



Review Article

# Traditional Beliefs of The A'chiks Community of Meghalaya in Taboos and Their Ill-Effects

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**ABSTRACT:** *The A'chiks are ancient tribal community and inhabits in the present northeast state of Meghalaya, India, having distinct tradition of their own since time immemorial. Their traditions have been survived orally due to the absence of literature for generations. But they were known to have a very rich traditional belief and practices which have been handed down by their forefather. The A'chik believes in the existence of taboos. On the other hand, the term extends to a large number of prohibition and restriction which constitutes an important characteristic in the social and religious life and possess ethical concepts. Belief indicates certain rules like taboos had ethical implications on the human beings and how one is connected to his surrounding environment. Interestingly, they appear to be simple prohibition but taboos were a way of inculcating desirable behavior in the individual lives. The study is intended to explore and give a perceptive outlook into the traditional beliefs of the A'chiks in taboos and their ill-effects associated with natural environment.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Tradition, A'chiks Community, Environment, Taboos, Belief, Meghalaya.*

## INTRODUCTION

The study is intended to establish and understand the traditional belief and practices of the traditional A'chiks that are passed down within a society or community with symbolic meaning or special significance associated with natural environment in the past. On the other hand, traditional belief points to the feeling of certainty that something exist is true, or is good. The A'chik tradition is the manifestation of their belief in determining the behavior, thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and the practices of the people. However, the A'chik like any other ethnic community of the northeast India, its past is undocumented and no written records have been found within them, yet the oral tradition has been a very sufficient tool and a better store house of all the knowledge and wisdom of the A'chiks traditional beliefs.

In this sense, their thoughts, attitudes, and practices are not put forward by means of theories. According to Rongmuthu. D (2008), there exist, however, a belief among some sections of the A'chiks that they possessed a literature of their own in their own script and language on rolls of parchment made from the skins of animals. But when they left Tibet and wandered towards the plains of India, they faced acute shortage of food and so they boiled those scrolls of parchments and ate them up. The A'chiks' oral historical narratives possessed a rich tradition and culture into the understanding of their belief and practices. Hence, the A'chik evolved their own traditional belief system or system of knowledge about various things, their own way of understanding the world, nature, soul, human destiny and so on.

## BELIEFS IN TABOOS

A taboo is an integral part of the A'chik traditional belief in their life world. The traditional A'chik community's relation to natural world was regulated to a great extent by taboos. In an interaction, one of the informants reveals that "namja ba dakmalja, aganmalja" is the local term for taboo, meaning forbidden or restricted. According to the informants, the term taboos possess large number of prohibitions in the social and religious life of the A'chiks tribe. Taboos are not just social implication but they have ethical concepts, because the A'chiks believed that if the taboos were violated it invites unwanted consequences in the form of diseases, drought, death etc which affects not only the individual but the whole community as well. This justifies that they never touched or do exploitation or destruction to anything when it is being forbidden or prohibited by the society. Bendangila in the book "Nature, culture and philosophy" pointed out that "Belief in certain avoidance rules like taboos had moral implications on the human person and how one related to his surrounding environment" (cited in Varghese, 2014. p.119). It is further observing that they appear as simple prohibitions but taboos were a way of inculcating desirable behavior in the individual towards certain aspects of nature.

## TABOOS IN ANIMALS

It is true that at one time, the traditional A'chiks did not see animals as they are, but as human community. Hence, the traditional A'chiks relation to the animal world was regulated to a great extends by taboos. This indicates that taboos extended to the non-human contents. In personal interaction the informants exhibits that there are certain animals, naming of which according to their common names was considered a taboo in the pre-modern A'chik society. The A'chik does not have any keen interest to destroy or kill animals which destroy their crops in the field. The A'chik believed that when different items of food are at the growing stage birds and animals which may destroy in the field such as elephant, monkey, wild hog, fowls and others are not mentioned according to their common names but reference are made under certain terms. They never mentioned according to their common names, because the A'chiks believed that these animals are inspirited and hence rendered respect.

### *Elephant (Mongma)*

The oral information gathered from the study reveals that the traditional A'chik believed that it was taboo to mention elephant according to their common name. An elephant which is commonly known as mongma is termed as dal'gipa (great one), atchu ambi (granpa grandma), ki'me chapangpila (one carrying tail on both sides), wena kon'a (wanderer). It is therefore taboo to mention according to the common name. Hunting and killing of elephant never exist by the ancestors within the Achik community since time immemorial. It was further said that violation of such belief compels to have some kind of punishment and sometime it even amounts to death. It was also believed that saying something inappropriate against the elephant invites unwanted consequences which will affects the individual as well as his belonging things. The interaction data included one piece of concrete evidence.

Once upon a time, a man was crossing by the forest and as he saw an elephant grazing, he said something like "he will bring an elephant to his house and do the cultivation in the field". With this the man came home and never realize of his action will bring element of fear and dreadful. Since it is strongly believed that saying something inappropriate against the elephant is immoral and a taboo and thereby may amounts to certain misfortunes. After a while the elephant came to his home and destroyed his house and all of his belongings that day itself. All of his house and belongings were ruined just because of his immoral action. The story about an elephant is not simple story as appears to be the case. It has a deeper meaning and

implications for ones' own action or deed. This justifies that these taboos have their significant importance as social implications within the community.

### *Tiger (Matcha)*

The informant discloses that ancestors of the A'chiks community never kill tigers. In the traditional A'chik, there was a belief that the tiger is regarded powerful animals that could bring ill-effect to the individual lives for generations. The A'chiks did not mention according to their common names, instead they will say, miksugija (face not washed), balwa paka (a tempest), jawa (stranger). Hence, in case if an individual was killed by the tiger, they didn't want to say, "tiger have killed the individual"; instead, they would say, "jawa or stranger has killed the individual" or "an individual has stumbled to death by the stranger". On the other hand, if a tiger was killed by an individual, they believed that its death would be avenged in the lives of the killer's descendents. It is therefore, a taboo to kill tiger in the traditional A'chik community. It was further confirmed that in the A'chik traditional belief, any river, forest, land etc, or any spot where an individual was killed by the tiger becomes defilement or unlucky and hence belongs to none. So, the place where an individual was killed by the tiger was regarded as sacred and become sacred grove thus keep protected and preserved for generations. The interaction data included one piece of concrete evidence that once upon a time on the season of agricultural cultivation, an individual was killed by the tiger in the pool. The body of the individual was left in the middle of the pool. Henceforth, the pool becomes defile or unlucky. On the other hand, the traditional A'chiks had a belief that it was taboo to name according to the common name and hence reference is made under certain term known as "jawa or stranger". Since then, the pool has been named as "Jawa Wari or Jawa Pool", a pool where an individual was killed by the tiger.

### *Monkey, wild hog, and fowl (Makkre, Wak burung, aro Do'mesel)*

A personal interaction reveals that in traditional A'chik community, it was taboo to mention monkey, fowl and wild hog according to their common names especially when the crops are at the growing stage in the field. It was believed that violation of such taboos or prohibitions will invites the animals to ruin their crops in the field. But different terms have been used to mentioned them such as monkey commonly known as makkre is termed as na'chil pugija (one having deaf ear), wild hog commonly known as wak is termed as gitchi olgipa (one carrying hoe on both side) and a fowl commonly known as do'mesel is termed as sengwat (a glowworm). It was also believed that these animals were considered divine which could bring either a blessing or a curse to the human beings hence rendered respect and care. Hunting or killing of them is strictly prohibited or restricted especially during the cultivation periods. If these animals were found in the field, they will never be killed or hunted but instead different terms are used to drive them off from the field and hence in the process the crops will not be ruined. Such is the strong beliefs of the traditional A'chiks associated with the animals to observe these taboos to preserve human's association with nature even this day.

### *Barking deer (Maraka)*

Taboos further extended to the behavior of human beings in relation to barking deer. The informants' remarks that in the traditional A'chik, there was a belief that the barking deer is regarded powerful animals that could bring them either a blessing or a curse. Hence, if a barking deer is found on the way to field, it was believed to be a sign of something which could be a blessing or a curse of their harvest in the field and it was a taboo in the traditional A'chik community to do manual work in the field. Hence, they never engaged any manual work on that very day to observe these taboos and thus maintain their strong relationship with the barking deer.

### *Snake (Chipu)*

Another taboo that gives an insight into their prudent way of regulating the usage of non human animals is the use of snake in the A'chik traditional community. If a snake was found on the way to firm, it is believed to be the sign of unlucky day to engage in manual work. There was a belief in the traditional A'chik community that the snake is regarded powerful animals that could bring a curse to the society. The traditional A'chiks had a belief that whenever the snake was found and hence hunting and killing was tried by the individual, but could not make it then, the snake will crouch and bite him to death wherever it is found. Thus, the traditional A'chiks abstains from harming the snake or from manual work to avoid unwanted consequences and also to observe these taboos.

## **TABOOS IN DOMESTIC ANIMALS**

Taboos extended even to the domestic life of the animals such as cat is believed to be divine and hence rendered respect. The oral information exhibit that whenever there was birth of a kitten, the owner and the household of the animals observed "salnima" for a day or two; it was taboo for them to engage in any kind of work. They observe these taboos to preserve, dedicate and welcome the new life of the new born. The extension of care and consideration to the lives of the animals justifies the values recognition in non-human species.

## **TABOOS IN PLANTS AND TREES**

It is further envisaged in the oral information that taboos not only extended to the animals but even to the plants and trees such as Prap Bol (banyan tree) and Mari Budu (long creeper tree). The traditional A'chiks regarded them divine and sacred trees that it could bring them a blessing or a curse to the individual as well as to the community. Thus, it was taboos to fell or to destroy the trees. Violation of such belief will invites the wrath of divine spirits leading to some kind of punishment, disease and sometimes it even amounts to death. These beliefs and customs have a great influence in their traditions into the understanding and affirming intrinsic values and in the values recognized in nature.

## **TABOOS IN RITES AND RITUALS**

The informants have also confirmed that the traditional A'chik communities had a number of taboos relating to certain places and rites and ritual ceremony. certain spots were held tabooed; the sight of such place or spot was believed to likely to bring and cause bad luck, misfortunes, disease, and even death upon those who happened to voluntarily took no care about them. Taboos regulated the behaviors of human beings in relation to agricultural beliefs and practices. The traditional A'chik prior to the cultivation did a consult to malign spirits known as "a'a o'pata" on the belief that the plots may be the inhabitants of malign spirits. It was believed that some of the plots were inhabited by some malign spirits. The inhabited plots were thought to be the kingdom of inhabiting spirits. So, on cutting the first plant, the individual went home and waits for dream for a night or two. If the dream is the good one, the individual set to work on it, but if the dream is the bad one, and then it is believed that the malign spirits inhabit the plots and hence search for another. And having a bad dream which the traditional A'chiks believed to be the kingdom of malign spirits is considered a taboo. If someone dared to have it for a jhum, it was expected that one of his family members would die the same year. Hence, the traditional A'chiks was afraid of provoking those spirits when they had to enter what was believed to be their domain.

*Kimindam ba Kritchakram* (sacrificial alter): It is another popular taboo for the traditional A'chik in the past. It is the spot where rites and rituals take place for a sick man to be healed

located near the house. Such a place was considered divine and sacred. The A'chik had a strong belief that the particular spot is strictly prohibited to enter or to do anything by anybody except a priest. If someone dared to enter or did something like urinating inside the spot, it was expected that the individual would die or will face unwanted consequences such as disease in the form of blindness and lameness etc. It is, therefore, for fear of such spirits, the A'chiks avoided such places where sacrificial alter is found and thus considered a taboo.

*Kosi*: It is the spot where sacrificial ceremonies take place. Such a place was considered sacred and divine. The traditional A'chik believed that Kosi is the inhabiting place for divine spirits. It is therefore, a taboo to cut wood, bamboo or tree from the spot. The spots surrounding 'kosi' is usually avoided for any cultivation unless a sacrifice was made to appease the inhabiting spirits. If someone goes ahead cultivating the surroundings, it entailed undesirable consequences like disease in the form of blindness, lameness etc and it even amounts to death and hence, no one dared to do anything nearby the spots.

*A'song tatchakram*: It was also a spot where a sacrificial ceremony is held for the safeguard and protection of people, village and their surroundings from all dangers and diseases. The sacrificial ceremony is performed every year erecting two stones at the altar where the slain animals' blood is smeared in order to appease the inhabiting spirits. A place where the sacrificial ceremony is performed was considered unlucky and unhealthy for cultivation purposes. Such places were regarded as inhabiting spots of divine spirits and hence, were avoided for fear of provoking the inhabiting spirits. Violation of such beliefs brings undesirable consequences to the offender as well as the offended. It is therefore, a taboo feared by the traditional A'chiks, and no one dared to have it for doing anything on the spots.

*Pra godapgipa bol*: A tree which has had a bare leaf broken off in a storm leaving only the living trunk standing, the wounded top of which in course of time has healed and become overgrown with bark. The traditional A'chiks had a belief that such trees were regarded as hunted by the malign spirits greatly feared by the A'chiks. It was therefore, considered taboos to use for any purposes. For fear of such spirits, the A'chiks generally avoided such trees for use of different purposes and no one is dared to have it. If someone dared to use it, it is likely to bring and cause misfortunes, mishaps or disaster upon those who happened to see no care about the taboos.

What emerges in this respect is the element that traditional belief in taboos exists among the traditional A'chik communities. From what we have discussed in the study, it is clear that the A'chiks in the past were guided by the ethical principle of right and wrong, good and bad, like and dislike. Whatever threatens or likely to threaten their individual and social integrity were avoided at all cost. Taboos were avoided because they believed that violation of such beliefs could bring some kind of punishment, ill luck, disease and even death. Whatever is likely to fulfill their desire and aspirations was considered right and good, and whatever is likely to bring misfortunes was considered wrong and bad.

### **THE CURRENT SCENARIO**

At present many of the taboos related to fishing, hunting and forest reserved are still observed by the A'chik people. Time and again for hunting and fishing are regulated by the community so that the animals, fishes and forest available in their natural habitat are not overexploited. Today with growing environmental concerns, community fish sanctuary and forest reserves have been formed by the community in the motive of values recognized in ecological importance and helps in protecting them. Some of the sanctuaries and reserves were adopted by the community such as Songkalwari fish sanctuary, Wachi Wari fish reserve and Bansamgre

fish reserve and the forest reserves like Chasingre forest reserve, etc. It was a community fish sanctuary where fishing is strictly prohibited. Violation of such rules is likely to bring some kind of punishment which the offender has to pay certain amount of fine to the community. It has strong prohibition and hence no one dared to do fishing from the spots for fear of punishment within the community.

The forest reserve was a community reserve, where cutting and burning of forest and cultivation in the reserve was strictly prohibited with certain amount of fines. If someone is dared to cultivate or felled trees from the reserve, it is expected that the offender pays fines to the community. Fearing of such punishment, no one is dared to cultivate or felled the trees from the reserves.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the traditional A'chiks in the pre-modern society believed in taboos associated with hills, mountains, rivers and animals, etc. From today's point of view, the belief prevalent in the traditional A'chik society can be judged superstitious, irrelevant and invalid; and many of the things they do in conformity in their beliefs can also be judged as groundless and meaningless. Nevertheless, what is distinctive to the A'chik tradition is that even though their belief and practices could not be said to have developed the ecological development but it justifies the positive attitudes to the preservation of animals, land, rivers and forest etc. On the other hand, the A'chiks hold the belief that taboos give a special value to certain animals, plants, trees, rivers and forests as they are regarded as possessing spiritual qualities and close association with divine spirits. Fear of provoking such spirits controlled their lives to great extent because the A'chiks believed that provoking them would bring ill-effect upon their lives. That is why the A'chiks had all kinds of taboos, do's and don'ts to avoid ill-effect in their lives. With the advancement of modernity, though a lot is left to be done in relation to natural environment, yet people are generally aware and careful of using natural entities. Water bodies, forests, and animals, many of which are protected and cared for; and in certain cases, the pools with their surrounding areas are now being developed as fish sanctuaries, the forest with their surrounding areas are now being developed as community reserves by the local community.

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