

An anthropological discourse on *Aacham Jhomba* (marriage by abduction) among the Sherd/tukpens of Thongre

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Abstract: Marriage and related customs and practices of the people have evolved with the ever-changing time. In the olden days, and still today (exceptionally rare), the act of persuasively abducting the bride was/is practiced among the various tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh. Sherd/tukpens too, like any other tribal community in Arunachal practice/d *Aacham Jhomba* i.e., “Marriage by abduction”, which of course with the leap of time has seen changes much like any other traditional marriage system. This paper is an attempt to understand the proceedings of the “marriage by abduction” among the Sherd/tukpens of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Marriage, Sherd/tukpen, Thongre, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh.

Introduction

When we contemplate about the marriage systems among the small scale, marginalized societies across the world, a plethora of work has already been done and dealt with forming a theoretical framework to marriage by the pioneer ethnographers like Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown etc. One cannot imagine any further contribution to marriage as a social institution or something that has not been drafted before to come up now (Fortes, 1962). The traditional marriage pattern and structure described in the anthropological texts supplementing the modern institution of marriage has been drafted in totality in the literatures available on marriage so far yet there are societies that do not necessarily fit into the general assumptions underlying the social institution of marriage.

The present study accentuates on the Sherd/tukpens of Thongre village in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The Sherd/tukpens are one of the Buddhist tribes, primarily inhabiting the single valley in the West Kameng district and are primarily settled in Rupa and Shergaon and both of which have multiple other villages under them. The Sher/tukpens are patriarchal and are strongly monogamous and have an age-old practice of marriage by abduction which has changed with time but till date in some of the villages the aforementioned

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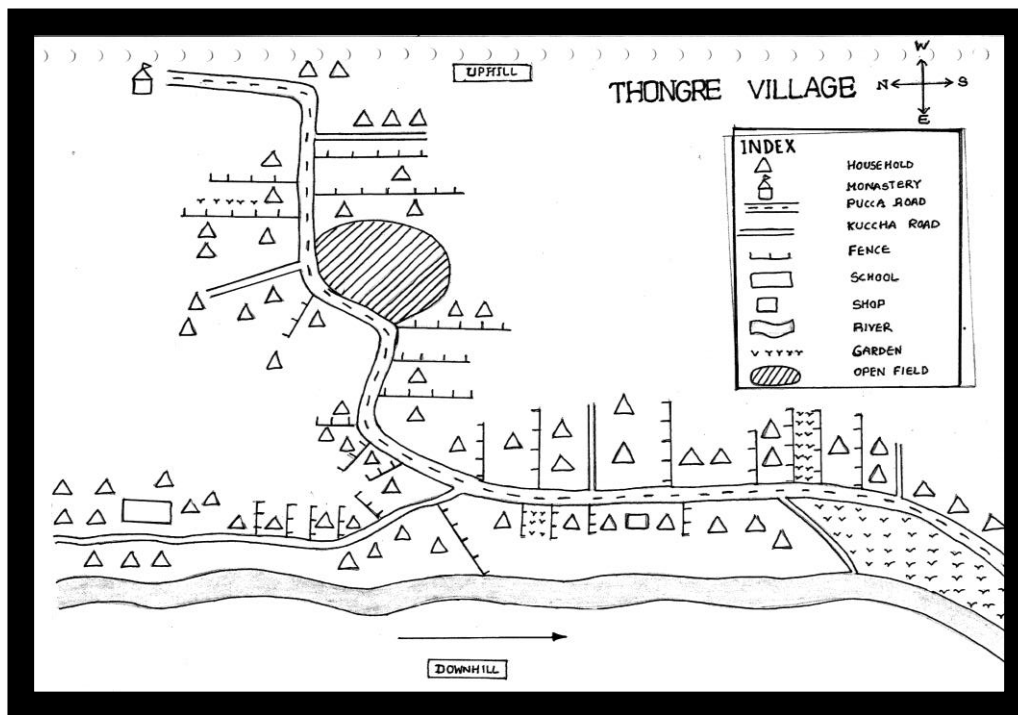
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practice of marriage is still performed, in full swing (Sharma, 1961). This article is in lieu of the said form of marriage and is an attempt to understand the proceedings of the “Marriage by Abduction” / elopement among the Sherd/tukpens of Thongre.

Fig: Hand-drawn Map of the Thongre Village, January 2017



Methodology

The article is based on the fieldwork conducted for a period of one month in Thongre, a Sherd/tukpen village in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh India in the month of December, 2016 - January, 2017. The paper is a reflection of the qualitative data collected from personal interview with the elderly people and Lama from the Village. A semi-structured interview was conducted and the narratives were voice taped in order to attain a point of saturation in the data and so that no imperative information would be overlooked while writing the paper. No fixed sample size was considered and the data was considered pertinent once the facts became repetitive in the interviews.

The Traditional Institution of *Uuyu Luba* (Marriage)

The Sherd/tukpens of Arunachal are neither an exception nor unique in its practice of marriage. Marriage in general is termed as *uuyuluba* among the Sherd/tukpens. When Marriage among the Sherd/tukpens is taken

into count, usually, selection of preferred mates is either done by the groom or the parents whose decisions are mandated or morally obligated on the sons in choosing a compatible wife. The most common practices of marriage among the Sherd/tukpens are “marriage by abduction” which is famously known as *aacham jhomba*. “*Aacham*” in their local dialect means ‘bride’ and “*Jhomba*” means ‘to capture’, the literal translation of which translates to ‘Bride Capturing’. There are two case scenarios in this form of marriage-

1. **CASE 1.** Abducting the girl with the consent of the family wherein the family members of the girl/the bride to be, is informed prior to the abduction. There are cases when the family agrees but the girl doesn’t so in such cases the family members of the bride to be helps in the bride capturing.
2. **CASE 2.** Abducting the girl without the knowledge of the girl’s family. In such cases, neither the girl nor the family of the girl is aware of the abduction.

When it emanates to abduction, the Lama (monk) is consulted (consultation with the Lama is done for almost all the significant pronouncements in life as the Sherd/tukpens are massively religious). In the olden days, instead of present-day Lama, the *Zizi* (shaman) was consulted for all the important decisions. After consulting the Lama about the propitious hour to capture the girl and the auspicious period to bring her to the groom’s household, a group encompassing 5 to 6 males (friends of the groom or kins of the groom) awaits the girl. The groom does not participate in the internment of the bride. Mostly, the girl is unaware of the impending abduction. So, what supervenes is a tussle between the abductor and the abductees. The girl tends to fight back (in most cases as informed by the respondents) with all their potency but overpowered. The brothers and nephews (if any) or any of the male consanguineal kin of the girl pretends to fight and foil the kidnapping but with an underlying wish for their sisters/daughters to be married off. Hence, they ‘pull one step, push two steps. Although, these struggles are a charade but in many instances such travesties have turned into an actual fight.

There is a custom of snatching a piece of clothing of the abductors by the girl’s family members and kin in jest which is to be returned in lieu of monetary gain. Those days when vehicles were non-existent, the girls were carried on the back for long hours, sometimes days at a stretch. The lama usually gives an exact time frame for the girl to be captured and another time frame for when to take the girl to the house of the groom. So occasionally, if the distance between the groom and the bride’s house is minimal and the time slot given is large, the men carrying the girl wait in the jungle or any other hide-way location till the clock ticks the auspicious hour as suggested by the Lama. On reaching the destination, she is held captive for 3 days, and 2 nights. During this, the girl may attempt to break free and run off, which gets easily foiled as many guards her. She is to stay inside a room with her friends or another female accompanies. They sing, dance, and make merriment. The groom stays

out of sight. When the third day dawns, the bride despite her wishes is made to prepare dishes and drinks (*laopani*). Till then, the food is supposed to be brought by her own family for her consumption. One of the pragmatic justifications given for this practice is associated with the girl being too dismayed to eat anything offered by the groom's kin. At the same time, representative parties comprising of men who are neither related to the groom's clan nor the bride's clan are sent to the girl's family by the Groom. They make an apology for captivating their daughter/sister without seeking their permission and the consent of the family is taken formally for the marriage of their daughter/sister. It so happens, if reprimanded and yelled at, the moderators representing the groom's family have to patiently receive it. When this party returns back, the merriment begins. In a completely different scenario, the parents of the bride are pre-informed of their intentions and they cooperate with their daughter's abduction for instance, by keeping the door open or telling her whereabouts. Sometimes when the bride completely agitates and refuses to get married after the completion of three days in the groom's house, then the groom's sister or other womenfolk of the same surname as that of the groom takes the girl back to her home and apologize on behalf of their brother/son.

After the confirmation of the marriage, the bride to be serves all the guests with food and wine. According to one elderly lady's anecdote being bashful, she kept her hair open like a veil, while meeting the groom's kin. This was an earlier practice. Not many follow it these days.

Later, Lama comes to the gathering and blesses the bride and presents her with *dho* (ceremonial scarf). Everyone from the groom's kin also greets her and presents her with gifts. Girl's clan members too come from distant places to greet and bless the newly wed during her 3 days stay and on the third day bring gifts for her. In the olden days, the girl sang/lamented to every one of her relatives as 'why they allowed her to go to other house'. It is a form of presentation taught to her by other elderly women. Only after the ceremonies the groom joins the bride in the bed as mark of their coming together, even if they refrain from copulating.

It so happens in few cases, where either the girl or the boy, both do not have affinity for each other, they do not consummate their marriage for years. The girl also returns back to her family many times. Furthermore, the girl can be picked up again by the same party or others. Thus, the girl can return back as long as she has not borne any children to the man. Such separation has no negative consequences for both the parties.

Marriage Forms

1. Cross Cousin Marriage

Earlier, preferential marriage of cross cousins was a common thing i.e. between the daughters and son of maternal uncles they were considered the best match and it also kept the solidarity intact within the families. But this has seen changes with time and people mostly now marry of their own choice without limiting them to their cross cousins.

2. Levirate

Cases of levirate alliances i.e. the widow remarries the brother after the death of the husband is heard of. This practice is prevalent but not a very prominent form of marriage among the Sherd/tukpens.

3. Sororate

Similarly, cases of sororate, where the widower marries the sister of the dead wife are also there. The younger siblings of the married couple are also at times conjoined.

4. Monogamous

The Sherd/tukpens unlike most of the other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh where polygamy is a common practice are very strictly monogamous. In Thongre during my field visit, there were zero cases of polygamy or for that matter polyandry in the whole of the village.

5. Clan Exogamy

The Sherd/tukpens follow clan exogamy and tribe endogamy although there are cases of inter-tribe marriage with the neighboring Monpas.

The Indispensable Material Exchange in a Sherd/Tukpen Marriage

Like any other marriage ceremony, the exchanging of gifts in cash and kind is one common practice among the Sherd/tukpens too. Other than the gift exchange between both the parties there is an age-old tradition of sending gifts, from the girl's family to the boys. There is five indispensable gifts that the bride's family offers as a token of love without which the marriage is not considered complete. It includes-

1. Local stone (*jijui*)
2. A big copper vessel (*Too*)
3. A long Aluminum vessel for water etc. made of silver (*chok*)
4. A copper case for storing prayer (holy)water during marriage and other religious or festive occasions (*toto*)

5. A big plate sort of thing, mostly bought and brought from Tezpur, Assam (*BatoBati*), plate (*Bati*), a small bowl for women (*nyinthlun*), and also a silver bowl for the women (*nyingorbi*)

Apart from the aforementioned gift items, carpets, blankets, shawls, traditional clothes, cattle, field plots, etc. are common gifts given during marriage ceremonies.

Now, interestingly, with reference to the gifts, the ornaments that the bride puts on while entering the new household are to be returned after her demise. This may happen after generational differences also, for instance, that of the grand aunt and grand nephews. The ornaments are seen as to still rightfully belong to the wife's family maintaining a chain of legacy in the girl's family.

Conclusion

A very basic but very important social institution like marriage has never been and will never be a static entity for someone to study and get done with. With time and with every generation the denotation of marriage has changed and change is the only constant and the changes in the Sherd/tukpen marriage are well justified in the ever-changing world that we live in. The role of men and women within the domain of marriage in almost all the living societies has changed but with all the changes that have taken place within the social institution of marriage, be it among the indigenous people or among the elite society, the core of inter-connectedness and the web of kinship ties have remained constant. Marriages across the globe involve not just the bride and the groom but families of both sides making strong kinship ties. These kinship ties play a significant role, especially in the tribal society where nothing significant or important event takes place without the general awareness or discussions within the kins. In Sherd/tukpen marriage too one can see the role of the paternal kins of the bride in fighting/safeguarding the girl while the kins (or friends) of the male come during the abduction.

It can be inferred that the traditional marriage system of the Sherd/tukpens has seen changes. Changes due to outer influences in matters of matrimony have occurred in the past few years. Couples get engaged, parents bid off their daughters and the cases of bride wealth are on increase but not on-demand from the other party but as a matter of social status. Just to give an impression of the older days, a mock abduction of the bride who consents is carried out to keep up with the tradition.

The form of *aachamjhomba*, where the family is informed prior to the abduction can be compared with the present day arranged marriage where the families of the bride and the groom decide their marriage with or without the consent of the boy and the girl who are to come in unison.

Today the study of marriage and other traditional institutions like family, customary laws, kinship, rituals, folklores, etc. have been seen as a basic and an old-school domain of anthropological study but one must not forget the importance of these basic units that build and structures our society and the significant role this institution plays in understanding the complex social life of the people. Human society is a web of complex structures Radcliffe Brown had pointed out while discussing his Structural Functionalism and parallel to his discussion, the complex structure of marriage in the Sherd/tukpen functions to fulfill the overall coercion of the society.

Note: Primary data was collected by conducting fieldwork from 23rd December'2016 to 24th January 2017 in Thongre, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh India.

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