannot survive or protect herself in men's domain of violence which is a sign of manliness. The practice is a clear discrimination on the basis of biological distinction that infers women are physically inferior. Thus, the protection which women receive is not out of respect or care but it is a way of patronizing them. Kapai (2011) puts forward the mechanism of headhunting as:

I find the headhunting custom as instrumental in perpetuating male domination. The seemingly privileged “protected” position of women becomes their ultimate undoing. The pretense of protection and at times real defense undertaking act as a key agency of subordination. It is not surprising then that women are not totally shut out of defense system. And women have no say at all in the matters of security. The logic seems simple: women should repose unconditional confidence on men for their safety and of course women should not earn the confidence of defending themselves. (99)

The social practices of the Tangkhul where boys can visit *Ngalalong* (girls dormitory) and the girls being prohibited from visiting *Longshim* (boys dormitory) is also a deliberate act that demeans the status of a woman in that Longshim is where teaching-learning of war techniques and strategies take place. And by shunning the girls from the place is to deprive them of the defense system of the village. Another similar practice is the prohibition imposed on women in touching war weapons which in fact is a superstitious belief that feeds the notion of women being an inferior being.

Contrary to the belief of the society, Tangkhul folktales depict the character of a woman having the ability to contend the domain of men through her intellect. Harkonla, in the famous tale of “Kalhang Langzarwui Khararchan”, triumphed against the men of Kalhang village through her meticulous warfare tactic. According to the tale, Harkonla's buffalo, of Marem village, was killed and eaten by Langzar of Kalhang village. When Harkonla came to Langzar to claim her animal, he bluntly denied through an act of ignorance. As a vengeance, Harkonla

also killed Langzar's Mithun (species of buffalo) when it came to Marem village. When Langzar came to Marem village in search of his Mithun, she offered him the meat and served *khore* (rice beer) where she had dipped her skirt in it. In Tangkhul custom, touching a girl's clothes is associated with humiliation and she deliberately offered the *khore* to humiliate him. Since there could be no negotiation, they decided to settle through war. The side of Kalhang village was aided by the famous warrior Raihao, of Phungcham village. Horkonla fully knew that her village could not confront the adversary if they just contend with physical force. So she came up with an intricate scheme. Following her tactic, the woman of Marem village smeared dog's blood on a pot and shouted "we have gained this side and Raihao had been defeated." The proclamation sent a sense of fear to Langzar who was fighting at the other side. Eventually he was captured and executed (Arokianathan 1982, 43-59).

During inter village feuds or war, the Tangkhul women have a larger part to take on. During such intense fights when deaths are inevitable, women act as the mediator and put a halt to the conflict. The obligation of the mediator can be executed only by a specific group of women called the 'Phukhareilas'.<sup>3</sup> Such women come with 'luke'<sup>4</sup> on their heads and iron staffs on their hands. It is against the customary laws of the Tangkhuls to hurt or offend the 'Phukhareilas'. Therefore when such women come to the spot, the fight has to be stopped automatically. R.R. Shimray highlights the role of Phukhareila in the succeeding lines as:

The Phukhareila could not be harmed as a rule. She was highly respected for neutrality and they were called as the Ambassadors of peace. In the bygone days when headhunting was practiced, these Phukhareila played a vital role in saving the lives of men. (169)

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<sup>3</sup> They are the women who have come and settled in the warring villages in virtue of their marriages.

<sup>4</sup> A basket made of bamboo.

If Tangkhul women have important obligation during the war and also have such potential of aiding the men in their war strategies, why should they be categorically undermined and deliberately be shunned away?

Alan Dundes examines why women are excluded in games and war. In war combat and game, men try to prove their manliness while they try to feminize their opponent. That is the reason why the losers are tagged with the word ‘chicken’ to mean weak and effeminate. The purpose of the combat then is to decide “who will force whom into a passive, female role.” If men try to feminize each other, it will be ignoble to include actual women in their group:

If the object of the game is to feminize one’s opponent, then one could not possibly have women on the opposing front line, inasmuch as much as they are already *female*, the whole point is to make the opposing males into females, symbolically speaking. In terms of male honor codes, if one’s women are on the front lines, there would be terrible risk of having them “penetrated” by the enemy, which would also be a disgrace. (37)

In the headhunting practice, it is not only the honour but the obstinacy of men that finds equality of men and women unacceptable. Headhunting is too sacrosanct a practice to include the participation of women.

It is often debated that Naga tribes living under constant care of imminent war is a superficial notion without any concrete facts. If war or headhunting was so rampant, as believed, there could be no intermarriages or interrelationship between villages. However, the folk literatures of Tangkhuls point out many instances of intermarriages as well as cordial inter-village relationships. There were only a few instances of war or headhunting being recorded by the British ethnographers. Even the folktales of Tangkhul have comparatively less tales that talk about war and headhunting. The question, then, arises why the belief of rampant war and headhunting? The element of fear comes handy for the patriarchy society to assert dominance.

The rule of ‘Big Brother’ over the ‘Proles’ in Orwell’s *1984* is largely based on the element of fear. The Inner Party under the leadership of ‘Big Brother’ declares a constant ongoing war. The bomb that is heard from time to time is to justify the war while in actuality Oceania does not wage war against Eastasia or Eurasia. The everyday “Two Minutes Hate” expresses their hatred towards “Goldstein” while expressing their gratitude towards BIG BROTHER (334). The proclamation of the ongoing war and the origination of the artificial enemy, Emmanuel Goldstein, is a way to acquire dominance over the people of Oceania. In their veneration of the war and their hatred towards Goldstein, their loyalty towards the PARTY is strengthened. The concept of Emmanuel Goldstein and BIG BROTHER are similar in that they are both psychological in nature. By spreading the ‘false consciousness,’ the dominant class rules over the subordinate class of citizenry. The patriarchy society of Tangkhul, living under constant fear of war, successfully ingrains the need for security in the minds of the people or women to be more specific. When the sense of fear is strongly rooted, the Tangkhul women willingly submit under the protection of men. Just as ‘Big Brother’ falsely stands out as the saviour of Oceania, the men become the saviour of women. In such a way, a society based on hegemonic structure is established where men is the dominant class and women the subjugated.

Tangkhul being a casteless and classless society, the condition of woman is much better off compared to other caste stricken societies of India. She enjoys certain rights and privileges and actively participates at the domestic as well as community level. This, however, is merely an outward observation because in a society that validates ‘headhunting’ it is more honourable to be born as a boy rather than a girl. The praxis behind the garb of rights and privileges survives the shackled life sanctioned by the patriarchal system.



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