

Research Article

Place of women in Bujuur society: Before and after Christianity

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ABSTRACT

The article is an examination of questions on gender equality and inclusivity among the Bujuur tribe of Manipur (India) and Myanmar. It is premised from the general notion among the Nagas and especially among the Bujuur that Christianity and modernity brought development and social changes and that women in the Bujuur society enjoyed almost equal rights to their male counterparts. The study takes into accounts two stratified period, viz, Pre-Christianity which was considered as the period of social backwardness and Post-Christianity which is considered as development and modern period to understand the ways in which women were oppressed in the past and how far have Christianity and modernity liberated women from traditional burdens. The article argues that despite the promises of hopes and changes, Christianity was not able to garner progressive gender equality among the Bujuur Naga and instead, it pushes the society into more patriarchal and patrilineal systems. The aim is to present the realities of women within the Bujuur, and Naga society as a whole, and to relook into the customs and practices and actively debate on social disparities if they were to aspire for a progressive and sustainable future.

Keywords: Bujuur, Naga, Women, Customs and Traditions, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality in social, political, economic and religious spaces has been a ground of contemporary disagreements within the Nagas. The traditional bodies, who are dominated by men, would often come up with excuses to assert that Naga women were and are treated fairly and that gender inequality is insignificant. At times, they would

also protest against any legislation that would benefit women and the excuse often tabled is that it is against the tradition and custom.¹ In fact, traditions and customs are the most used tools to control, suppress and repress Naga women. Despite experiencing modernity and modern values, Naga women continue to suffer under unchanging patriarchy. It might be true that Naga women fare better than women of neighbouring communities because of the absence of class or caste system within the Naga society, but it is equally myopic to state that the Naga is characterised by gender egalitarianism (Pamei, 2018).

The Nagas are composed of various tribes and sub-tribes, the experiences of each tribe are unique and differ from the other tribes. Thus, despite the universal gender disparity of Naga women, the forms of disparities differ from one tribe to the other (Shangkham, 2018). This paper focuses on a selected tribe by the name Bujuur (Moyon) where gender progression is a dynamics of positive and negative changes. The Bujuur also represents a small tribe vulnerable to peer pressure in order to fit into or be acknowledged by other Naga tribes, especially the more dominant and visible ones. It is also one of the few Naga tribes with favourable sex ratio, i.e. females overwhelmingly outnumber males.² Even if Bujuur females outnumber men, their visibility at social, political and religious institutes are at the barest minimum. At the same time, their position as compared to the historical period also seems to not improve significantly despite exposure and influence of Christianity and modernity.

This article aims at understanding the position of women in the Bujuur society through stratified time period, i.e. Pre-Christianity and Post-Christianity. The Pre-Christianity period, in the perceptions of the present Bujuur, was a period of social primitivism, lack of education and backwardness along with archaic customs, superstitions and social practices that systematically excluded women from all spheres of everyday life. On the other hand, post-Christianity was constructed by the present Bujuur as the period of development and education, modern-western lifestyles and values. However, the everyday realities of the present Bujuur society are rigid and less inclusive despite the claims as being more egalitarian and open in comparison to the past. One of the many and important yardsticks for this comparison of two periods is women. Whereas the traditional customs bounded women to chains of suppression, Christianity fails to liberate Bujuur women from these chains; instead, Bujuur women are burdened with additional sanctions from

¹A suitable example is the opposition by several Naga tribal bodies against 33% women reservation in the 2017 urban local bodies (ULB) elections in Nagaland. For details, see Longkumer (2019), *Naga Women's Perspectives...*

²As per the Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013, the sex ratio of Moyon is 1147 females for 1000 males (2013: 154).

Christianity and ideals of Christian life rendering them even more helpless than before. This comparative discussion will shed light on experiences of Bujuur women and that the question of gender equality and egalitarianism are still unspoken taboo.

The study revolved on the key question,

1. Do Christianity and modernity liberate Bujuur women from the yokes of traditional prohibitions?

Based on the above question, the following objectives were framed for the study,

1. To study the status and roles of Bujuur women before conversion to Christianity
2. To discuss changes and continuity of traditions and customs pertaining to women in the Christianised society

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The study was based on multi-sited ethnography encompassing in depth interviews with individuals having knowledge and lived experiences of the pre-Christian customs and traditions to narrate their life experiences. In addition, non-verbal and participant observations were also vital components of the study which assisted immensely in comprehensive analysis of the community's everyday life including contemporary social attitudes, opinions and perceptions. The purpose of this multi-sited ethnography was to come up with grounded sets of information saturation at the same time for an overall complex exploration of multitudes of scenarios and situations.

The grounded findings are put forward in two sections,

- i. Bujuur women in the traditional setting (Pre-Christianity)
- ii. Bujuur women after Christianisation

The two sections will then be discussed as concluding summarised the challenges for the Bujuur women.

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF BUJUUR

The Bujuur, or as widely known by the exonym- Moyon, is a small tribe belonging to the Naga group, inhabiting Chandel and Tengnoupal districts of Manipur in India and Tamu Township of Sagaing Region in Myanmar. Their total population is around 2,600; out of which 2,516 are in India and the rest in Myanmar (Chara, 2021: 410).

The society is divided into complex clan system which can put as two primary clans each consisting of six secondary clans. They are,

i. *Shimphuw*: Nguruw, Langlom, Charii, Bungjeer, Serbum and Suwnglip

ii. *Ziingven*: Chinir, Nungchim, Ruwen, Vanglar, Khartu and Hungam.

In addition to these clans, there is also another historical clan-Ziingvun- of the erstwhile *Aemo* sub-tribe of Bujuur; the surviving clan members are at present absorbed into the Nguruw clan (Chara, 2021:413).

Traditionally, Bujuur society was strictly patriarchal, but the social practices also included exceptional like *matrilocalism* (*matrilocal* servitude or *Imah Itu*) and ethnic *ambilineage* whereby the ethnic identity 'Bujuur' could be inherited from either the father or mother depending on their residence.³ *Imah Itu* is no longer practiced and the presently society is more or less patrilocal (which is attributed mostly to modernisation and Christianity) and the historical practice of ambilineage is presently frowned upon in favour of male descent.

The present Bujuur population are adherents of Christianity which was introduced in the year 1922. Prior to Christianity, the traditional Bujuur religion was a complex system of non-ritual monotheism and animism. People believed in a supreme creator which they called '*Thangnang*', but the creator was never worshipped. Instead, the people developed complex relationship with the spirits which they believed caused illness and diseases; these spirits were not worshipped, rather they were considered as outcasts and the *Ithiim* (shaman) was to ensure that these spirits were kept at bay. Most the traditional *ithiim* were men although women could also become one but they were prohibited from performing community rituals.

The traditional political system of the Bujuur society was clan based democratic-gerontocracy (Chara, 2019). Each Bujuur village is regarded as a republic with its own territory, population, social customs and administrative system under the village council. Only men were and are allowed to be members of the village council. Unmarried men and women are not allowed to be members of village council even if they are well qualified and versed with customs and traditions.

Bujuur women in the traditional setting (Pre-Christianity)

Traditionally, Bujuur women were considered weak and powerless, symbolically represented by a tied *shabaken* (*Bos frontalis*) ready to be slaughtered. This symbolic

³Identity and lineage are complicated among the Bujuur. Even the historical customs on ambilineage is also overshadowed by overemphasis on patrilineal descent and patriarchy such that even if a child identified as a Bujuur in the past, the narrations never gave importance to the role of the mothers in shaping the identity of their children. The topic is sensitive to the present population as well.

image of image was a part and partial of *Ikam*, feast of merit, which celebrated the wealth of men while ignoring the contributions and importance of women.

As a powerless gender, Bujuur women were traditionally bounded by taboos and prohibitions even if they were contributing members of the society. Their powerlessness were often depicted in women centred folk tales like *Shajangnuw* and *Tudeen*, viz., *Shajangnuw* was sold against her wishes by her brother in order to pay bride price so that he could marry the woman of his choice; whereas *Tudeen*, another folk woman, was not appreciated by her father who believed that her economic contributions toward the family was a great shame for him. On the other hand, another daring woman by the name *Tunuh* broke all the gender stereotypes by hosting *Ikam* but nobody turned up for the event and she ended up begging her own clan members not to dishonour the auspicious event like *Ikam* (a feast of merit) just because she was a woman.

To say that Bujuur women were oppressed in the traditional setting would be overtly exaggerated. However in comparison to the men folks, they were inferior with their status equated to foolish children reflected in the saying '*Lupuwnuw Naepang chong*' which means '*words of women and foolish children*'⁴. Women and children were considered foolish, stupid and immature and accordingly, even their opinions in any social, political and family affairs were regarded as insignificant. Such inferior treatment of women's wisdom extended to the sanctions against women *ithiim* (*shaman*)⁵ even if they could become one, viz,

- i. They were prohibited from performing village/community rituals,
- ii. They were prohibited from performing agricultural rituals,
- iii. They were prohibited from performing rituals during *Ikam* celebrations,
- iv. They were prohibited from performing birth and death rituals,
- v. The opinions of male *ithiim* hold more value even if female *ithiim* were valid,
- vi. Female *ithiim* cannot be appointed as village *ithiim* or member of village council.

This indicated that the wisdom and skills of women in the traditional environment were always undermined and they were never given due recognition or encouraged to venture into mustering their *ithiim* skills.

In the economic environment, women were the actual backbone. Their economic importance were so much valued that men had to compensate their fathers-in-law for

⁴*Lupuwnuw* means women and *Naepang* is a portmanteau of two words- *nae* meaning children and *ipang* meaning foolish.

⁵*Ithiim* which literally means '*the learned/all knowing/teacher*' was a well respected profession in the past; an *ithiim* was well respected by the society, even more than the *khurfhuw* or village priest.

marrying their daughters by paying bride price and undergo three years of *imah itu* (matrilocal servitude). Despite the economic value of women, they were not given economic freedom and choice. Even their value was determined not by themselves but by their own fathers and uncles. In other words, even though women were respected, they were treated as economic commodities and marriage was more of an economic transaction between men (her father and husband). Bujuur woman had little say in her bride price and the amount/item of the bride price was not for her either, instead it was meant for her father.

After marriage, the position of woman was more complex. Though she technically belonged to the family of the husband, she also belonged to her birth family, thus, she was considered as belonging to two clans. As such, women were described as '*Rupuwnuw arae omah*' meaning '*woman got no spirit*' to indicate that they belonged nowhere and to nobody. This was the reason for the exclusion of women from politics which was strictly clan based as women were deemed unfit to represent either the father's clan or the husband's clan. As unmarried people were barred from politics, the status of unmarried men and women remained the same, i.e., both had no political rights.

Traditional Bujuur politics were clan based, thus, women were denied political rights and representations as they were believed to have no clan affiliation. The saying '*Rupuwnuw arae omah*' (Woman got no spirit) to mean women's dual clan affiliations to their birth clans and marital clans was the customary justification to bar women from politics, so women were not allowed to be members of village council. They were also not encouraged to participate in village meetings and assemblies. If they did, they were prohibited from voicing their opinions and their role remained as mere spectators.

The inherent gender discrimination could be observed time and again when incompetent men were often elected as village leaders despite their lack of knowledge of customs and traditions. Any woman vocal enough to raise her voice for justice was considered immoral, greedy, power hungry, attention seeker and a threat to the society. Since all the matters to customs and traditions were the domain of men, the voiceless women continued to be voiceless and their welfares were never given due thoughts or considered in any way. The expected role of women, unmarried men and children was to obey without question; they were not to question or raise questions even if they were right. This often resulted in serious social dysfunction and deterioration by creating social distrusts between the leaders (men) and others (women, unmarried men and children). But at the end of the day, gender and age deviancy were penalised by the society in the form of heavy fines and social shaming.

Within the family, the husband or the father was considered the patriarch. He made all the family decisions and was the sole political voice of the family. Even on the demise of the family patriarch, the wife/mother was not regarded as the head of the family. The political responsibility of the family was either entrusted to the eldest living son or the immediate brothers of the deceased husband by bypassing the mothers. At the same time, the sons would inherit the property of the deceased father while the mother was put at the mercy of the sons even if she might have contributed immensely towards the building of the family property. Daughters were not allowed to inherit family properties; in the absence of sons, the paternal male cousins could stake a claim over the properties at their own interests (Shangkham, 1995: 449).

Gender biases in the socio-cultural spaces was very much observed in the past. The privilege for hosting of the feast of merit (*Ikam*) and allied activities was reserved only for men while women were prohibited from hosting it. Although the custom never mentioned that a specific gender should only host *Ikam*, the society did not allow women to host. The custom merely mentioned that wealthy individuals with bumper agricultural harvest could host *Ikam*. In a sense, even though women were considered as economic assets of the family, they were not given economic entitlements and accordingly, they were also prohibited from owning properties. The labours of women were assumed to belong to the patriarch of the family by default, which in turn explained the reason why only men were allowed to host *Ikam*. Ironically, majority of the agricultural activities including rearing of domestic animals were the responsibility of women. Despite women being a major contributor to the households wealth, they were not given due recognition.

The gendering of *Ikam* is also further observed in the fact that only the achievements of men were celebrated and sung during *Ikam* events. The wives were almost invisible on public platforms and nobody paid attention to their hard work. On certain occasions, a man celebrating *Ikam* would be carried around the village on a palanquin whereas the wives were not accorded the same respect. On the demise, the men were given grand funerals accompanied by singing and dancing whereas the wives were given simple funerals. Even after the burial, a memorial stone known as *rutha* would be erected for men to signify the achievements, but a simple wooden plank was erected for women even if their husbands hosted *Ikam* (Shangkham, 1995: 451).

Despite the general cultural bias against women, there were also few positive customs attributed to women. For instance, men were expected to reside at their wives' house for three years. Women were allowed to bring home their husbands instead of living at their husbands' houses. Widow re-marriage was socially acceptable and encouraged. The honour of the cutting of paddy during harvest season was reserved for women; unless women made the first cut, harvesting could not proceed while it was considered

taboo for men to make the first cuttings. While women were denied the opportunity to taste the best portions of meat in any social functions and events, they were given the exclusive right to consume ‘*Sharthuwbuw*’ (a special cuisine prepared by mixing steamed rice, animal brain and herbs) while men were prohibited from consuming it.

Within the women’s social circle, it was considered a disgrace for women to marry outside the community as they felt that the customs of other tribes were oppressive and not suitable for them. This could be attributed to many cases of Bujuur women returning home following divorces. Despite the social stigma against broken marriages, divorces were common and divorced women were always welcomed back in their homes and villages by the folks and kin. Spinsterhood and childlessness were socially acceptable and women who chose not to marry were not considered social shame. Whereas most Bujuur men looked for economically and biologically productive wives, Bujuur women also traditionally responded with their own expectations for their life partners. It was said that Bujuur women would not marry any divorced men or widowers as they considered it below their feminine dignity to marry into such. As such, the social expectations on women were also responded by women with higher expectations; their logic was that, ‘*if Bujuur men deserve the best, Bujuur women also deserve nothing lesser than the best*’. In fact, because of these extreme higher expectations from the side of women, many Bujuur women in the past chose to rather stay unmarried and remain independent than suffer the consequences of wrong choices.

Perhaps, these dynamics of women’s positions in the society was the unique identifying feature of the Bujuur society. Facing all the positives and negatives aspects of traditions and customs, Bujuur women not only managed to thrive in the society but they also actively participated in the making and remaking of the Bujuur identity for centuries. It was because of these reasons that Bujuur women, despite their lower social positions, were invaluable to sustainability of the Bujuur identity. But, the coming of Christianity altered the social ecology and further complicated the position of women in the long term despite the promises of liberating Bujuur women from the yokes of age-old suppressions.

BUJUUR WOMEN AFTER CHRISTIANISATION

Christianity first appeared among the Bujuur community with the conversion of few youths in 1922. The initial years of Christianity were tumultuous with conflicts between the traditionalists and the Christians. In the end, Christianity managed to impress the Bujuur and thus by the 1970s, almost all the Bujuur population converted to Christianity.

One of the first changes after the conversion to Christianity was in the cultural sector. Almost all the traditional customs and practices were abandoned by the Bujuur on the

belief that the pre-Christian cultures were backward, repressive and not compatible with the Christian teachings and ways of life. Within a few years of Christianity, people began to question the social taboos and prohibitions; as they felt liberated by Christianity, they zealously discarded any customs they did not like at the same time they also modified any customs they felt like as per their whims. Some of the modifications were for the social good while others resulted in more social division and alienation.

The age-old prohibition of marriage outside the tribe was immediately discouraged. At first, inter-tribal marriage was viewed negatively but with time, it became popular and the legacy is noticed today with the majority of the Bujuur population being the first, second and third generations of mixed marriages. In addition to non restriction of mixed marriage, the binary clan exogamy between *Shimphu* and *Ziingven* clans was also revised further to relax the marriage rules; thus, by 1978, the Bujuur clans were clubbed into four marriage groups viz,

- Shimphu*: i) *Nguruw and Laanglom*
 ii) *Charii and Sherbum, with Bungjeer and Suwnnglip*
- Ziingven*: i) *Nungchim and Chineer*
 ii) *Ruwen, Vaanglaar and Khaartu, with Hungam.*

This revision of the marriage clan-groups benefitted the people a lot as they had more marriage choices within the tribe. Despite the positive changes in marriage options, there were also negative changes in marriage customs as a result of Christianity. The traditional *matrilocal* residence after marriage was not encouraged as the Bujuur Christians believed that a wife must follow her husband. Thus, the mandatory *Imah Itu* disappeared altogether. In fact, *Imah Itu* is now considered anti-men, a custom that suppresses men and an institution for women to overpower their husbands. Such a negative attitude against *Imah Itu* negatively impact Bujuur women as they are now completely at the mercy of patriarchy and new patrilocalism. This paradigm shift from matrilocality to patrilocalism affects other marriage customs, social bonding, confidence and relationship building between men and their in-laws. Whereas in the past men had to served their in-laws after marriage, it is the opposite today with women starting to serve their in-laws after marriage. This further complicated the limited freedom and advantages enjoyed by Bujuur women in the past, that is, *Imah Itu* ensured women ample of time to transit from unmarried/singlehood to married life and also streamlined the productivity of their husbands. In the absence of *Imah Itu*, Bujuur women find it difficult to adjust at the in-law's house. With the increasing patriarchal expectation as a result of Christian teachings of the submission of wives to their husbands, Bujuur women were subjected to serving their husbands and in-laws' without question and most women choose to suffer silently rather than speak out their grievances for fear of being ridiculed as bad women.

In the religious space, the position of Bujuur women is complicated. In the initial years of Christianity, women were encouraged to become Church leaders. The encouragement given to women resulted in Bujuur having one of the first female pastors among the Nagas in the year 1939. The progress was repeated again in the later years with two more Bujuur women became pastors of their respective churches. However, in the subsequent years, the prospects of women becoming pastors greatly diminished as the church administrations were slowly dominated by men. Till date, there is not a single woman serving as a church deacon. Among the Baptist churches, there was some initiative from progressive thinking pastors by including women as members to serve the Holy Communion; however, this initiative was received negatively by many. The reactions of the public signify that Bujuur population were not ready to be led by women in religious spaces just like in the traditional practices. Instead of inclusivity, the church became more patriarchal with newer traditions like married women should cover their head while praying inside the Church or women should dress appropriately when attending church services while there are hardly any hard and fast rules for men.

The influence of the church is quite significant in the everyday marital choice that despite the relaxation in marriage choice among the Bujuur clans, marriage choice has become restricted. It has become increasingly difficult for a Baptist and Catholic to marry despite belonging to marriageable clans. There were few cases in the past where parents and families objected to marriages because the man/woman belonged to different denomination. If such inter-denomination marriage took place, women were forced to change their church affiliation/denomination after marriage. There were also instances whereby church leaders refused to solemnise marriage between Bujuur women and non-Christian men apart from serving them disciplinary actions for marrying outside Christianity or even outside the denomination. Whereas women are expected to change their denomination, there is no such expectation for men. The idea behind this change of denomination is that since women are to follow their husbands after marriage, they should follow their husbands' religion as well. This clearly indicates that Christianity induced patrilocalism enhance cultural patriarchy and put the society into a default false consciousness that Bujuur society post marriage should be patrilocal. Some leaders (men) even come up with explanation that it is not Naga culture for men to live at their wives' residence and that Bujuur practice of *Imah Itu* is becoming a laughing stock from other tribes.

To further add into the issue of women's residence after marriage, non-Bujuur women who married into the Bujuur community also brought their patriarchal and patrilocal ideas with them. Many of these women were not acquainted with the customs of Bujuur and were shocked that Bujuur men stayed/lived at their wives' house after marriage.

They managed to somehow impart their imported patriarchal ideas to their children through discouragement of their sons to reside at their wives' residence or expect their daughters to move to their husbands' residence after marriage.

Even though patrilocalism is the preferred practice, Bujuur families still encourage their daughters marrying to other communities to bring their husband. But, the irony is that even if daughters are encouraged to settle at their village after marriage, they are denied property and villages won't allocate them land. For example, the Kapaam Village Authority came up with a plan in 2019 to distribute portions of land to those in need; however, one of the resolution was that women should not be allotted land as they are expected to follow their husbands after marriage which in contrast to the societal pressure whereby any women from Kapaam village wishing to marry to other tribes/communities are pestered to reside in the village. The pestering is to the extent that some women of Kapaam are still considered as citizens of the village even after moving to different a village/place after marriage, because the village leaders desperately hope that they would return to settle in the village. This expectation can be put in the following points,

- i. Women are discouraged to marry outside Bujuur/village/denomination
- ii. If women marry outside the Bujuur/village, they are told to bring their husband for *Imah Itu* and eventually settle in the village,
- iii. Women will not receive ancestral property or free village lands for settlement because they have to follow their husbands after marriage

The above three points indicated that the Christianised Bujuur are complicated with their approach on women's choice and rights. They wanted to dictate what women should do or not do as per their needs. Thus, if *Imah Itu* does not fit their patriarchal agenda, they discourage it; but, if *Imah Itu* fits their agenda, they encourage it. These kinds of mixed and drastic social attitudes confuse women. Many women are not happy with such kinds of treatment, but they could not speak out as they were afraid of social repercussions.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Patriarchy runs deep in the Bujuur social system despite the everyday claims that Bujuur are more becoming more liberal by the day. Many of the traditional prohibitions and taboos for women continue till date, as noted by Serbum (2018). Some of the continuing prohibitions include,

- i. Women are not allowed to be members of village council
- ii. Women are not allowed to dig graves

- iii. Women are prohibited to go hunting and do blacksmith work
- iv. Women are not allowed to initiate marriage proposals
- v. Women are not allowed to host *Ikam*.

When it comes to leadership, women are not the preferred choice even if their skills excelled their male counterparts. The Moyon Naga Council, which is the apex cultural body of Bujuur, was dominated by men for many years and it was only in the 1990s that women were allowed to members as well as hold executive positions only after long periods of demands by women for inclusion. The years following 2010s became more inclusive with more female representatives to the council; however, in relation to the population proportion of females, they were underrepresented. It was also interesting that ill informed conservative leaders would often stated that '*women could also become members of the council if they were qualified enough*' despite the reality that Bujuur women are more educated with multiple skills and knowledge of customs than their male counterparts.

To summarise, Christianity did little to liberate Bujuur women from traditional yokes; rather, Christianity comes with its own sets of additional prohibitions for women resulting in altogether disappearance of customs like '*Imah Itu*' by encouraging patrilocalism. Just like the tradition barring female *ithiim* from community rituals, the Church also fails to apprise women to be leaders. Women are still denied political and rights to inherit ancestral/clan properties. Positive changes in the initial period of Christianity reverted back to more conservatism as the society, and women in particular, become more immersed into patriarchal Christianity. The burdens of women have only increased with time and the only way women could progress forward is that they need to come together as one to liberate themselves. On the other hand, Bujuur men also need to recognise the injustice against women and that gender equality and inclusion should be their priorities if a small tribe like Bujuur has to survive and sustain itself.

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