
Gender Dynamic and the Socio-Cultural status of Women in the Shertukpen tribe

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Abstract

This study delves into the gender dynamics and socio-cultural status of women within the Shertukpen tribe, a community acknowledged as migrants from Tibet, presently settled in five distinctive villages in the West Kameng district. Affiliated with the Tibeto-Mongoloid clan, the Shertukpen society intricately balances the esteemed position of women with a nuanced participation in administrative affairs that remains nominal. While administrative involvement may exhibit limitations, Shertukpen women revel in unhindered engagement during myriad festivals. Remarkably, they experience no seclusion from special gatherings or public amusements, signifying a cultural openness towards women's active participation in communal celebrations. The liberty extended to them for unrestricted movement and reciprocal visits enhances their socio-cultural autonomy.

This research sheds light on the delicate equilibrium between tradition and progress within the Shertukpen community, highlighting the commendable status accorded to women in ceremonial contexts. The study aims to unravel the subtleties of women's roles in Shertukpen society, emphasizing both the societal esteem and the evolving dynamics that shape their cultural experiences.

Keywords: Shertukpen tribe, Gender dynamics, Socio-cultural status, Women's participation, Cultural autonomy.

Introduction:

The Shertukpen community, recognized as migrants from Tibet and affiliated with the Tibeto-Mongoloid clan, has established residence in five distinct villages within the West Kameng district—Rupa, Jigaon, Shergaon, Thongri, and Doimara. Traditionally engaged in trading and bartering, the Shertukpens have cultivated economic interactions not only with neighboring tribes but also with the Assamese populace.

Synonyms, Sub-class, Exogamous Clans:

In contrast to certain communities, the Shertukpens lack a synonymous term, with the very appellation "Shertukpen" encapsulating a profound meaning—'newly thrown,' settling after a clash (Sher - New, Tukpen - Clash/Thrown away). Insights gleaned from the present ethnographic study and earlier reports by R. R. P. Sharma (1988) reveal a stratification into sub-classes (Thong, Chhaos, and Yanlos) and exogamous clans (Thongdok, Thonga, Krime).

Migration Account:

The origins of the Shertukpens trace back to Tibet, and their migration narrative intertwines with historical events. The Tibetan King Be Srongtsen Gompo, residing in Devalajari, Lhasa, entered into matrimony with a daughter of an Ahomese (Assamese) king subsequent to the demise of his Tibetan queen Be Mu Za. This union yielded two sons, JabdungNgowangNamje and Japtang Bura. Following King Be Srongtsen Gompo's demise, the elder son, JabdungNgowangNamje, ascended the throne, resulting in the expulsion of his younger brother, Japtang Bura.

Japtang Bura's odyssey led him to Khoina, where conflicts with neighboring tribes, namely the Akas and Mijis, ensued. The narrative unfolds as King Japtang Bura arrived in Thongthu (Rupa) with a substantial retinue of porters and servants, who became his adherents. The descendants of the king are now designated as Thongs, while the progeny of the porters are recognized as Chhaos (Sharma 1961:7). This historical chronicle forms an indispensable backdrop to the cultural and social tapestry of the Shertukpen community.

Social, Cultural and Religious Life of the Shertukpens

The Shertukpen society is based on a fundamental division into two classes-

1. Thongs (upper class): The Thongs are regarded as the descendant of the Lhasa King's third son Japtang Bura and form the aristocracy.

2. Chhaos (lower class): The Chhaos are considered to be the progeny of the porters and servants who accompanied Japtang Bura on his way south to Rupa.

The social fabric of Shertukpen society is intricately woven with a foundational dichotomy into two distinct classes: the Thongs, representing the aristocracy, and the Chhaos, denoting the lower class. The Thongs, esteemed as the descendants of Japtang Bura, the third son of the Lhasa King, hold a position of prominence, exercising a dominant influence over the lower strata of society, comprised of the Chaos and Yanlos.

While obedience to the Thongs is a societal norm for the Yanlos and Chhaos, there exists an absence of prohibitions on inter-dining or inter-drinking among these classes. Remarkably, there are no discernible disparities in dress, lifestyle, or physical features, although economic disparities persist within each class. Generally, the standard of living for the Yanlos and Chaos tends to be lower than that of the Thongs. The Chhaos, further, are often employed as workers by the Thongs when the need arises.

In matters of matrimony, the Thongs adhere to stringent guidelines, disallowing unions between Thong girls and Chhao or Yanlo boys. Such unions are feasible but incur a substantial fine imposed upon the groom's family, payable to the village council. During Thong funerals, the Chhaos affiliated with the deceased Thong undertake the responsibility of washing the deceased, wrapping the body in new cloth, and conducting the cremation. In acknowledgment of their service, the Chhaos receive a nominal token gift of five rupees and partake in a feast. Unlike the Thongs, the Chhaos enjoy some leniency in dietary restrictions, permitting them to consume mithun flesh, a prohibition for the Thongs. While it is conceivable for a Chhao to assume roles as a Jiji (tribal priest) or a Lama, the associated regulations are more stringent in their case. During religious ceremonies, the Chhaos are expected to position themselves behind the Thongs, adhering to a hierarchical seating arrangement reflective of their societal status. This intricate interplay of social classes and their associated customs delineates the distinctive tapestry of the Shertukpen social, cultural, and religious milieu.

Life-Cycle Rituals

Family Structure in Shertukpen Society:

The fabric of Shertukpen families is inherently patriarchal, with the father assuming the pivotal role as the family's head. In the event of his demise, the mantle of leadership seamlessly transitions to his eldest son. Joint families are a prevalent arrangement among brothers, where the father's influence remains paramount, and his decisions typically hold sway in all family matters. Other senior members of the family also contribute to its overall maintenance.

Remarkably, the Shertukpen community does not practice polyandry or polygamy. While engaging in extramarital relationships is socially disapproved, a certain leniency towards sexual morality is observable within the community. Notably, divorce rates are not disproportionately high, and the societal norms permit the remarriage of widows.

In essence, the Shertukpen family structure is characterized by a patriarchal hierarchy, joint family arrangements, and a balance between traditional values and a nuanced perspective on certain aspects of personal relationships.

Marriage Practices Among the Shertukpen: A Societal Framework

Marriage alliances among the Shertukpen community involve diverse processes, predominantly negotiated by parents. Class endogamy and clan exogamy serve as foundational elements in their marital system. The society embraces both parallel and cross-cousin marriages, with unions between the son of the mother's brother and the daughter of the father's sister considered ideal.

Unique methods, such as marriage by service, are employed when the girl's father lacks male assistance in the fields. Marriage by exchange, albeit uncommon, and the occasional resort to capture marriages underscore the flexibility in their matrimonial practices.

The Shertukpen practice levirate and sororate marriages in the event of a husband's death, with widow marriages also deemed permissible. Monogamy prevails as the norm, with polygamy and polyandry absent. Notably, young individuals exhibit a distinctive practice of sleeping separately at night upon reaching puberty, fostering opportunities for courtship and mate selection.

Marriage ceremonies involve elaborate negotiations, with the groom's friends orchestrating the bride's arrival through a symbolic show of force. The subsequent negotiation process, involving a go-between and consultations with a lama, culminates in a formal ceremony marked by exchanges of presents.

Divorce, though uncommon, occurs on grounds such as disobedience, misconduct, adultery, domestic discord, desertion, and issues related to fertility. In cases of divorce initiated by the wife, the return of the bride price to the groom's family is a requisite. The societal intricacies of Shertukpen marriages reflect a blend of tradition and adaptability, shaping a unique matrimonial landscape.

Position of women in the society:

In Shertuken society, the position of women is esteemed, yet their participation in administrative affairs remains nominal. Despite this, women enjoy unrestricted engagement in a myriad of festivals, and they are not secluded from special gatherings or public amusements. Furthermore, they possess the liberty to traverse freely and visit each other.

Within the context of marriage customs among the Shertukpen people, women are accorded a high status. The initiation of matrimonial alliances involves the father of the prospective groom formally requesting the hand of the bride from her father. Diverging from the dowry system prevalent in the plains, the Shertukpen people adhere to a bride-price system, wherein the father of the groom assumes the responsibility of remunerating a substantial price for the bride.

Regrettably, societal norms in Shertuken society impose certain limitations on women concerning religious matters. Their involvement in religious rites is virtually non-existent, as it is strictly prohibited for them to officiate as priests. This restrictive aspect delineates a notable disparity in the religious domain, contrasting with the relatively elevated status women enjoy in other facets of Shertuken societal dynamics.

In the broader societal context, Shertuken women enjoy an equitable status with men, standing nearly on par in social interactions. An illustrative example of societal harmony is evident in the approach towards unwed pregnancies. In instances where a girl becomes pregnant before marriage and the responsible boy declines matrimony, other members of the society willingly step forward to wed the girl. Astonishingly, these individuals not only embrace the girl into the groom's family but also accord her respect for the resolute decision she made, thereby exemplifying a commendable degree of societal acceptance and support.

Throughout the phases of sowing and harvesting, women in Shertuken society actively contribute to their husbands' agricultural endeavors. In domestic spheres, they engage in rigorous tasks, with primary responsibilities encompassing culinary duties, grain processing through

pounding and shifting, as well as the procurement of fuel from the jungle. This industrious involvement underscores their commitment to the household's functioning.

Characterized by a conservative disposition, women in Shertuken society harbor a preference for the preservation of familial patterns and traditions, displaying a reluctance toward embracing change. Despite this inclination, they consistently exhibit gentle-heartedness and amiability. Their cheerful demeanor and modest comportment render them particularly appealing. Open and forthright in their interactions, women readily partake in conversations, fostering an atmosphere of sociability.

Birth Ceremonies in Shertukpen Culture: An Intimate Tapestry of Rituals:

The journey into parenthood within Shertukpen culture unveils a series of nuanced rituals, underscoring the profound significance attached to the arrival of a new life. While the pregnancy stage itself does not entail specific rituals, a poignant exception arises if the expectant mother has previously experienced a miscarriage. In such instances, the family invites a lama to their home to perform sacred recitations, including texts like Tashi Chekpa, Drolma, and Chiluit. This ritual is believed to ward off the influence of five malevolent spirits that may afflict the pregnant woman, ensuring a safeguarded pregnancy.

The third night post childbirth marks a pivotal moment in the familial landscape. The father extends a heartfelt invitation to a lama, a revered figure in these ceremonies. Local beer, known as fock-jong, is offered as a gesture of hospitality. The lama assumes a crucial role in casting the child's horoscope and assigning a name, bestowing both identity and cosmic alignment. The ceremonial recitation of the "Sang" text follows, accompanied by the "Serkem" rite, a fervent prayer for the child's well-being.

This intricate tapestry of rituals reaches a poignant crescendo when, post-ceremonies, the mother introduces the newborn to the world. The symbolic act of venturing outdoors marks the child's inaugural connection with the natural realm, embodying hope, blessings, and the promise of a flourishing life within the embrace of Shertukpen cultural traditions.

Attire and Ornaments in Shertukpen Culture: A Symphony of Style and Tradition

In the captivating realm of Shertukpen culture, attire and ornaments converge as a vibrant expression of identity, seamlessly blending functionality with aesthetic allure. Rooted in an astute understanding of local weather conditions, the Shertukpen attire embodies both practicality and a rich visual tapestry, particularly during formal occasions.

Women's Attire:

The sartorial elegance of Shertukpen women manifests in loose and sleeveless shirts, gracefully draping the body from shoulders to knees. Enhancing this foundational garment, women occasionally don small, full-sleeved coats crafted from cotton, adorned with intricate embroidery using colored cotton threads. A captivating interplay of colors unfolds on these formal occasions, a testament to the community's penchant for vibrant expressions.

Embodying a harmonious fusion of tradition and contemporary flair, women adorn themselves with a colored sash, locally known as "mukhak," elegantly cinched around the waist. This sash, a distinctive cultural emblem, becomes a canvas for personal expression. Its upper end is artfully fastened below the knee using thread or bead strings, while the lower end cascades freely, gracefully draping down to the ankle. This meticulous attention to detail in women's attire not only reflects the cultural aesthetics of the Shertukpen people but also serves as a visual ode to the seamless integration of tradition into their daily lives.



A Shertukpen lady in her traditional attire with the kid

Young girls cut their hair in round shape. When, however, they get a little older, they let it grow long and fall over their face so as to act as a sort of veil. This is thought to be very attractive. After marriage or after the birth of a child, girls tie up their hair at the back of the head in a loose bun, just above the nape of the neck.

Adornments of Affluence: The Opulent Tradition of Ornaments in Shertukpen Society

In the tapestry of Shertukpen society, ornaments weave a narrative of prosperity and affluence, adorning individuals as symbols of their wealth and thriving cultural heritage. These embellishments, with their intrinsic cultural significance, find a prominent place during festive celebrations and social engagements, elevating the visual allure of the wearer.

Women's Ornate Elegance:

The adornment of Shertukpen women is a spectacle of bead necklaces, each strand a testimony to local craftsmanship and artistry. These necklaces, diverse in varieties and hues, become a kaleidoscopic display of cultural richness. Embracing their wrists, women wear bangles and rings, meticulously crafted by melting rupee coins. The allure of silver lockets and brooches, acquired from local markets, further accentuates their elegance, creating a harmonious blend of tradition and contemporary aesthetics.

Secrecy and Valuables:

For the affluent elite endowed with valuable ornaments, a discreet practice unfolds. A portion of their prized possessions finds sanctuary in concealed recesses within the jungle. These clandestine repositories, known exclusively to the owners and their inheritors, serve as a safeguard for the family's wealth. This practice reflects not only a pragmatic approach to safeguarding valuables but also underscores the esteemed legacy attached to these precious ornaments.

In the intricate details of these ornaments, Shertukpen society articulates its cultural opulence, where each piece becomes a shimmering thread in the rich tapestry of their heritage.



Hair decorated ornament

Traditional bead necklace



Bangle

Pendant

Guardians of Opulence: Concealing Valuables in Shertukpen Society

Within the stratified echelons of Shertukpen society, a discreet tradition unfolds among the affluent elite who possess coveted ornaments. This practice, born out of a nuanced understanding of wealth preservation, entails the concealment of a portion of their prized possessions in clandestine locations within the jungle's embrace. The secrecy surrounding these hidden caches is a testament to the meticulous measures taken to safeguard the family's wealth and cultural heritage.

A Veil of Secrecy:

These concealed repositories, carefully tucked away in the heart of the jungle, become enigmatic vaults known solely to the discerning owners and their chosen heirs. The deliberate choice of such remote locations ensures that the treasures remain shielded from prying eyes and external threats. The act of secrecy elevates the intrinsic value of these possessions, transforming them into more than mere ornaments; they become custodians of familial legacy and affluence.

An Inheritance of Privilege:

This discreet practice extends beyond mere concealment; it establishes a sacred bond between generations. Only the privileged sons, selected as rightful heirs, are entrusted with the knowledge of these hidden treasures. The act of inheritance transcends the material realm, becoming a conduit for the transmission of familial prosperity and the cultural significance encapsulated within each ornament. In the subtleties of this practice, Shertukpen society unveils a nuanced understanding of wealth, blending the tangible allure of ornaments with the intangible legacy of cultural opulence.

Culmination: Upheld Dignity and Influence of Shertukpen Women in Hilly Terrains

In the undulating landscapes of Shertukpen villages, the societal tapestry weaves a narrative where the positioning and magnanimity afforded to women transcend the challenging topography. The women of every household emerge as pivotal architects of familial decisions, their influence resonating far beyond the confines of domesticity.



Elevated Status and Empowerment:

Contrary to the geographical constraints of hilly terrains, Shertukpen women perennially occupied an elevated and esteemed status within their families. Their roles extended beyond traditional domestic spheres, assuming a profound significance in shaping familial destinies. The decision-making matrix within each household bore the imprint of women's wisdom and sagacity.

Resolute Pillars of Society:

In the broader social construct, Shertukpen women carved out a niche for themselves, securing a revered and respected position. The societal fabric, woven with the threads of gender equity, acknowledged and celebrated the vital contributions of women. Their influence was not merely familial; it extended into the communal tapestry, underscoring their role as resolute pillars of societal cohesion.

A Paradigm of Gender Respect:

The Shertukpen society emerges as a beacon of gender respect, where women's voices resonated with authority and their presence was integral to the cultural ethos. The nuanced interplay of tradition and progress renders Shertukpen women as torchbearers of a legacy where dignity, influence, and respect converged seamlessly.

In the panoramic vistas of Shertukpen existence, the women stand tall, not confined by the challenges of hilly terrains but rather thriving amidst them, embodying resilience, influence, and the enduring spirit of empowerment.

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