

Women in the Chakhesang (Chokri & Khezha) Society

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Introduction

The tribe referred to by Hutton as the Eastern Angamis includes the Chokri, the Khezha and the Sangtam which later came to be known as the Chakhesang. It was in the year 1978 that these three groups united together under a new identity called Chakhesang. Later in the 1980s, the Sangtams for one or the other reason, showed their apathy for this common identity and thus broke away from the Chakhesang and maintain their own separate identity as Sangtam.

Khezha Women

(with special reference to Khezhakeno Village)

Marriage : When a son was born, a cock was killed and after performing the necessary rituals, the cock was cooked and eaten by the mother. Likewise, when a daughter was born, a hen was killed and after the necessary rituals were performed, cooked and given to the mother.

When a mother gave birth, for three days she had to sleep on a plank. She cooked in a new oven and new pots, ate in new plates and drank in a new cup. On completion of the third day, she would preserve the utensils in a particular place.

After the completion of one year, the mother would cook a hen and perform certain rituals. On that particular day, she

would perform only domestic work and would not leave the house for field work or any work outside the house.

The traditional society was known for maintaining a high moral. It was said that a man or a woman could not even look face to face for fear of social sanction against them. Even teasing a girl by a boy was treated as an insult and the girl was considered unchaste. Love marriage was unknown.

The marriageable boys and girls slept in their respective dormitories. The boys' dormitory was known as khrozhi and the girls' dormitory liizhi. The khrozhi and liizhi were maintained khel wise. If from another khel the boys were to visit the liizhi of the other khel, by day time, prior information was to be given to the girls of that liizhi.

Marriage was mostly arranged. However, a boy was to formally propose for the girl. Even a girl could propose a boy through her parents.

Trial marriage: It is interesting to note here that a sort of trial marriage was prevalent among the Pfiitseromi village. In that, a girl after attaining puberty was to sleep in the girls' dormitory and during this period she was to sleep and live with a man for three months. Only after the three months, she was allowed to keep long hair. After the three months, she leaves the boy and returns to her parents.

After the three months, it was up to the girl as to whether she would marry the man she had lived with or choose another man for her marriage. During the said three months, if the boy had ill-treated the girl, she could decline the marriage on flimsy grounds. According to this village, marriage was mostly by 'pick and choose' by the boy or the girl. However, arranged marriage was also widely known.

Lhiyi: In the olden days, a girl was never allowed to keep long hair till she was married and the marriage consummated. Just for the sake of keeping long hair, a girl had to be formally married at least for seven days and the marriage consummated.

After seven days, the girl could leave her husband on the pretext that she had bad dreams during their marriage and would not be congenial for the marriage to pull on. If the girl did not like her husband for obvious reasons, the husband could not compel her to stay with him. This brief period of marriage is called lhiyi.

Beauty contest : It is also interesting to note that a sort of beauty contest was prevalent among the Lasumi villagers. According to that, on a particular feasting day, all the unmarried girls of the village would line up and the boys would give a piece of meat to the girl they admired most. In the end, the girl who had collected the maximum pieces of meat will be declared the most beautiful girl of the village.

Her economic position : With regard to the economic position of the women, the condition was not that pathetic and miserable, for women did enjoy a considerable economic right.

At the time of her marriage, her parents would give her *liina* (property both movable and immovable given to the daughter), which became more or less her absolute property. The *liina* was usually confined to the fields. However, her parents could give her different type of properties and for which, her brothers could not challenge their parents. It was absolutely up to the will of the parents. They could give her even the whole of their *motsotsiili* (whatever property had been purchased by the wife and husband), however, ancestral property could not be given to the daughter.

Once a *liina* was given to the daughter, it would continue to be passed down from daughter to daughter, so long as daughter continue to be in the family. The *liina* could be reverted to the reversioners only if there was no more daughter in the line. This reversionary right was called 'do'. To testify that 'do' was undisputed, *mviidziimviira* (1/10 of the produce of the field) was paid to the reversioners once in a woman's life time, and after her death, her successor i.e., her daughter had to pay the same *mviidziimviira*. This *mviidziimviira* stood as a living witness and testified that 'do' was undisputed and *liina* could be reverted to the reversioners as and when daughter issue ended in the line. So long as *mviidziimviira* was paid to the reversioners, the reversioners could not claim the *liina* from their sister/niece/grand niece etc.

Though the *mviidziimviira* was fixed at 1/10 (i.e., one tin of rice out of ten tins) from the produce of the *liina*, it was upto the reversioners to reduce the quantity or take only a nominal amount. For instance, from 40 tins, they might demand only 1 or 2 tins and this was the common practice. So from the above discussion, it is apparent that so long as female offspring ran in

the line and *mviidziimviira* paid to the reversioners, the reversioners could not claim or demand the *liina*.

Apart from the above, the *liina* could be called back by the reversioners if the reversioners were ill-treated or humiliated by their in-laws. However, this kind of reversion was very rare and stood only as a principle.

Apart from fields, '*chikhe*' (woodland) could also be given to the women. However, the *chikhes* were not given as *liina* but as a gift, especially at the time of the parents' impending death. The *chikhe* was given once and for all and would not be reverted back to the reversioners, unless specifically mentioned in the will for such reversion. The woman could dispose off the *chikhe* as and when she liked. However, ancestral *chikhe* of the father could not be given to the daughter.

In desperate situation, when hard hit by poverty or misfortune, with the prior approval of the reversioners, the *liina* could even be sold. At the time of selling, 50 per cent of the sale proceeds were to be given to the reversioners and 50 per cent to her. It is interesting to note here that, the husband's inherited properties would be first sold.

The wife's *liina* could also be given to her son. In case the daughter married outside the village, she could still be given immovable property. However, for practical reasons, only movable properties like cow, rice, money etc. were given. Even the whole property of the parents could be given to the daughter, except for the ancestral property and the brothers could not challenge the parents for such gifts.

Property which a Woman could Inherit and give to her Kith and Kin

1. *Motsotsiili* : (properties purchased during the life time of the couple): If the husband had died prior to the wife, it was exclusively upto the wife to distribute the property. She could distribute the properties to her brothers or loved ones and her in-laws could not challenge her.

2. *Kirhipfiinu* : (property movable or immovable divided during the life time of the couple): During old age or an impending death; the couple who were issueless would divide their *motsotsiili*. Once *kirhipfiinu* is entered into by the couple, the husband's clan could not claim the share of the wife.

As mentioned earlier, if no kirhipfiinu was entered into by the couple during their life time, the properties were divided according to the wishes of the last surviving spouse. Whatever be, the wife could not own or give the gun (if they possess) to her family members but had to return to the husband's clan.

Share of Property in Case of Divorce

Divorce was usually referred to as 'kokhota' or 'pfiinuta' or commonly referred to as 'teta'. Divorce could be by mutual consent, wife's fault or husband's fault.

1. *Divorce by mutual consent*: In such a case, the wife could take back all the properties she had brought along with her at the time of the marriage. As for motsotsiili, the properties were divided between the wife and the husband. The wife could not claim any children. At the most, she could request her husband to allow their children to be with her for sometime. However, this was absolutely upto the husband to agree or not. Even if the husband agreed, the children on attaining puberty were to return back to the father.

2. *Wife's infidelity or other reasons*: When divorce took place due to the wife's infidelity or other adverse reasons, the punishment on the wife was so severe that she had to leave her husband's house without taking anything except for her under garments. This spoke of the high moral values prevalent in the old Khezha Naga society.

3. *Husband's infidelity/fault*: Whatever be the reason, children belonged to the father in the Khezha society. The motsotsiili were divided into two equal parts: one half to the husband and the other half to the wife, or the property could be divided into three equal parts: one third to the children, one third to the husband and another one third to the wife.

If a woman was found poisoning others or became a mother of a child who's biological father could not be identified, she was thrown out of the village once and for all. If a girl carried a child outside a wedlock, she had to leave the village and give birth. She could however return to the village after a gap of two or three months.

If the husband dies: As long as the wife remains loyal and faithful, she could stay in her late husband's house and no one

could drive her out. If her chastity was questioned, it would be confirmed by her by taking an oath.

Women and Festival

Festival was so much part of life that the months were named after the festival. The months were:

Zathokhrri	:	January
Chide Mechikhrii	:	February
Tinyikechiiikhrii	:	March
Likheniekhrii	:	April
Pfiizhi kiyi/khranakhrii	:	May
Pfiizhi kono or Pfiizhikhrii	:	June
Selukhrri	:	July
Riilie or Briiniekhrii	:	August
Nokhrri	:	September
Mviitshakhrii	:	October
Buliekhrii or Chidekhrii	:	November
Riinyiekhrii	:	December

In a year, the important festivals were Riinyie, Likhenyie, Selunyie and Dziinyie.

Riinyie: This was the most important festival of all. The festival lasted for about 18 days. Since the festival was held just after the harvest, both the rich and the poor equally enjoyed the festival. The main highlights of the festival were drinking zuso (rice beer), eating meat and singing folk songs. On the 7th day, known as the *neto nerii* day, young boys gave meat to young girls of their khel. In return, the girls prepared and gave tophatso (boys' earring made of cotton worn during singing and dancing) to the boys.

Anytime during the festival, mostly during the middle of the festival, young boys of one khel gave meat to the girls of a particular liizhii (girls' dormitory) of another khel. In return probably after a month, the young girls of that liizhii invited the boys for drinks and merry making. For that they would go to the field for fishing etc. They would prepare zuso, cooked fish and whatever caught from the field and invited the boys for drinks and merry making. The place for gathering was usually in front of that particular liizhii. They drank and sang together late into

the night. However, so much so was the height of morality that, not even the toes of the girls were shown to the boys.

Likhenyie : This was referred to as the festival of the youth. The trees with their new leaves beautify the village, thus giving a youthful and promising look. Nature itself with the youthful look added much life to the festival. Though the whole village participated in the festival, it was the young boys and girls who enjoyed the most and therefore rightly referred to as the festival of the youth. The festival lasted for about six days.

The main highlight during this festival was that, after two days, the young boys and girls of same khel went to the hill tops like Tshelo, Hube-o, Taikhazu, Telolephe, Morontsiikopo, Tapamojo, Chizadziipo-o for collecting green tender leaves, flowers like rhododendron and likhenyiepa (a flower which blooms only during this season). Apart from this, unmarried couples together pulled norho (a type of plant) and a belief prevailed that if norho had a single root, the unmarried couple on getting married would have no children. But if the norho had double red roots, they would have a son and if white, would have a daughter. After the merry making, with the leaves and the flowers, they would return to the village singing "holi O holi O . . .". With the leaves and flowers, they would decorate the place of their camp fire.

A belief also prevailed that, on the day they went to Taikhazu, if there was no rain, that particular year, the moral of the youth would be very bad.

The whole festival was marked by feasting and specially young people having camp fires. Much before the festival, the youth would earn for their feasting by going to others' field etc. The boys went for hunting and the girls for fishing etc. in the field.

Selunyie : This festival was held as a sign symbolizing that all field works are over. This was a lean season and the poor family were hardly left with anything. As such, only the rich could celebrate. Since the poor could not afford, they hardly had any feasting of meat and zuso.

Zatho (Feast of Merit): This was the feast of merit. The richest man of the village threw a feast for the whole village. The feast lasted for about a month. One interesting feature was that, the feast of merit could not be hosted if the wife had died.

It was possible only, if both the spouses were living together. On the first day of the feast, the wife 'pho'(open) the 'chi' (carved wooden log where the rice beer were stored) and served the zuso to the villagers. She offered prayers to the creator by uttering "Chii ki chi-o Thimepu molo" so that the drinks and foods do not run short during the feast.

Apart from the above significant role she played during the festival, she also played the key role in different rituals performed for different occasions at different times. In short, it leads one to safely conclude, that women did enjoy her own comfortable place in the society.

Myth about Women

In olden days, women were held in high esteem and she enjoyed a comfortable place in the society. It is worth mentioning some of them:

Kovie-o : She was so beautiful that her beauty dominated for seven generations.

Akule D/o Ravo : She was very beautiful. Once she went to Kohima and on seeing the beautiful lady, the rich Miache-o's son of Kohima asked for her hand.

Dze-o : It was believed that the creator used her as a foreteller.

Tariinie-o : She foretold that the moral of the younger generations would become very bad. Before her death, she told the villagers, that, in case of drought, they should come to her grave and sing:

"Ta rii dzedze
Ishe no no Eshe no no
Solhuo le medziisa pha bou"

Nyiepi-O

Women were also believed to own Nyiepi-o (the spirit associated with wealth and riches). It was believed that if a woman owned nyiepi-o, their family became very rich and the villagers used to say:

" Nou-u ki mi nyiepi-o mepfe-ii chii ta"

Only the blessed women could see nyiepi-o i.e., the spirit. Some of them who saw nyiepi-o were:

Kevechii-o w/o Tirilhou Pfiidzii, Zonie-o w/o Michirodzii. Zode-o w/o Chepuyie owned nyiepi-o and that she was believed to have milk on her thumb.

From the above myths, we can appreciate the fact that women were well treated and had her own specific role in the society.

Demi (mediator)

In olden days, head hunting between inter-village was a very common feature. It was very rare that a particular village would volunteer to act as a mediator between two warring villages. In such a situation, women played the commendable role of a mediator. From the village, some outstanding women were chosen as mediators called 'Demi' to mediate and call for peace between the warring villages. Apart from the above role, Demis were the only one to carry the head of the slain one to the bereaved family. Their role was so important that it was tabooed to slain or kill a demi — "Demi pi-o yie kii nyii" (i.e., It is tabooed to slain or kill a demi). She was the only one to break the ice for peace talks between two warring villages. Some of the Demis who are remembered to this day are:

1. *Kaponie-o* : She mediated between Khezhakeno and Mao-Maram villages.
2. *Tariinie-o* : She mediated between Khezhakeno and Poumai villages.
3. *She-o* : She mediated between Khezhakeno and Lanumi or Nenumi (i.e., Poumai) villages.

Mawopi (Village Priestess)

The Mawopi enjoyed a very comfortable place as the wife of the Mawo-o (Village Priest). In certain circumstances, she enjoyed the power of the Mawo-o. For instance, when the Mawo-o died leaving behind a minor, the Mawopi assumed all the charges of the Mawo-o. She convened all the meetings comprising of all the 'krii' (i.e., representative of the clan elders) and only after 'tikhe' (i.e., resolution/order adopted by the clan elders for the village), she would 'kiche' (i.e., implement the resolution or order adopted). The kiche was done through the eldest male of

the clan by 'sa' (i.e, wide proclamation) in the village. However, the eldest male of the clan was not allowed to perform 'sadie' (i.e., a more dignified form of proclamation). Sadie could be performed only by the Mawo-o. It is important to mention here that, unless 'tikhe' by the 'krii' with matters pertaining to anything of the village, the Mawopi could not serve any 'kiche'. An illustrious Mawopi worth mentioning is that of Chi-o Mawopi w/o Ngope Mawo-o. She was Mawopi for about 15 years.

Though women did not have much say in the Village Assembly, they did enjoy certain exclusive privileges especially with matters pertaining to women. Matters confining to women were entrusted to the women body by the village authority, and whatever decisions were arrived at by the women body, was approved by the village authority.

In the traditional society, women were not allowed to address or stand before the village crowd. This position has been to a great extent done away with the coming of Christianity. The Christian principle advocating equality and love has today placed women in equal footing more or less with men. With the awareness and demand for more women education, we see today women actively participating in administration, teaching, medical and other technical professions, in theology and hordes of other professions. The yester year women confined only to household chores are now partaking in policy matters, planning etc. thus adding immense asset to the society.

Special mention may be made of the Village Development Board (VDB) Women's Wing. The VDB has been considered a hallmark in the development of the villages in Nagaland. It is found that the VDB Women's Wing has opened an avenue for the women to actively participate in the developmental process of the village. Today, out of the total allocation from the grant-in-aid from the Govt. to the VDDBS, 20 per cent of the funds are earmarked exclusively for the Welfare and development of women. This fund is monitored and operated by the VDB Women's Wing themselves and the Village Council has no control over it. Women today can formulate their own priority schemes and implement it accordingly which she was deprived of for so very long. This has boosted the position and status of women and they are able to actively participate in the planning and developmental process of the village.

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Chokri Women in the Chakhesang Community (with special reference to Phek and Phulami village)

Marriage: Normally, the marriage proposal went from the boy to the girl. Once the girl consented to the proposal, they exchanged zu (rice beer). Then she would be invited for food in the boy's house. On her way to her fiance house, she would pick up a stone, and on entering inside the house, she would throw it inside the bed. Her fiance would give a basket to her and the girl accompanying her. After that only, they would be served rice beer and once the girl had been invited for food by the boy's side, the girl's side would also reciprocate in the same manner.

On the day of marriage, she would carry rice beer on her basket and with her bridesmaid, she would come to her fiance's house. On reaching the house and as about to enter the house, the bridesmaid would call out 'athe' (brother-in-law), her fiance would respond to the call and after that only they would enter the house. On entering the house, her fiance would help her to put down the basket.

The new couple would make cups from banana leaves and drink rice beer throughout the day without eating any food. After three or four days, the marriage would be consummated and after that the bridesmaid would leave the new couple.

If the wife ran away from her husband before the marriage is consummated, she would face the following consequences:

1. Her head would be shaved.
2. The husband would take everything she had brought along at the time of her marriage.
3. She would be forced to come back to the husband within ten days for consummation. Within the ten days, if the husband could not consummate the marriage, the wife was freed.

During birth, when a son was born, a cock was cooked and given to the mother. When a daughter was born, on the first day, a hen would be cooked and served to the mother. On the third day, the baby would be taken outside the house and a necklace would be put on the baby's neck. On the fifth day, the father would go to the jungle to collect 'sithosi' (a tree belonging to corylus/oak family). The sithosi should be a perfect one not eaten by any worm. The father would bring the sithosi to the village gate. The mother along with the new born baby and another child would be waiting for the father at the village gate. From the gate, the mother would carry the sithosi in her basket. The new baby if a boy would be carried by a small boy and by a girl if the baby was a baby girl. This way they would proceed to their home. That night a chicken would be killed and the child who had carried the baby would be given the drumstick of the chicken.

On the first day, when the child is taken to the field, the parents would carry a sickle and chicken feathers. In all the main paths, crossings and resting places, they would put a feather all along till they reach the field. Then they would return to the village before sunset. That night they would also kill a chicken for their dinner.

Her economic place : At the time of her marriage, the girl was sent off by her parents with a basket, necklace and clothes. These movable properties normally would not be returned to her relatives. If she had no child, she would give these properties to the one who had nursed her during her last days.

The immovable properties given to the daughter at the time of her marriage was called 'shephra'. The property given was usually for her life time or at the most to her daughter's life time. Then after her death, the properties would be reverted back to the 'kalii' i.e., the reversioners. The reversioners could also give these properties as gifts to their sisters. However, this stood only as a principle and in reality was very rare. The father's field could also be given to the daughter. Though woodland could be given to the daughters, this was rarely practiced.

At the time of sickness or misfortune, she could sell her shephra. However, the husband's properties were to be sold first. After her death, in return for the shephra sold, the kali would be given spade, dao, basket etc.

In case of no son in the family, the father could give to the daughter even the ancestral properties. However, the heirs were to be given their due shares. The father could give even up to the extent of 75 per cent of his total property. Whatever ancestral property a daughter had received from her father, was only for her life time. After her death, the ancestral properties were to be reverted to the heirs.

Even if she had been given the purchased properties of her parents, these properties were to be reverted to the heirs. However, at the time of her death, she could pass on these properties to her daughter and after the death of her daughter only, these properties were to be reverted to the heirs.

Divorce/separation: If there was a divorce due to the husband's infidelity, the properties would be divided between the wife and husband equally.

If the divorce had occurred due to the wife's infidelity, she would leave the husband's house with only a skirt (lungi) and a shawl and nothing else. Punishment was so severe that, even the man who had committed adultery could also be fined.

According to the Phulami village, son or daughter belonged to the father. However, in case of a step mother, and if the father had not given any property to his children, the real mother would take the children, and the children, whether son or daughter would take after the mother's clan.

According to Phek village, the son would go to the father and the daughter to the mother.

If for reasons best known to the wife, she did not desire to continue living with her husband, the properties would be divided into three parts, the husband would take 2/3rd and the wife 1/3rd of their properties.

If the husband dies without any issue, the properties would be equally divided between the wife and the heirs or if at the time of his death, the dying husband had clearly declared his will that, after his death, the heirs should not interfere in his properties, the whole property would go to the wife.

If the wife dies before the husband, the whole property would be exclusively at the husband's disposal. He could claim and own all the properties and the wife's side might not be given anything at all or he could give the wife's share to her family.

Festivals

Seikrienyie : This festival was held in the month of January. On the first day of the festival, it was common for both male and female to participate.

The second day of the festival was exclusive day of the males and was called 'thupuseikrie'. On that day, it was tabooed for the women folk to dirty or defile the ritual or the seikrie place of the males. Early in the morning, two elderly men of the village would hold a straw burning torch and would perform necessary rituals. After this, the whole male folks would go hunting exclusively for birds or small animals. Till the male folks return to the village from their hunting venture, it was tabooed for the women folk to even wash clothes or touch his tools. It was also tabooed for women to touch 'radebo' (a bamboo erected to hang the birds/animals killed on the hunting day). If a woman touch the 'radebo' she would be beaten up, to the extent of killing her. It was immaterial whether she apologize or not. On that day, the best cock was killed and was eaten only by the father and the son/s. The purpose was to ritually bless the son/s annually. Best zutho (rice beer) was served to the son. In the evening, after the eating was over, all the left-overs would be buried.

On the third day, the women folk would have their day called 'thunonuso'. The mother and daughter would have the best hen and the mother would bless the daughter/s. That particular day could be observed only by women who have daughters. In all her preparations, she would be helped and provided by her husband.

Khilunye : This was held in the month of November. After harvesting, the paddy was stored in a huge basket called 'khi'. After observing necessary rituals, she would open the khi and put into her mouth a grain of paddy, thus opening the khi to the family for their use.

Therinyie : This was held in the month of December. The first day of the festival was common for both the male and the female. The second day was exclusively meant for the male folks. Early in the morning, they would go to the pond and bathe themselves. This was done with a belief to forgive and forget the past and to begin a good and healthy year. For the

young boys, the fathers would bring water to their house and wash the hand or head of the child. It was tabooed for the women to go out that early morning towards the pond/well where the male folks were bathing. If any women were found, she would be molested.

The third day was for the women. Male folks were not allowed to go near the pond/well where the women were bathing.

During the therinyie, pounding of paddy for the feast of merit was done. The male folks in their best dress would be busy pounding, while women also in their best dress would be busy chaffing.

It was tabooed for women to eat animals that had fingers. For eg., monkey, tiger, and jungle cat etc. Even birds like riichii and riimo were tabooed for women to eat. She was also tabooed from eating cat, sheep and goat etc.

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