

Role of Women in Angami Naga Culture: A Case Study of Southern Angami of Nagaland

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Abstract

This paper examines the various activities the angami naga women participate and contribute as part of their culture. Though women have a relatively high participation rate in terms of farming, there was certain culture related to men which is untouchable by women. The objective of the study is to highlight the importance of the role of women in the angami society. It is found that women participation in social activities is very less and restrictive decades ago but the modern society has seen that the angami women is playing an influential role in almost all the cultural life. This study exhibits that majority of the modern angami parents are indifferent to male and female child.

Keywords: Women, angami, gender, culture.

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Introduction

In the traditional angami society, activities are segregated between male and female. Activities like bamboo crafts, wood crafts and wood carving, handicrafts, blacksmiths, hunting with guns, spears and shields, arrow and bows, cutting woods for timber, chopping firewoods, etc are considered as part of men culture, whereas activities like cooking, knitting, weaving, embroidery, collecting sticks for fire, carrying water, making rice beers, thrashing rice, cleaning rice, sweeping, washing, carrying eatable goods while going to and coming from fields, etc are considered as part of women culture. Women are not even allowed to attend decision making meetings related to the village.

Though women takes a central place when it comes to family and farming activities for sufficiency but their role were fairly limited when it comes to decision making and participation in the angami society in olden days. Since angami community is a patriarchal society, the primary focused is on male members and female were given the secondary role. Sivakumar and Manimekalai (2021) has pointed out that women behave in self-limiting ways not because they are socialized as females but because they are locked into a lack of decision-making power, invisibility, multiple roles in the gender injustice society. Kishor & Gupta (2004) viewed that average women in India were disempowered absolutely and there have been little change in their empowerment over time.

With the onset of Christianity and modern education, the role of women is more or less recognized in the society because the culture is such that without women, the cultural activities come to a standstill. Maddock and Parkin (1993) in their work "Gender cultures: Women's choices and strategies at work" found that gender cultures affect both men and women's decisions and behaviour at work.

In Naga society “Women are not permitted to inherit any immovable property. J. H. Hutton (1969) writes “A men cannot leave real property to his daughter”. If the man does not have a male heir, the next of him (male) could claim the property with the clan. Lasetso (2009) in her work “A Search for Values in the life of the traditional Angami Naga women” showed that women status in the society are lower to that of men but women enjoy the privilege of inheriting particular category of property transmitted or handed over in matrilineal line, mother to daughter. Women are not entitled to inherit ancestral property.

Though there is the presence of gender inequality there are instances where the role of women is inevitable. Lasetso (2009) remarked that traditionally, some rituals were assigned to women with roles such as *Liedepfü* (the first reaper) who is usually the oldest women in the village and her role as *Liedepfü* corresponded with her counterpart, the *Tsakro* (the first sower). The *Tsakro* inaugurate the sowing of the seed and the role of *Liedepfü* is to reap the first harvest. The day is observed as *Genna* for the whole village and for the next day people go and start the harvest which was associated with feasting. This indicates the *Liedepfü* and *Tsakro* played a significant role in the sowing and reaping context in agriculture of the traditional Angami society.

Angami Naga women also take active parts in certain ceremonies and rituals where men are not allowed. One such ceremony is called *Kikenyü* where women take active part during the harvest season. The first harvest ceremony will be done for “*Pepou Pelou*” (multiplication). In this the women will split the first paddy with her finger nails and put in the pot. Women test the first harvest. The belief is that they will have abundant rice for the whole year.

Women are considered as Healers or Diviners called *Terhope* which literally means “God’s Bridge”. They were gifted with ability to communicate with the spirit and acted as bridges between the world of the spirits and the people. They also have the ability to interpret dreams and to dream dreams for seekers. They were known to go into trances in which they provide interpretation of treasons for that especially un-natural death, untimely death and so on. They also act as healers and as healers they give their prescription which could involve animal sacrifices, shedding of blood of animals and other rights recommended by them. Women who possess such gifts are given recognition in the society.

Marriages are arranged by the parents of both the groom and bride, however girls have the freedom to choose whom she wants to marry. From the positive points prior to marriage the girl is moulded, guided and she is prepared for her marriage. The first marriage proposal is brought by the women or spinsters and even on the day of marriage, one woman along with one virgin will accompany the bride to the groom where the bride will carry along her pitcher of *Zu* (Rice beer) (Lasetso, 2009).

J. H. Hutton (1969) in his book *The Angami Naga* pointed out that divorce is allowed and is common. Incompatibility and temperament is the chief reason. Our women cannot leave her husband until more than five days after the marriage has elapsed. If she does so, her husband can keep all her properties. Otherwise the women takes her properties away with her unless she is unfaithful or makes another arrangement to marry another man while under her husband’s roof in which cases she forfeits the property brought as dowry.

Infidelity on the part of the man is not a ground for divorce, but if a man arranges to marry another woman before divorcing his wife, the latter is entitled to a cow and a *Dhuli of Dhan* as compensation.

In the Angami Naga traditions, it is mostly the women who mourn over the death body, and even for the funeral rites, if there exist no heir to make ritual for husbands/father, then the wife/daughters can take the place of performing the last funeral rites Lasetso (2009).

2. Objectives

The main objectives of the study are to focus on gender participation and various attitudes to cultural exposure and also to analyse the position of parents towards gender equality.

3. Data collection and methodology

The primary data have been collected through a survey using questionnaire adopting random sampling method with a sample size of 300 respondents comprising of 50 percent male and 50 percent female from twelve southern angami villages under Kohima district. Further, from a group of 150 male and 150 female respondents, 50 percent are below the age of 50 years and 50 percent are above 50 years of age. A percentage method is used to draw comparisons.

4. Results and analysis

According to the 2011 Census, Nagaland Population is 1978502 consisting of 10,24,649 Male, 9,53 853 Female. In Kohima district, total population is 2,67,988 comprising of 1,38,966 male and 1,29,022 female.

Table No. 1: Distribution of workers by category wise in Nagaland (2001 & 2011 census)

Categories	Persons		Male		Female		Percentage of women workers	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
Cultivators	548845	420379	270927	208221	277918	212158	50.64	50.47
Agricultural labourers	30907	22571	15985	12899	14922	9672	48.28	42.85
Workers in household industries	21873	9525	9193	4731	12680	4794	57.97	50.33
Other workers	246171	288704	192863	216353	53308	72351	21.65	25.06
Total workers	847796	741179	488968	442204	358828	298975	42.32	40.34

Source: Statistical Handbooks of Nagaland

The above table shows the percentage of workers category wise that is cultivators, agricultural labourers, workers in household industries and other workers according to 2001 and 2011 census. In 2001 and 2011 the number of women workers as cultivators and workers in household industries was more than the men workers and the percentage stood at 50.64 and 50.47 respectively for cultivators and 57.97 and 50.33 respectively for Workers in household industries. In categories such as agricultural labourers and other workers the numbers of women workers were lesser than the men workers.

Table No. 2: Distribution of workers by category wise in Kohima district (2011 census)

Categories	Persons	Male	Female	Percentage of women workers
Cultivators	38017	16525	21492	56.53
Agricultural labourers	911	507	404	44.35
Workers in household industries	1131	622	509	45
Other workers	59349	43185	16164	27.24
Total workers	99408	60839	38569	38.80

Source: Statistical Handbooks of Nagaland

Table 2 shows that women cultivators are more than male cultivators at 56.53% which is higher than the state percentage also. While in other categories like agricultural labourers, workers in household industries and other workers, female are much lesser than male workers.

Case Study

For the purpose of this study, a set of ten indicators were used to analyse the status of women for past and present and their involvement in the society.

Table No. 3: Status of women in Southern Angami Naga

	Indicators	Female						Male					
		Below 50 years of age			Above 50 years of age			Below 50 years of age			Above 50 years of age		
		Yes	No	Can't say	Yes	No	Can't say	Yes	No	Can't say	Yes	No	Can't say
1	Women in Angami society were given opportunity for equal participation 50 years back?	16	51	33	20	60	20	35	44	21	39	43	18
2	Women in Angami society were given opportunity for equal participation at present?	73	11	16	64	9	27	79	9	12	88	8	4
3	As a parent do you want a male child?	100	00	00	100	00	00	100	00	00	100	00	00
4	As a parent do you want a female child?	100	00	00	100	00	00	100	00	00	100	00	00
5	Women are part of decision making 50 years back?	6	67	27	10	65	25	31	60	9	24	40	36
6	Women are part of decision making at present?	86	1	13	65	12	23	84	13	3	94	1	5
7	Given male and female child, would you prefer male child for opportunities?	1	99	0	2	91	7	1	92	7	5	87	8
8	Women are influential in household and society decision making?	99	0	1	75	12	13	80	13	7	91	4	5
9	Women of today are getting enough representation in socio-economic and political fields?	60	27	13	47	33	20	67	27	6	67	14	19
10	Women are actively involved in religious activities	84	5	11	67	20	13	87	9	4	81	11	8

Source: Field Survey, 2022

*Figures in the table are in percentages

As given in table 3, in the past five decades, 16% and 20% female below the age of 50 years and above 50 years respectively are of the opinion that women in the angami society were given opportunity for participation as compared to 51% and 60% respectively who feels that women were not given the opportunity. On the other hand, 35% and 39% male below the age of 50 years and above 50 years respectively are of the opinion that women in the angami society were given opportunity for participation as compared to 44% and 43% respectively who feels that women were not given the opportunity.

For indicator 2, irrespective of the age groups for both male and female, maximum respondents feel that at present women are given equal opportunity for participation in the society. With regard to indicators 3 and 4, parents value both male and female child irrespective of their parenting age. This reveals that present age is more open-minded towards gender.

In respect of indicator 5, the analysis reveals that in the past 50 years, women participation in decision making is very negligible where only 6% of the female in the age group below 50 years of age feels that women are part of decision making and only 10% of the older female generation feels that women are part of decision making in the society. As for the male respondents, there is a little higher consideration where 31% and 24% of the respondents in the age group of below 50 years and above 50 years of age respectively are of the opinion that women are taking part in the decision making. On the other hand irrespective of male and female respondents, majority of the respondents with 58% feels that women were not part of the decision making and as many as 24% of the respondents could not give their opinion. Likewise for indicator 6, in comparison to 50 years back, at present 82% of the respondents are of the view that women are importantly part of the decision making in the angami society while 7% of the respondents still felt that women were not given due opportunity.

With reference to the indicator 7, the study found out that as many as 99% and 91% of the female respondents below 50 years and above 50 years of age respectively and 92% and 87% of the male respondents below 50 years and above 50 years of age respectively have no preferential opportunities to their children in terms of gender.

In the modern era, we can also say that women in the southern angami are part and parcel of the decision making in the household as well as in the society. This is evident from the study that 86% of the respondents felt that women are influential in the family decision making processes as reflected in indicator 8.

As shown in the table, majority of women are getting representation in socio-economic and political fields. The indicator 9 in the table represents that 54% of the female respondents agree that women are getting representation, 30% of the female respondents disagree that women are getting representation and 16% of the female respondents have no opinion with regard to this indicator. In respect of male respondents, 67% agree that women are getting representation in socio-economic and political fields, 21% disagree and 14% have no opinion.

Similarly, for indicator 10, 75% of the female respondents agree that women are actively involved in religious activities, 13% of the female respondents disagree that women are actively involved in religious activities and 12% of the female respondents have no opinion with regard to this indicator. In respect of male respondents, 84% agree that women are actively involved in religious activities, 10% disagree and 6% have no opinion.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that there might be some kind of discrimination in the southern angami society towards women, the contributions and participation of women in the cultural society cannot be overlooked. There are certain activities where male role is limited and though the society has given an upper hand for the male counterparts, they are inseparable. The modern southern angami society exhibits that there is no gender preferences. This study reveals that women are influential in the decision making and are actively playing a vital role in the religious activities.

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