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Traditional Knowledge System and Sustainable Development among the Poumai Naga of Manipur, India

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Abstract:

For many years traditional knowledge system has been sidelined by the scientific community and the Western world as flawed, orthodox and superstitious. Recently, it has made its appearance from near extinction after the global debates on climate change. People appreciation and acknowledgement of this forms of knowledge is born out of the fact that the knowledge system of the local communities of resource management and maintaining ecological balance is more sustainable than that of the advanced communities. Using ethnographic data of the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur, and by examining some areas in the field of traditional knowledge such as food ways, health practices, and traditional resources management, the paper attempts to present an insider's perspectives into the questions of sustainability and traditional knowledge practices.

1. Introduction

Traditional knowledge refers to the information accumulated over a period of time through experience, trial and error, and through ways of sharing and retelling stories. This knowledge system was the only way of knowing about the natural environment among the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur before the advent of Christianity.¹ To the Poumai knowledge is usually action-oriented no matter how abstract it may appear; this is observed in their belief and value system found in the daily social life. In short, everything that one knows is put into practice. Traditional knowledge to the Poumai Naga is more than a body of knowledge that is used for livelihood and sustenance, it weaved into the social organisation. Traditional knowledge helps the society to understand their social world and grasp the reality of their existence. Especially the knowledge about plants, animals and their natural surroundings are based on the experiences and stories of the people that has been passed down generations. It is this reflection of life's experience that shapes and structures the society. What is thought of is sometimes put into action giving meaning to everyday practices. This knowledge gives space for reflection and premise for social actions (Fredrik Barth 2002).

The traditional knowledge of the Poumai revolves around the individuals and the social group. The way of knowing is located in every individual and in the collective identity of the community. It is the unwritten and undocumented knowledge system of the community traversing the past and present. It forms a part of culture that individuals learn and acquire as members of the society. Thus, from making a bamboo carpet, weaving shawls, farming, fishing, hunting, planting trees, decision-making to splitting firewood—knowledge is everywhere. There are numerous ways to understand this form of knowledge, and it has been researched extensively by scholars in different parts of the world. Some have proposed the need to document and preserve the knowledge system of the traditional societies; some have raised the issue of intellectual property rights; some have shown ways to implement this knowledge system in resource management; while have gone to the extent of implementing the traditional knowledge system for developmental purposes (Antweiler 1998; Paul Sillitoe 1998). However, amid the advancement of modern technology and economic progress, the traditional knowledge of the tribes of North East India are facing a threat from these external exigencies.

This article examines the traditional food knowledge, health practices and resource management of the Poumai community. The argument is based stating the relevance of some knowledge and the gradual changes that affects sustainability. It recognises the gradual causality of traditional knowledge system and its sustainable practices among the Poumai in the present-day context.

2. Agriculture and Food Knowledge

The Poumai are known to other communities for their unique food ways, which at times are caricaturised. They possess a wealth of knowledge on what and what not to eat during particular seasons, and also a knowledge on a variety of animal and plants species as food. Their love for meat and fish are written and sung in the folk tales and modern songs. The main staple food of the community is rice. And as an agricultural society, paddy cultivation plays the most significant role in the social and cultural lives of the village folks.

¹With a population of over 1,87,180 (2011, Census of India), the Poumai Naga tribe constitutes one of the major tribe in the north-eastern states of Manipur. In 31st May, 2002, the Poumai were officially recognised as a distinct tribe under Schedule Caste/ Schedule Tribe Order (Amendment Act,2002) Government of India. The Poumai Naga inhabit the northern hills of Senapati District, Manipur. They are geographically divided into three blocks namely Paomata, Lepaona and Chiliive region.

Their everyday lives, discussions, and work revolve around their terrace paddy cultivation. No meal or dinner is served without rice as the main ingredient; people wake up to one or two plates of rice in the morning, afternoon and evening a day. Around 60 to 80 different types of paddy seeds are sown every year in most villages of the community. The exchange of rice within villages, relatives and households is a common sight among the Poumai's after the post-harvesting season.

There are three seasons in the Poumai traditional calendar: *Akalai* (dry season) December-March; *Ahraolai* (Wet or rainy season) April-July and; *Chaaki* (Paddy pre-harvesting and post-harvesting season) August- November. With the change in the seasons, food availability and their dietary pattern changes with time. Food sources among the Poumai are mostly found within their immediate environment. From Jhum cultivation to kitchen garden, they sustain themselves throughout the year round. Apart from their own domesticated plants and animals, wild food sources are also eaten extensively in a varied taste.

The Poumai means of traditional food management comes in their apt skills in preserving food for the dry or winter season. Green leafy vegetables become rarer during the winter season, so people during this season eat the dried preserved vegetables (*wuki*) that they had stored during the abundance to supplement other food sources which are scarce. They store enough to last for whole dry season. Mostly, it is kept sealed on their kitchen shelf where the air is dry to prevent it from rotting and worms. Small amount of heat and smoke is required for keeping this already dried food sources for winter. During this *Akalai-ki* (dry season), apart from the dried preserved food sources, some common seasonal vegetables like *cobihou* (cabbage), *Zawuhou* (mustard leaf) *mtrubi* (potatoes) *ma* (pumpkin) etc are also taken in. *Ahraolai* (wet or rainy season) is followed by the abundance of food sources, mainly green vegetables and wild food sources. The mid of *Roupa* (March) and *Khonii* (April) are the months for hunters to hunt wild animals and birds; wild animals come out to the hills after the dry spell of winter's end. This month is also marked by blooming of flowering trees and ripening of fruits in the jungle, attracting the hunters for trapping and shooting animals like deer, stag and wild boar that eats the fallen fruits of the tree, and trapping of birds respectively. Though the number of wild birds and animals have decreased over a period of time because of excessive hunting, often some hunters get their share of luck during this month.

Ahraolai (wet or rainy season) is characterised by abundance and availability of all types of food sources, and is also marked by paddy-transplantation of the community. Domesticated animals like cows, pigs and buffaloes are butchered for the feast and stored for the transplantation season. Fish are also commonly food sources during this time of year. Dry meat which is smoked inside the kitchen is eaten throughout the seasons; it forms an important diet of the society. People prefer boiled rather than oily food, although fried food is prepared on certain occasions. The *Chaaki* (pre and post-harvesting season) continues with the availability of food sources, and during this season womenfolk peel and dry the leaf of the (*behauki*) yam, cabbage, mustard, and beans, etc. All types of food sources from pumpkin, cucumber, squash, yam, and mustard are all peeled and dried in the sunlight during this time. These *wuki* (dried vegetables) are eaten during the dry winter season when the food source gets scarce. This is one traditional way of food sustenance of the community throughout the year.

3. Medicinal Health Practices

In the past, when a person is bedridden for days due to illness, the family often called the soothsayer of the village and make him examine as to where the person has contacted the illness. Illnesses in those days are mostly linked to malevolent spirits which they believe may have touched the patient while in field or forest. So the soothsayer will predict the time and place where the evil spirit had touched the person's soul. While the place of the malevolent spirit is revealed, the family members perform a ritual in the form of offering to bring back the soul. In this case offerings are made in terms of rooster, the patient's clothes, or rice beer to the spirits. In a week's time if the person recovers, they believed that the spirits have accepted their offerings, but if the person does not get well it is believed that the spirits have not accepted the offering and so preparation for the final resting place of the sick person is made. Often, this ritual is done after all the traditional medicines and other healings practices invalidate the people. Although this practice has been abandoned long ago, it was a pervasively held belief and health practices amongst the Poumai before the advent of Christianity.

Different ways of curing sickness and diseases were used by the community before the arrival of modern medicine. Though in the present context the use of traditional medicinal herbs or leaves are a rare sight. This is due to the availability and advancement of modern medicine and formally trained doctors. Medicinal herbs in the traditional village of the community are found in the surrounding areas. The roots, leaves, barks, and shoots of certain plants are used for curing all types of health ailments. Knowledge of some of the medicinal plants or herbs are passed down family line, it is not publicly acknowledged, while others are more commonly used (Veitayaki, 1995). According to tradition the medicinal herbs or plants lose its values and purpose if the plants are made known to many in the village or community. So, mostly, the knowledge of medicinal plants is best kept secret and grounded in family tradition for fear of losing its effectiveness. People who possess this knowledge are widely known in the village. The medicinal knowledge is not passed down to all the family members, there are few chosen one from the siblings who the father/mother, grandfather/grandmother secretly or openly bless them with the knowledge. This way of knowing is still prevalent among the people in few households. The preparation of medicines varies from plants to plants, herbs to herbs, and disease to disease. Some medicinal plants are crushed and boiled, and its potion is consumed directly or used in a daily dose. Many sicknesses are known to have been effectively cured. In some instances, like broken bones or joints, the herbs or leaves of the plants is crushed and rubbed in the wounds. Some of the medicines are collections of a variety of plants, while others could be of a single plant. Indigenous medicinal practitioners have a huge wealth of knowledge about curing certain dreadful disease like typhoid, malaria, dengue, tonsillitis, *niprolitheasis* (stone case) etc.

One unique feature of traditional health practices of the Poumai tribe is the traditional physiotherapy. The practitioners have a wealth of knowledge and experience about human internal organs and its functions. Any dislocation of the internal body organs such as bones, veins, and muscle pains are treated by them. The knowledge system that they themselves have mastered without any formal

training of medicines or modern physiotherapy presents a hint of mystery. In times of fractured bones, nose, hands or legs no family in the village would be advice to go to the Doctors. They rush to the physiotherapy practitioner because: they trust them more than the medical doctors. This form of knowledge system is not passed down from father to son, or mother to daughter. It is rather a highly individualistic and situated within the personal knowledge. The question here is how do they acquire this forms of knowledge system? For these ways of knowing is not acquired through trials and errors, though practice might be required but are not passed down generation orally. The present practitioners fully give credit to god for blessing them with such enormous knowledge to cure the sick and poor. Some are said to have acquired the gift through prayer, and some through visions. This knowledge has been the most coherent form of practices among the Poumai people. The pervasive use of modern medicine does not deter people from going to these traditional practitioners, as they believe that the traditional practitioners know better than the medical doctors.

4. Resource Management

Traditional ways of knowing has a huge gap of differences in practices, skills, capabilities, belief and values with that of the modern ways of knowing. Prior to the advent of Christianity, the Poumai were said to have only about fifteen to twenty villages, which were socially distant, independent and autonomous. They maintained physical distance because of the fierce headhunting practices between villages, and also maintained independence from other village's interference in their decision-making or administration yet entirely dependent on their surrounding natural resources for subsistence and livelihood. What is significant in the community traditional practices in relation to resource maintenance or management was their customary laws, land rights and their traditional value systems regarding their surrounding resources. It is not the specific form of knowledge practices that provided a level of ecological stability to their natural surroundings: it has more to do with people values and regard they have for forest and fields which tilted towards resource preservation because as villages wholly subsist themselves in their own natural resources, that is, in their own land. They have a responsibility to judiciously utilize their surrounding resources or starve. This led to well-delineation of land rights and values concerning utilization of natural resources within the neighbouring villagers.

As villages were independent from each village, no neighbouring village interfered in the works or welfare of another village. Every decision and rules pertaining to villagers is taken by the village itself; the collective principle of non-interference in other people business is well-maintained within villages. However, looking from the present context, the collective consciousness of the people seemed to be evolving due to economic and political connections among villages. With the perversity of local level politics and intense economic organisation between groups and villages, the possibility of non-interference is not possible in the present Poumai society. However, in the past people lived rather strictly structured social life; resources of each village were confined to their own, and no other persons from another village have the right to set foot on another's land. Warfare was fierce, and as headhunting brings forth prestige, status and honour to the man and family, killing became a field of achievement among the people. Agricultural activities, hunting, fishing, or gathering wild foods and fruits, or trapping small animals and birds takes place only in one's land and boundary. Villagers going to their field or working in the field were guarded by man (*riekhomai*) with spears and shield protecting them from intruders.

This kind of situation prepared them to utilise their only resource that is in their land in a judicious ways. As a self-sustaining community, traditional resources used practices are assigned through traditional authority in each village. Decisions made by the authority were to be strictly followed and maintained, and this is conveyed by the village head or chieftain to the public by declaring it to the villagers on an open platform. Everything that is acquired and produced in the village are only for the villagers in the past. The idea of having surplus was absent in the minds of the people, surplus that they have in terms of paddy or animals is given away as feast for the villagers in the past. The community maintenance of their natural resource in the past was based on the principle that one should extract from the surrounding resources of only what is required. The absence of notion of surplus with respect to firewood collections also contributed to judicious utilization of resources among villagers at a minimum level of sustenance for just a year or two. This in return led to the abundance of resources in terms of forest lands, wild food, flora and fauna in the past. The people values of getting from the forest resources of only what is needed may still be a common practice in many peripheral villages among tribes of Manipur, however, this system has excessively changed in villages that are more connected by better roads and trading.

The Poumai Naga maintenance of their natural resource in the past was strictly based on the principle of taking only what is needed. This in turn maintained a level of ecological stability of the people for years. The principle of getting what is only needed from forest resources still hold relevance to some villages. Nevertheless, these traditional mindsets are evolving amongst the people with the change of time and commercialization. This is observed in the present society as trees are extensively cut down in the jungle for firewood or commercial purpose.

When it comes to maintaining ecological balance of the community, the community in the past seems to have a better knowledge about the judicious use of their resources. It is not exactly the knowledge system that keeps them grounded about their surrounding environment. The idea of marketing, cash by extracting their resources, or constructing a luxurious houses by exploiting their resources was completely absent. It was only after the coming of the missionaries and people adopted the new religion and practices that opened up their mind to new standard of livelihood, surplus, money and luxuries. The belief that even trees and stones have a soul resides in the knowledge of the people. Asking the approval of stone to be erected and giant trees to be chopped down (by performing rituals) and waiting for the stone or tree spirit to visit him in dreams was more a way of sustainable living.

Poumai resource management system lies in their customary values and belief system. The values about getting only what they need to sustain for months or years. The belief systems that excessive use of natural resources for oneself or more than is needed leads to misfortune and poverty in later generations. Taboos associated with cutting down of trees or bamboos from other land without the owner's concern was strictly adhered to. The value based and belief system helps in maintaining ecological balance between villagers and neighbouring tribe. It is still a common practice in many of the traditional village. The idea and values of taking only what we

need especially the forest product is still visible amongst the community. The continuity of these traditional values and beliefs can be seen among the older generation, but the younger generation are less bothered by values and belief system. They are driven by commercial gains, economic progress and development which seem to negate the ecological equilibrium of the region.

Sacred groves was one way of maintaining their forest resources among the villages. Although, not practiced universally, these parts of the forest are believed to be the dwelling places of the benevolent spirits or their ancestor gods. It is often a forbidden place to step in into such parts of forest land without the elders or without proper rituals. In the Poumai villages such as Liyai and Siifii, this practice continues even today. The region of the sacred place is well-demarcated and fenced to restrict people movement into the area and tiny thatch house measuring up to one metre in length and height called *Raki* (or temple of god) is build inside the area. Burning of forest in the adjacent area is forbidden because the villager's believe that the destruction of the sacred groves by wildfire would lead to burning down of their villages as well. The Siifii villagers have a collective long-held knowledge and belief system about their *raki* and conserving their sacred grove because according to oral history it so happened that a huge inferno occurred hundreds of year ago destroying everything including their entire forest leading to excessive migration and famines that particular year. So citing this historical story, they still believe that destruction of their sacred grove would lead to the destruction of their villages by fire. This fear helps them preserve and conserve the demarcated areas of the forested lands. The villagers build their house only after the construction of their *raki* every year. No households whether Christian or pagan constructs new houses before the village priest has built the village *raki*. The place is kept sacred by prohibiting any human movement into the land for year-long apart from the priest who offer rituals to their gods.

The people assimilation to Christian values and practice led to the negligence regarding the maintenance and preservation of various sacred groves among the Poumai tribe. However, the reason the two villages still preserve their sacred grove to this time can be correlated to their historical contingencies. Other villagers like the Tunggam, Tungjoy, Phuba, or Maiba have lost the idea of sacred groves very long back as they could not relate any incident with the destruction of their sacred groves, thus with coming of Christianity the idea of sacred grove got lost when the Poumai accepted the new religion. The belief, values, laws, knowledge, economy, technology and religious system contributed extensively to the degradation of natural resources in the present social settings of the people.

5. Conclusion: Continuity and Transformation

The notion that traditional knowledge practice of the tribes or indigenous communities of the world are sustainable in the present context can be a constructed exaggeration by the scholars of indigenous knowledge. Examining the North-East tribal communities of Nagaland and Manipur, it rather presents a different social reality. Nevertheless, we cannot also rule out the existence of traditional knowledge practices that are sustainable and self-sustaining for the community in the long run. This can be seen in the above description of the Poumai tribe ways of food management and food preservation for sustenance. Their ways of food preservation and food management knowledge helps them sustain throughout the year. Storing it for the dry season for sustenance during shortage of food sources is still a common practice even in today lives. In the area of traditional medicinal knowledge among the community, in times of the inaccessibility of doctors they resort to traditional way of curing the illness. Forest injuries, snakes bites, cut wounds, or any other injuries while in the jungle or paddy field, the first aid comes from the plants, leaves or herbs to prevent the person from aggravating the injuries or wounds. Till today, the traditional physiotherapies are kept ready during any sports events to assist players who are injured during the event.

The unprecedented changes in the present social settings of the tribal communities of the hills of Nagaland and Manipur is that the ways of imparting traditional knowledge to the younger generation in the community has become less feasible. This is due to the younger generation concerns about financial stability, jobs, educations and wealth. The run for better living and better education has made many young people settle in other parts of the town and city which contributes to losing their traditional ways of knowing and values. The knowledge, belief system, and values which were once held strongly by the older generation have lost its essence and value with the generational shift. As knowledge is not transferred to the present generation, it has begun to vanish and losing its validity, and holds little relevance amongst the younger generation. In all the changes taking place in the present era, viewing from the village level, their traditional belief, values and practices continues even to this day. Though their religion and belief system might have change over a period of time, the continuity of their age-old knowledge system about their surrounding environment still exist in the collective knowledge of the village elders.

The answers to the questions of sustainability relating to the past can rather be situated in their technological practices. The advanced form of modern technology can often lead to unsustainable practices. This is seen in the people incorporation of modern guns during hunting and fishing with equipped electrical machines, cutting down giant trees with modern saws, used of pesticides, insecticides and fertilizers, etc. The simple blunt technology used by the community in the past led to the sustainability of the environment, food resources and subsistence pattern. It is the technological practices, values and belief system of the community that makes this knowledge system sustainability. With the human advancement in technology, the old technology which they once used has been discarded as it is slow and consumes lots of time and energy. In the past, cutting down a giant tree takes a day as the axe used were blunt and small. Now hundreds of trees are felled in an hour being equipped with modern machines. In the past people only utilised a limited resources for their household needs, as lands were a common property, no person was allowed to cut down trees beyond their needs. The privatization of the land and forests leads to huge felling of trees for commercial exploits. The changes happening in the present time with the advancement of technology and the youth's adaptation to the advanced machines will trivialise or wipe off the validity and relevance of traditional knowledge in future.

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