

Women and Gender Related Taboos in Hunting-Trapping culture - A Study on the Adi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The Adi constitute one of the major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. They are found in the entire districts of East Siang, Siang and Upper Siang. The Adis are also found in the districts of West Siang, Lohit and Lower Dibang Valley.

In their Traditional economy, Hunting-Trapping culture constituted an important part of their livelihood. Hunting-Trapping was one of their earliest occupations before taking up agriculture as a permanent means of livelihood. However due to social change and domestication of animals, Hunting-Trapping culture changed from means of livelihood into a form of entertainment and pastime. Although Hunting-Trapping culture has lost much of its economic importance, it has a greater social significance amongst the Adi due to several reasons.

Therefore, the present paper will be an attempt to elucidate Women and gender related taboos in Hunting-Trapping culture among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The data has been mainly drawn from both primary as well as secondary sources.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Taboo, Hunting, Trapping, Adi, Arunachal Pradesh.

The Adi denoting hill people comprises a large number of sub-groups such as Minyong, Padam, Shimong, Millang, Pasi, Komkar, Karko, Ashing, Pangi, Tangam, Bori, Ramo, Pailibo and Bokar. They are bound together by a language that inspite of dialectical variations is fundamentally the same and by a similar culture. They trace their descent from a common mythical ancestor, Tani. Besides the Adi, some other major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh such as the Nyishi, Tagin, Apatani, Galo also trace their genealogy to Tani. They are basically Patrilineal, Patriarchal, and Patrilocal. They have their own traditional village council, popularly known as the *Kebang* which is the recognized authority to decide all social disputes. They practiced clan exogamy and tribe endogamy is preferred.

The myths, legends and folktales of the Adi community throw light on the significance of hunting as well as on the strong belief system that points to a strong sense of community-ecology justice system. Their mythologies reflect the socio-economic condition of the early Adi community and how hunting practices played a vital role in their community. For them, hunting is not merely killing of animals for food rather it is a social tradition where they assemble and celebrate together. It is a social activity that is an integral part and parcel of their social life and handed down from generation to generation through its continuous practice. The hunting practice owes its origin to the community of *Engo Takar*, the mythological society of the Adi tribe. According to mythology, the people of *Engo-takar* after

construction of *dere*, community dormitory offered *apong*, rice beer and ginger paste to the spirits of *Nuyi-Gamro* who resided in the land of *Nomgu pyalung subbung* where he had died several years ago and invited their spirits by building a stair of gingers called *nomgu sayang kobang* to enable the spirits of *Nuyi*, *Gamro* and *Nungki* climb up to the *dere* because the people of *Engo takar* did not possess hunting spirits. *Nuyi* climbed the stairs and stayed at the corner most part of the *dere* followed by the spirits of *Nungki* and *Gamro*. The spirit of *Nungkit Tagit* responsible to cause skin disease also followed *Nuyi* to the *dere* of *Engo takar* to dwell in it. Therefore, it is believed that a person who hunt wild animals without restraint often catch skin disease (Danggen, 2007:170-176) The Adi community is guided by strong moral and spiritual values during hunting which further make up the community's worldview.

The earliest mention of the Adi area was recorded in the writings of R.Wilcox in his '*Memoirs of a Survey of Assam and its neighborhood*' when he visited Mebo in 1825-1826. Alexander Mackenzie (1884) in *North East Frontier of India* threw light on the socio-economic life of the Adi and their relations with the Miri and Ahoms. A. Hamilton's (1912), '*In Abor Jungles of North East India*' gave a vivid description about the topography of the land and its people. Verrier Elwin's book, '*A philosophy for NEFA*' (1959) described Siang division as inhabited by the Adi who he described as independent and classified them into two main divisions. Sachin Roy (1960) in his book, *Aspects of Padam- Minyong Culture*, had described in detail about their socio-cultural and economic life. L.R.N. Srivastava (1990) in '*Social Organization of the Minyong*' provides an exhaustive account of the Minyong, their customs, laws and institutions. Tai Nyori (1993) in his book, *the History and Culture of the Adis* had attempted to bring out almost all the socio-cultural background of the Adi society.

Besides, some of the significant works on the tribe are, *Moshup Abang* by B.S Guha (1964), *A comparative Study of Adi Religion* by J.N Chaudhary (1971), *Alluring Frontier* by Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee (1988) etc. These studies provide us some information about their faith and belief systems, dormitory system, arts and crafts, political life, material culture, social organization and British relations with the Adi but women as a distinct aspect of study has been left out. These works provided limited elaborations on women and gender related taboos as a significant feature in the socio-religious life of the Adi tribe. Therefore, it is necessary to relook and readdress this issue to provide a window into the domain of socio-cultural practices and its role in helping unearth the regional history of the tribe. Hence, the present paper is a modest attempt and in-depth study covering various dimensions of gender related taboos in hunting-trapping culture in all its aspects and to fill the long felt gap of knowledge in this regard. Analysis of data was based on both primary and secondary sources. The researcher, being a native of the tribe employed efforts both experience and observation in validating the information so as to confirm the reliability of the data.

The concept of Taboo exists in all societies although the word comes from the Polynesian language where it meant a religious interdiction. However, taboo was also a social prohibition or restriction since social and religious institutions were almost inseparable in the context of Polynesia. Social rules were enforced by giving them a sacred value. (Sen,1989:271). The extended meaning of taboo, however often crosses the space of religion. But even if some taboos have no direct bearing on religion, they at least are charged with the supernatural and therefore, fraught with mysterious power and danger. Moreover, they are observed because they are considered to be right even if their meaning cannot be explained by the people who observe them.

The Adi tribe observes a number of taboos which is known as *Nyonam* in order to prevent bad luck, sickness, epidemic, anger of the spirits and natural calamities. In case of sickness, taboos are observed

which vary according to various ailments with regards to food, drink and work because the traditional belief that disease and death are caused by evil spirits though primitive, still persists even today. Hence, they propitiate the malevolent spirit responsible for the ailment by sacrificing birds or animals and observe rituals performed by the priest or *miri*. In case of death, a few days are observed as *Nyonam* from the date of death and they abstain from certain items of food which differs from place to place. The Taboos are also observed in order to promote agriculture, hunting-fishing as well as socio-religious ceremonies. *Nyonam* is followed strictly. The Adi society does not take upon itself to punish the offenders because it is considered that a breach of taboo would bring supernatural punishment. Various diseases are attributed to the breaking of different taboos.

Tai Nyori in his book, '*History and Culture of the Adis*' had pointed out that the Adi observe three types of taboo after their ritual ceremonies. First is the taboo on movement when they keep themselves confined indoors and the period of confinement differs from occasion to occasion. Secondly, there is taboo on works by which restrictions are imposed on felling of big trees, cutting of banana trees, digging of big holes and damming of rivers. Third is the taboo on eating. The individual and the members of his family who have performed a ritual do not take any meal from the utensils of others for certain days or months. (Nyori, 1993:281).

Hunting and gathering constituted the earliest occupation of the Adi. Their traditional economy was primarily based on hunting, food-gathering, fishing and shifting cultivation. Hunting has always been a part of the tribal tradition and is practiced by most of the tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh. In recent times, however, considerable progress has been achieved towards development of agriculture by improved and scientific methods. Land has been brought under more productive methods of settled cultivation both wet-rice as well as terrace-rice cultivation with the help of irrigation facilities. The progressive Adi farmers are also making use of improved seeds and better agricultural implements. They have also taken up business, industries, horticulture etc.

One of the myths of the Adi narrates the long struggle between *Nibo* (the man) and *Robo* (the spirit), who were brothers for the possession of fertile land and other good lands suitable for human habitation. Ultimately, *Nibo* emerged victorious and occupied these lands as well as the hunting grounds. (Ering, 1970:17-18). We also learn from their *Abang*, the traditional repository of creation myth that *Kari* and *Toro*, the two sons of *Sedi-Melo* were the first good hunters. *Nui* and *Gamboh* were the other two great hunters who lived in the underworld and came to help *Karduk* in hunting and killing a boar. (Nyori, 1993:180). Hunting has a great social significance amongst the Adi for it stands second only to war and is considered a man's occupation. A good hunter enjoys special status in the society and thereby they display their trophies in their houses. Moreover, their contribution to the collection of trophies in *Dere* or *Mushup* (Boy's dormitory or community hall)¹ is honoured by the society. After death, their trophies decorate their grave and it is believed that it will enhance their status in the next world. (Nyori, 1993:182).

The Adi hunt both individually as well as in groups. Hunting is practiced by the community in many ways such as individual hunting, group hunting, community hunting, and hunting in order to eliminate wild animals believed to be harmful to crops etc. Normally hunting is undertaken during winter season roughly starting from November till the onset of spring. The elders teach the young ones on the use of various weapons and traps and the latter are always eager to accompany hunting groups whenever opportunity arise. They use simple but effective weapons made out of materials available in nature. The most widely used implements are bow and arrow, *eyok*, machete that act as a tool and weapon.

Domesticated dogs are constant companions in their hunting expedition. The master of a hound is given a separate piece of meat of the hunted animal for its services.

In individual hunting, a man goes out to the jungle towards any direction at his will and hunts. But in group hunting, all the young male members of the village take active part. Bows and arrows, both poisoned and non-poisoned were used but for hunting ferocious animals, spears and swords were used. In contemporary society, firearms have become important weapons for hunting. A very strict taboo was observed throughout the period during the preparation of poison for the arrowheads. They believed that if the taboo was violated, the poison would be rendered ineffective. The persons engaged in the preparation of poison did not take bath or changed their clothes nor ate meat, pulses or vegetables except boiled rice with salt. They believed that violation of the taboo would render the shooter blind. Every married men were also required to sleep in the *Dere* or *Mushup* (Boys' Dormitory) during the night throughout the preparation period. They were strictly prohibited to sleep with their wives. Similarly, women were also required to observe the taboo of not taking bath, washing clothes or combing their hair during that period.

The nature and purpose of various types of hunting are different. In individual hunting, the hunter lay trap in the forest and check them on a regular basis. He may also go for an animal such as deer, bear or wild boar individually after tracing their footprints.

In group hunting, different types of techniques and traps are used for killing and trapping the animals. The animals killed in group hunting are meant for the participants only.

In community hunting known as *kiiruk*, every household has the obligation to send at least a representative as its purpose is ritualistic social participation and the animals killed are shared by the entire village.

The hunting rituals of the Adi community are closely associated with their traditional belief system deeply rooted in their culture. Most of the hunting rituals are associated with community hunting. Individual and group hunting also have obligation of performing rituals before or after hunting. It is an obligation towards the hunting spirits. They perform certain rites and restrictions to which hunters adhere before going out on a hunting expedition such as avoidance to meet or sleep with women during the previous night but physical contact with women in dreams is considered a good omen, a hunter does not participate in hunting if he sees inauspicious dreams because dreams are considered a reflection of real life situation, hunting weapons are to be kept away from women and children besides exchange of bad words, anger, quarrel and indulgence in laughter and loud noise is restricted. Washing of clothes, grinding of grains, sewing and weaving of clothes by women during the time of hunting are strictly prohibited. During rituals, offering is made to various deities and spirits such as *Gumin Soyin*, the protector and guardian of the house and *Gamyng uyu*, hunting spirits are propitiated before leaving for hunting expedition. *Sikom tanom*, *hikimoyi* and *asi aamong* spirits are propitiated at the forests. The spirits of killed animals of high mountains are propitiated at the outskirts of the village, dormitory or at the hunter's house. The rituals associated with traditional hunting practices are the continuation of tradition of the ancient past. Rituals performed during course of hunting throw light on the various socio-religious and economic aspect of the people.

Emo monam ritual is associated with community hunting which is led by two or more persons assigned by the village elders during *Emo kebang*, meeting in the dormitory. A person whose wife is pregnant or in menstruation, involve in incestuous relationships, those who attended funeral rites is never assigned for the purpose. On the appointed day, *emo* or aconite is made into a paste mixed with local herbs and

smear on their arrows with *mane*, a local plant. A *miri*, priest is also invited to decipher where to begin the hunting and to foresee its success or failure. At the same time, the *miri* foretells or warns the hunters of all possible impending dangers. During *Ityit* ritual, hunters assemble in the community hall and after discussing the hunting strategy; the rite is performed with incantation by an older member of the *merom* that is hunting group to ward off impurities among the hunters and seek good omen for the day and they are supposed to exit from the same door to proceed towards the hunting reserves. The rites of *Bomlik gatlik* and *Pobang taknam* are performed in the hunting camp, *dumbang* where the camp is cleaned up and the trees are decorated with *pobang* that is shaven bamboo sticks woven crosswise. A circular fence is prepared with bows and guns placed inside and a fowl, red rooster is sacrificed with its blood sprinkled on the bows and guns. This is performed to seek blessings from the hunting spirits and ward off all impurities from the hunters. *Hine Mone* rite is performed for both individual and community hunting in order to propitiate the hunting spirits with rice, eggs, ginger paste and *apong* that is rice beer which are offered to the deities with the hope of something in return. During *Mebuk apnam*, a half burnt pressured bamboo is hung vertically above the ground in the *dumbang*, hunting camp where expert hunters show their skills by striking arrows at the bamboo target. This starts the beginning of the hunting expedition.

Gadar Gekunam is performed to please the hunting spirits and gods of forest if the *merom*, hunting group is unsuccessful in getting any game after full day hunting. Another leader is assigned to lead the hunting due to the belief that the earlier leader might have had bad fortune and replacing him with a new leader would affect a better outcome.

Kohon is performed on the way as the hunting expedition continues or in the deep forests where hunting is finally carried out. An egg or a fowl is sacrificed in order to propitiate the hunting spirits. This is done after successive failures of hunting by the *merom*, hunting group. *Laklam panam* is performed at the outskirts of the village by the hunter. Six small posts are erected up to a height of 10-15 cm and in between the posts; the footmarks of animals are smeared on the ground in different directions. Then ginger is smeared and arrow is shot at the post which is done with a belief that the spirits of the killed animals which are believed to follow the hunter and the hunting group would be puzzled at this point to find the right direction in which the hunting group would proceed. *Bango penam* is performed to propitiate the spirits of the animals which is incanted and propitiated differently for different animals which takes place inside a community hall or a hunters' house.

Hunting is carried out by the able-bodied members including the young boys along with dogs while those who are unable to accompany the hunting stay back in the *dumbang*. Older men known as *dumbang mijing* or *merom mijing* do the maintenance of the *dumbang* and offer propitiation known as *hine mone* in the *dumbang* such as millet beer, ginger and rice to the guardian of the sacred grooves.

The Adi believe in many malevolent and benevolent spirits and attribute every good deed to the benevolent spirits whereas every disease and suffering to the malevolent spirits. There are two ways to get rid of such sufferings according to them, one is through propitiation to the spirits causing suffering and the other is to drive it away by hunting such as *killi menam* to drive out epidemics. Another form of hunting known as *eruk erak kiiruk* is carried out to drive out the spirits that cause damage to crops leading to decay and infertility of the soil.

L.R.N Srivastava had observed in his book '*Social organization of the minyongs*' that the preparation of poison for the *Kiruk*, the organized community hunting or going for a war was taken more or less on a

ritual pattern and no woman were allowed to enter or even peep through the *Dere*, boys' dormitory while the poison was being prepared there. (Srivastava, 1990:61).

Sachin Roy had noted that the hunting bows and arrows of the Adis were of the same type as those used in warfare. Women were not allowed to touch the implements of war and chase, swords, spear, bow and arrow and arrow-case during menstruation and at war time. It was considered that the touch of women who spin and brew may cause entanglement and loss of self-control during fights. If a woman had touched the weapons, to avoid disaster in war, the male had to sacrifice one fowl to the *piang* deity and the female had to perform *Takuk*. To test the effect of the sacrifice, first of all they went out on a hunt and if they were successful in killing an animal easily, it was proved that their offering had been answered and if not, they were to perform *gammang*, *mabat*, *piang* ceremonies with sacrifices of fowls. (Roy, 1960; Reprint 1997:117).

The hunting reserves were left untilled for games and these reserves were the common property of the whole village and every family had an undisputed right over them. But in the hunting reserve owned by individual families, traps and snares were not allowed to be set up but an individual could hunt using bow and arrow, firearms etc. however during *Kiruk* or community hunting, the whole village, or the members of various clans could hunt in any area without setting up traps or snares.

Traditional community hunting was discussed, planned and organized in a *kebang*, village council, which was held in the *Dere* or *Mushup*. The entire village, except womenfolk, participated in it and normally such hunting was undertaken after the harvest in the dry season. Before the start of annual hunting or during *Ampi kiruk*, *Ampi* considered as the guardian spirit of war and chase was worshipped by the villagers at the *Dere* or *Mushup*. During night time, the *Dere* or *Mushup* boys' shared and drunk rice-beer and *Ampi Bari*, the accounts giving the origin of hunting was sung by them for successful hunting. During the search for animals, they were expected to sleep in the forest for three nights and they hunted during the fourth day known as *Ampi Kiruk* and the animals killed were distributed to the old men of the village. In return, the old men, *mijings*, threw a feast called *Dorung* for the young hunters. The next day, the young men again proceeded to the forest for hunting known as *Donio Kiruk*, feast given by young men. Girls and women observed *nyonam* during these three days and were not allowed to go to the fields. They resumed their field work only after the *Donio Kiruk*. (Roy, 1997:142).

During *Unnying/Aran*, the new year festival of the Adi, the *Kebang* or the village council fixed the day for community hunting, which is a defining ritual of the *Unnying/Aran* festival, where small game like wild birds, squirrels and rats are a gift to the old and young. The young hunters would bring home whatever they have killed on the first day. The women prepared food and rice-beer for the hunters. Sachin Roy had observed that on the third day when mithuns were sacrificed, dancing was prohibited. The eighth day of the festival was observed as a taboo day for the whole village whereby the mithuns were let loose and on the ninth day, women were not allowed to enter the *Dere/Mushup* when all the male members of the village consumed meat after cooking it there. (Roy, 1997:143)

Sachin Roy further wrote that during lean months, the Adi observed a festival called *Yage* when they organized community hunt and the game collected in such hunting was shared equally by the hunters and brought back home. They placed a piece of ginger and a bunch of millet near the entrance of their respective houses in order to frighten away the evil spirits. (Roy, 1997:143). During the annual hunt, until and unless the first messenger had arrived from the jungle to inform about the hunt, the womenfolk were not allowed to comb their hair, wash their clothes or to take bath. (Borgohain, 1981:48).

The hunting tradition of the Adi has taken a dangerous turn with modern guns of all choices turning out to be more accurate and devastating with the pull of every next trigger. Traditional trapping for small game still exists but hunting with bow and arrow has almost become extinct. Over the years, the traditional method of hunting has been gradually replaced by modern weapons. The enormity of the hunted and wildlife dead could be witnessed on the day just before *Unnying/Aran* festival when the hunters returned home after spending nights in the jungle. (Arunachal Times, 2016:1).

During recent years, a series of awareness campaign on preservation, promotion, and protection of Biodiversity, sensitization of Adi community against wildlife hunting in the name of festivals and rituals has been organized by the *Adi Baane Kebang*, the apex body of the Adi Community. According to a report of *Adi Baane Kebang*, majority of the people gave consent to complete ban on selling and transportation of air guns used for killing birds and small animals and hunting of wild animals and birds using firearm besides fishing by using power generator and blasting etc.

Responding to the public reports of hunting of wildlife, the East Siang district administration issued an executive order imposing blanket ban on hunting of wildlife under any purpose. The order prohibited carrying, keeping, transfer and use of air guns, air rifle and pellets within the jurisdiction of the district and it further warned of legal action for any violation. (Arunachal Times, 2016:3).

K.Kumar in his book, '*The Pailibos*', a sub-group of the Adi had observed that the girls did not eat the heart, lung and stomach of an animal killed in a hunt. They believed that violation of such taboo would make them vulnerable to the evil effect of the presiding deity of the jungle and the consequence of the violation of the taboo would be disastrous for them and their families and even for the village as a whole. They believed that observance of taboo would protect them from harm, injury and disease. (Kumar, 1979:47).

If a person had killed a tiger or during Tiger hunting, the man whose arrow first hit the tiger, he had to observe certain rite and rituals to purify him from the sin otherwise it was believed that the spirit of the tiger might harm the hunter and his family. Therefore, the offender was not allowed to enter his house except after a scheduled time limit and he was required to stay in the *Dere* or *Mushup* and observed certain rituals instead of one's own house. He also had to abstain from taking meat for a long period as advised by the *miri* or priest. Moreover, during Tiger hunting, several rites were to be performed after the kill was spotted and before the hunters returned to the village with their trophy. (Roy, 1997:141). It was also considered a taboo to go near a woman, accept food from her or sleep with her after a warrior returned back from war. Moreover, the warrior was also required to sleep in the *Dere* or *Mushup* as his association with the women might not be auspicious for her and the entire family.

Thus, from the foregoing discussion, it can be observed that the Adi followed certain taboos connected with Hunting-Trapping which had socio-religious sanction and it reflected the prohibitive aspect of taboos. It was believed that the infringement of such prohibition and restriction would bring punishment to the wrong doer.

Notes and References

1. Boys' dormitory is known by different names by the various sub-groups of the Adis such as minyongs call it as dere, mushup by padams, ngaptek by millangs and bange by boris, ashings and tangams and so on.
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