

## MYTHS OF ORIGIN AND FAMILIAL TRADITIONS AMONG THE SINGPHO TRIBE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The Singpho tribe, one of the prominent frontier communities inhabiting the tri-junction region of India, China, and Myanmar, possesses a rich cultural heritage, distinct social organization, and significant historical background. Related communities of the Singpho are found in the Yunnan Province of China, where they are known as the Jingpo, and in the Kachin State of Myanmar, where they are identified as the Kachin. Ethnographic studies indicate that the Jinghpaws constitute one of the most influential groups among the Kachin communities, comprising major clans such as the Lahpai, Marip, Maran, Lahtaw, and Nhkum. The present study adopts a longitudinal survey method to examine the myths of origin, lineage traditions, and family structure of the Singpho tribe, with special emphasis on changing family dynamics. The study highlights the significance of oral traditions in preserving collective identity and tracing ancestral lineage. According to Singpho mythology, a semi-divine ancestral figure descended from heaven and gave rise to six brothers namely Gam, Nong, La, Du, Tang, and Yawng, from whom the major lineages of the community emerged. Among them, Shapawng Yawng is regarded as the ancestral forefather of the Singpho people. The findings reveal that the Singpho family system is predominantly patriarchal and patrilineal, with inheritance, lineage, and chieftainship transmitted through the male line. Traditional customs relating to marriage, inheritance, kinship, and domestic responsibilities continue to play an important role in maintaining social order and cultural identity. At the same time, processes of modernization, education, migration, and economic transformation have influenced shifts from joint to nuclear family structures and encouraged changing gender roles and occupational patterns. Despite these transformations, the study concludes that the Singpho community continues to preserve its core cultural values, kinship ties, and customary traditions, thereby maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Singpho tribe, myths of origin, familial traditions, lineage

### INTRODUCTION

The North-East India is a mosaic of various racial groups such as the Mongoloid, Caucasoid, Indo-Burmese and Aryans characterised by an enchanting and divers culture. It is home to 166 different tribes consisting of 12.1 million people (27.29 %) and 220 languages. The highest proportion of tribal population is inhabited in Mizoram (94.4%) followed by Nagaland (86.5%), Meghalaya (86.1%), Arunachal Pradesh (68.8%), Manipur (35.1%), Sikkim (33.8%), Tripura (31.8%) and Assam has the lowest share of tribal population at 12.4% (Census, 2011). Each tribe has its own unique myths, history and socio-cultural life, which are distinct from those of the other states of India. According to Burman et al. (2007), "The indigenous people belong to mainly the Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman stock and have preserved their culture, language and way of life, even in the present century".

The Singpho tribe is one of the frontier tribes of tri-junction zone of India, China and Myanmar with a rich culture heritage, distinct social structure and significant historical background. It is worth mentioning that, apart from North-East India, their relatives also reside in China's Yunnan Province and Myanmar's Kachin State (Machey, 2013). In China Singphos are known as 'Jingpo' and in

Myanmar known as 'Kachin' (Singpho, 2000; Bora, 2007; Hanson, 1913). *Kachin* is a romanisation of the Burmese term 'Kakhyen' and from 1890 onward *Kakhyen* have come to be known as *Kachin* (Leach, 1964). Hanson (1913) noted that the Jinghpaws constitute the largest and influential tribe known as Kachin comprising numerous clans and sub-tribes. Among which the Lahpai, Marip, Maran, Lahtaw and Nkhum are particularly significant. The meaning of the term remains uncertain; however, *pawng Jinghpaw masha ni*, is the central Jinghpaw race.

The Singphos primarily inhabit in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, particularly along the Patkai hill in North-East India (Machey, 2018). In Assam they are concentrated in Tinsukia district, while in Arunachal Pradesh they are mainly inhabited Changlang, Namsai and Lohit districts. Smaller groups of Singpho-speaking populations are also present in Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. Estimates suggest that the total Singpho population in India ranges between 30000 and 40000 (Lintner, 1997). However, the Census of India (2011) recorded 7,958 Singphos comprising 3,999 males and 3,959 females residing in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The myths of origin and familial traditions of the Singpho tribe of North-East India constitute an integral part of their cultural heritage and social organization. These origin myths not only explain the migration and settlement patterns of the tribe but also reinforce collective identity, kinship bonds, and ancestral legitimacy. Familial traditions among the Singpho are deeply rooted in clan-based social structures, customary laws, and patriarchal lineage systems that regulate marriage, inheritance, and social responsibilities. Ritual practices, oral storytelling, and ancestor veneration continue to play a significant role in preserving intergenerational continuity. Despite the growing influence of modernization and cultural transformation, the Singpho community has retained many of its traditional values and customs, thereby maintaining a strong sense of socio-cultural continuity and ethnic identity. In this backdrop this paper examines the myths of origin and familial traditions of the Singpho tribe, with particular emphasis on the role of kinship practices, ancestral narratives, and socio-cultural continuity in preserving the community's collective identity.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study is to examine the myths of origin and familial traditions of the Singpho tribe of North-East India.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The study primarily employed a longitudinal survey as its research method. Data collection was carried out through extensive field visits, direct observation and interactions with members of the Singpho community. In addition to primary data, concurrently or after field interviews, consulted district records, local libraries, mission records, older ethnographies and census reports to collect corroborating historical evidence.

Primary data were collected through interview with help of interview schedule from senior knowledgeable persons, elders, ritual specialists, historians and village headmen. Moreover, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted to explore the origin and history of the Singphos.

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

### **Myths of Origin**

The myths of the Singpho people narrate the origin of their familial lineage. According to their myths, in a time long before the existence of human beings, a semi-mythological figure descended from the heavens. This figure split into two, and from it emerged six brothers, who were named *Gam*, *Nong*, *La*, *Du*, *Tang*, and *Yawng*. These names continue to influence the name nomenclature of the Singpho

community to this day. Among them, *Yawng* also known as *Daru Tsinli Yawng* or *Shapawng Yawng* is regarded as the ancestral forefather of the Singpho people.

According to Singpho oral tradition, *Shapawng Yawng's* grandson, *Wahkyet Wa*, became the father of nine sons. Among these nine lineages, only five are traditionally recognized as chieftain families: *Marip*, *Lahtaw*, *Lahpai*, *Nhkum* and *Maran*. These families hold significant social and historical importance within the Singpho community.

## LINEAGE

In Singpho society, the family follows a patriarchy system with authority vested in the male head, known as *Intana Mitow*. The *Intana Mitow* oversees household affairs, manages property, resolves internal disputes and ensures the continuation of family customs and rituals. His role is both symbolic and functional, serving as a guardian of the family's honour, traditions and social ties.

The patriarchy nature of the Singpho family system also extends to inheritance patterns and lineage tracing, which typically follow the patrilineal line. In the patrilineal Singpho society, property is inherited by the sons. All of the sons enjoy the family land while their father is living. However, the sons split up the family property once their father passes away. Each of them receives an equal portion of the family's assets. However, the person who stays with the parents to take care of their welfare receives a larger portion. Property and inheritance are transferred from one person to another through customary practices, and disputes along this concern are resolved through existing customs. Sons are often expected to remain within the family unit, while daughters join their husband's family upon marriage and takes up her husband's surname though she can use the family property at will, a female member has no legal claim to it. The widow, however, is entitled to a share of her husband's estate.

The chieftainship of Singpho is inherited. The father is the Singpho family's chief. Everyone respects the father since he is regarded as the leader of the family, and the oldest son inherits the role upon his death. Each family member shares equal responsibility for the family and works together to support it. The oldest female member of a joint household prepares meals at one hearth. The family's immovable and moveable assets, including cultivable land, kitchenware, apparel, livestock and other items are held in common.

An individual keeps his earnings, but in a joint family he must give half to the head and retain the rest. Each separate family is housed in a small compartment within the dwelling for a joint family. Through the male line, the Singpho culture sustains their link. Because of this, each phrase used to denote a relationship also denotes the group to which the relationship belongs.

## FAMILY CUSTOMS

The traditional Singpho family is extended with several generations living together or nearby, sharing household, hunting and farming work. Moreover, these extended families play a significant role in maintaining kinship bonds, social order, transmitting cultural knowledge and managing communal resources.

The income accruing from the agricultural product of the family is still kept in the common fund. But it is observed in the village that, the earning of the some of the joint family members from non-agricultural sources like postal service, engineering, shop keeping, teacher, earnings are kept by the concerned family members in bank or elsewhere instead of depositing it in the common fund of the family. The habit of small savings is being seen as developing among such persons (Machey, 2015).

## **MARRIAGE CUSTOMS**

Marriage is called *numladat*, meaning taking of a girl, is considered one of the most important life events. Marriage customs within the community are largely endogamous and regulated by clan-based rules that ensure harmony and cultural continuity. Elders are deeply respected and their guidance is central in both family marriage and community matters. In Singpho society, polygamy is permitted, though monogamy is regarded as the ideal form of marriage. However, women are not allowed to have more than one husband (Ningkhee, 2008). In some cases if the first wife is deceased or barren or no son or the man is wealthy he get married more wives.

Marriage within the same clan is not approved by the society. The bride and the bridegroom must belong to separate clan. Each clan of Singpho people is exogamous. Singpho marriage practices show that each clan generally prefers to restrict its marital alliances to specific clans. Marriage with one's maternal uncle's daughter is allowed. Consequently, when an individual marries a girl from a particular clan, it often becomes customary for his descendants to choose their wives from the natal lineage of that clan (Lakhendra, 2014, Machey, 2015).

## **ROLES OF DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES**

In Singpho family father commands respect and authority, while women play crucial roles within the household economy. They are expert handloom weavers, producing both day-to-day garments and ceremonial textiles. Their weaving skills are significant culturally and economically, contributing to the family's material wealth and cultural heritage. However both male and female member participates in agricultural and allied activities. Moreover, their customary law grants men and women equal authority in decisions concerning children's discipline. In case of a child's illness, parents offer prayers to *Nat* (spirit) while also seeking medical treatment, with the father traditional responsible for expenses. In agriculture, women decide the type of crops or rice to grow based on family and community needs, while men lead the overall farming process with assistance from domestic helpers.

## **TRADITIONS AND MODERN INTERFACE**

The interface between traditional family structures and modern influences has led to both challenges and opportunities within the Singpho community. Migration for education and employment has weakened some traditional practices and intergenerational cohabitation. On the other hand, exposure to broader societal norms has encouraged greater gender equality, education for women and diversified roles within the family.

## **FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Although traditional joint families are still common, recent decades have seen a gradual shift toward nuclear families, especially among younger generations. This shift is largely influenced by increased access to education, employment opportunities, and the spread of modern lifestyle patterns.

## **FAMILY SIZE AND DYNAMICS**

Historically, Singpho families were larger in size due to agrarian lifestyles. With the adoption of modern education and economic changes, family sizes have gradually reduced. Young couples increasingly opt for smaller families, influenced by awareness of health care, job opportunities, economic planning and governmental family welfare programs.

Despite gradual shift toward the nuclear family structure, reduction in size, the core values of familial support, mutual respect and collective responsibility remain integral to Singpho identity. Even among nuclear families, ties to the extended kin group are maintained through regular visits, festivals and participation in customary ceremonies.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the Singpho family system is deeply rooted in patriarchal, patrilineal and clan-based traditions that continue to shape their social and cultural identity. Myths of origin, lineage practices and inherited chieftainship play a significant role in preserving unity, kinship and customary values within the community. Traditional customs related to marriage, inheritance, family responsibilities and collective living reflect a strong sense of mutual support, respect for elders and communal cooperation.

At the same time, the study highlights gradual transformations influenced by modernization, education, migration and economic change. Joint families are increasingly shifting toward nuclear family structures, and younger generations are adopting smaller family norms and diversified occupations. Despite these changes, core Singpho values such as family solidarity, cultural continuity, collective responsibility and kinship ties remain strong. Thus, the Singpho family institution reflects a balance between preserving traditional customs and adapting to contemporary social realities.

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