



## REVISITING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT OF THE A'CHIK INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF MEGHALAYA: A REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

One of the issues and problem in the harmonious existence of all the life forms on the earth planet was believed to be the extinction of traditional culture of the indigenous tribe that has a significance linked with natural environment. The two components nature-culture work together and lead to unique features. In line, culture is the set of knowledge, practices, idealism that guides human to associate with the natural environment. Thus, culture can be defined as one of the assets into the paramount of harmonious existence of all the creatures.

Coming to the A'chik ethnic group of Meghalaya, like any other cultural groups of the North East, the A'chiks is very rich in their tradition and culture. Ethnically, for the A'chiks, the name itself is associated with natural environment. There was a historical narrative with regards to the origin and derivation of the name A'chik. 'A'a' means 'land' and 'chik' means 'hill'. Thus, A'chik means 'hill' and 'mande' means 'man' or 'hill man' (Mihir, 1995, p. 33). Thus, their association with nature was symbiotic and intimate. However, the impact of western culture and its associated aspects of modernity have greatly changed the tradition and culture of the A'chik. The study is an attempt to give an insightful look into the A'chik traditional cultural practices associated with natural environment. In view of the culture and tradition within the environment on the unprecedented ecological crisis in the name of development and modernity needs to look back and examine how culture and tradition is linked to environment.

The study finding indicates that today one of the greatest challenges in the present global

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scenario was the crisis in environment on account of the globalization, the influence of modern culture, technological innovative, intermingling and cultural hegemony and hence the tribal cultures are on the way to extinction. The world is now engaged to search out means of tackle this grave catastrophe proves that our lives and practices have somehow gone astray. The natural resources are now subject to increasing destruction and reduction and even overgrazed out of existence. Hence, there was an urgent need to draw the attention of the mankind as well as culture and their environment in the era of modernization and globalization in the environmental degradation and climate changes.

**KEYWORDS:** The A'chik tribe, Culture and Environment, globalization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of the paper is to revisit into the culture and environment of the A'chik indigenous community in the context of present scenario. It was a meaningful talk when we see the existence of living and non-living components around the globe perfectly working in each possession to a remarkable value and its uniqueness in it. The existence and survival of nature and human were very close and well balanced. Thus, it was the surroundings and the existence of human that constitute the environment. In fact, environment is the sum total of physical and biological and other organisms as well as of all surroundings including natural forces and other living things, which provides the ground for development. The environment consists of interaction between biotic and non-biotic components. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the term 'environment' means the entire range of external influences acting on an organism, both physical and biological, and other organism, i.e. forces of nature surrounding an individual. Thus, environment consists of both physical and biological, and other living things surrounding the human beings.

But to the point of view, one can acknowledge and feel the order of natural environment only when culture of the people does not change. In this line, culture was the essential characteristic that plays a vital role in the development as well as in the association of natural entities into the beauty, stability and integrity of all life forms. In fact, culture is the aspect of human social behavior of a particular people or society. One can make the claim in Protagoras dictum, "Man is the measure of all things" (qtd in Tripathi A.M. 2016, p.176). The idea is that man is the sole reason for moral and rational aspects into the culture and environment relationship. In this sense, when culture of the people is edited the order of environment is changed thus rendered to environmental disorder. The change of human thoughts, attitudes and behavior resulted to the change of cultural outlook leading towards the crisis and imbalances of the natural environment.

The A'chik is the community strongly rooted in their tradition and culture that has been surviving orally from one generation to the next. The inhabitants of A'chik was also found in different state of India such as Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, Koch Bihar but the major portion of the total A'chik ethnic community population could be found in the northeast region of Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya. The A'chik like any other ethnic tribe of northeast India,

possessed rich culture and tradition associated with natural environment. The tradition and culture of the A'chik has been their myriad of their natural world view. Mihir N Sangma in the book *Hill Societies* (1995), points out that the A'chik have developed their own separate pattern of political, social, cultural and religious institutions. In this way, the culture of the A'chik reflects the values of the people and their environment; which gives a world view, a means of understanding the world. As for the A'chik, most of the cultural practices emerged with the environment and reflects an eco-consciousness. So, the A'chik community's orientation to environmental ethos cannot be established without first understanding their tradition and culture. As such tradition and culture has an important role to play in determining human action, attitudes and behavior towards the development of environment.

### **THE A'CHIK, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT**

The A'chik is an indigenous hill community of northeastern part of India, where majority of the population inhabits the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Being the indigenous tribal community of Garo Hills, like any other hill tribal of Northeast, the A'chik finds environment within the mode of their existence. Mihir N Sangma (1995) in the book "*Hill Societies*" noted that the term *A'chik* signifies a tribe with the origination of name which signifies that *A'chik* means 'hill' and 'mande' means 'man' or 'hill man'. Hence, A'chik was a tribe strongly rooted in their tradition, cultural practices and religion. However, culture and tradition of the A'chiks was mostly based on oral tradition. The A'chik does not have written literature; neither do they have written script of their own but then they possess rich oral literature history in traditions and culture that survive for generations. However, the absence of literature does not necessarily entail the absence of traditional knowledge of their worldview, cultural practices associated with environment. This orally formed literature of the A'chiks consists of historical traditional accounts about humans and environment being told in cultural contents. In this sense the cultural outlook of the A'chik is ingrained in the environment.

The traditional A'chik culture is the manifestation and the apprehension into the paramount of identity, livelihood, biodiversity conservation and continued development of their knowledge of environment and traditions. The beauty and integrity of natural environment consist in the cultural practices and behavior of a community having more intelligent relationship with environment. Keeping in mind what emerges is that culture was the set of knowledge, attitudes, thoughts, behavior and ideologies that guide humans to associate with the environment. In addition, culture can be assumed as one of the assets into the protection and preservation of the environment. It is traditional knowledge generally defined as local knowledge held by indigenous tribe given by the cultural outlook. Hence, these two components – environment and culture – work together and lead unique features. Saraswati (1991) noted that the tribal community cultures are still in perfect harmony with and spiritually attuned to environment. Thus, the tribal cultural practices, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs are intrinsically nature centric. The fact is, the entire socio-cultural life of the A'chik is mirrored in environment in the past.

One of the traditional cultural practices of the A'chik community was the position, pattern and location of building of houses. This paper aims at highlighting the traditionally constructed indigenous houses of the A'chiks namely *Nokmong* or main house, *Nokpante* or the Bachelors' dormitory and the *Borang* or watch tower associated with natural environment.



Table 1: Main House or Nokmong of the indigenous A'chik tribe.

A personal interaction reveals that A'chiks have traditional house known as *Nokmong*, where all of the family members live together (July, 2022). For the main house the front house or *nokkra* always lies in the west and *nokgil* or balcony or back verandah to the east. The building of main house never takes place at the fallow land as it was believed to be the way of wind to pass through. Playfair (1909) in the book *The Garos* noted that the house was built in such a way that for construction, they use giant bamboo, bamboo leaves and thatching leaves for roofing and the walls are made of the same matting. Traditionally, thatching grass is mostly preferred for roofing in which a small bunch of thatching grass is erected at the end of roofing which they reason of having the power of protection from the causer of thunder and lightning. Interestingly, it was believed to be a life supporting gift of nature in the lives of human beings. Since the *nokmong* or the main house is said to be the only living house of the family member, the house was very long and it has the provision for all the activities inside the house. The main house has the provision to accommodate cowshed, hencoop to rear when there are any which happens to be at the *nokkra*, the room at the front room and also for all other activities in one house and hence no construction of any other houses is required except for the unmarried youth.

A personal interview remarks that the house where unmarried youth live is known as *Nokpante* or bachelor's house which is found in every village (May, 2022). It has two doors kept, one in the front and the other in the back side of it. Women are strictly prohibited entering into the bachelor's dormitory. It was only during the time of *Saram Cha'a* and *Chugan festival* (joint partaking of a meal) that the women get chance to come inside the bachelor house and not in other days.



Table 1: Carved picture of crocodile at the bachelor's post.

According to the traditional legendary the post of *nokpante* is carved and coloured beautifully with human beings, tigers, crocodile, and other animals, and various kinds of fruits and vegetables. It was believed that if an individual commits any mistake, the assemblies of gathering of the village take place in front of the bachelor house. These carved and coloured pictures of the animals with the human beings has a significance meaning which gives reason for the judgment day that a person who commit guilty need to look up those animals and tell the truth. It was believed that the *headman* (*nokma*) of the village, ask the person to tell the truth. If he did not tell the truth even after he commit a mistake then the *Nokma* (headman) tells the person to look up pointing to the animals saying, “*Do you see these animals*”. If you do not tell the truth these animals will take your life or you may escape from them but your cousins or relatives will not be spared by these animals. But if the individual tells the truth no untoward is expected to him as well as to his family members. A picture of dove was also seen to have carved at the horizon wooden post of the house. These curved animals pictures were not just a picture but there was a significant symbolic meaning behind all of this. The dormitory was the house for the youths to learn and mould their life world in relation to nature and their surroundings. It was believed that the dove possesses peace, gentle, or tender in life so also the youth needs to admonishes a symbol of innocence; gentleness, tenderness, and peace.

It was further observed that apart from the two mentioned houses, the A'chik possess a house in the *jhum* field known as *Borang* or a watch tower. This *borang* or a watch tower was often built during the cultivation season to lives in the field so as to be near his crops, to weed them and protect them from the ravages of wild animals like elephant, pigs and monkeys. The field house was often built high up in trees about 20 to 30 ft from the ground in order that the inmates may be safe from the attack of wild animals. One of the reasons of possessing a field house is the motive to protect the grown crops in the field.

It can further be observed that like any other cultural community of northeast tribe of India, the A'chik is aware of the location or site chosen for the village to inhabit and built the houses. As Playfair (1909) noted in his book “*The Garos*” that the A'chik built their houses in valleys or in

depressions on the hillside, close to running water. They attach great importance to pure water, and it was quite the exception for them to live at any distance from a good distance. It was also remarks that the site chosen for the houses were often found at the steep and at the flat ground in which the entrance of their villages are to be covered with plantation of groves of jack trees and other fruit plants and it was a custom to plant trees as soon as a village is founded.

Interestingly, it was a custom to celebrate the building of a new house by a sacrifice followed by a house warming feast. Several dedication songs exist during which the invited guest sitting in a row in the room of the new house gets up and dances and sung addressing the word of tie or bind to the spirits to bind firmly the component parts of the house and consolidate the work of the builder (Playfair, 1909). Henceforth, the song becomes the very part of the A'chik life in their day to day life. As noted by Lucy M R (2015) that folk songs are an intrinsic and inseparable part of the A'chik culture. The song like 'Gonda Doka' which sung about the nature and then on human deeds saying,

*"Choose and transplant the best seedling of rice, though my face and form are not comely, take me (as wife) out of love"* (qtd. In Caroline R, 1985).

In the same way, Iris Watre in the book " *Music and Musical Instruments of the Garo Tribe of North-East*" (2007) noted that how the songs were also used for renewing the fertility of soil and crops, for invoking the spirits-gods for exhibiting magical feats and even for curing the diseases . Thus, folk song brings out the moral values and care extended to the natural environment.

Meanwhile, the food will be served for the entire guest and accordingly they enjoyed the ceremony of the feast. Generally, the A'chiks staple food was, of course, rice, in addition to which they were also fond of eating millet, maize and other food items. There is nothing remarkable in the manner of cooking, they simply boiled the food. On the other hand, the A'chiks use earthen pots for cooking purposes and also pieces of bamboo about a foot or two in length are cut and filled with water to boil rice as cooking pot. In this the medium of cooking curries was the *soda water* or *kalchi* which is made by them from the burnt ashes of dried plants like bamboo, mustered plants, cotton plants, banyan tree etc. It was more fascinating to note that the wrapping and taking of food, vegetables in banana and other tree leaves is another common practice of the environmental ethos of the A'chik indigenous tribe was the choice of keeping cooked food and other items.



Table 3: Traditionally used bottle gourd (Lau/pong) for drinking and storing water.

It was even more interesting to note that the life culture in the cultural practices of the A'chik environmental ethos is to witness the traditional use of *gourd* as water storage. Traditionally a gourd was used to give as well as store water by the A'chik indigenous community.

The A'chiks like any other hill community of Northeast India primarily practices jhum system of cultivation for their livelihood in the olden days. The indigenous A'chik community is essentially agriculturist. So, the main source of livelihood of the A'chiks is shifting cultivation. The method of cultivation was primitive yet they usually obtain outstanding results as the soil was very rich and also they did not demand too much from it. During the course of cultivation, there was a start of cultivation known as '*Samsepa or A'a o'pata*'. According to the story of creation it was believed that it was the malign spirits who looks after the land, forest, springs, hills, valleys and mountains. Therefore, if any person without any consultation with this deity clears the plot, the assigned deity will be wrathful and he may even cause illness or death. After having chosen the plot, clearing the jungle with the ceremony of *a'a o'pata* takes place. But that plot of land was believed to be the inhabitant of a malignant spirit known as *Abet Rora Raka Ganda*. So, on cutting the first plant he utters the words addressing to Abet Rora and Raka Ganda, *this place I will clear up...poi...poi...* (Rongmuthu D, 1996)

Then he goes home and waits for a dream for a night or two. If he has an unlucky dream, then he abandons the spot and search for another. But, if the dream was good one, he sets to work on it. More importantly, the land after being used for jhum cultivation is abandoned for another ten years and more, till it replenished by itself or grows sufficient vegetation to be cut down and burnt. Subsequently, the field was allowed to lie fallow for over 15 years. No individual can go and clear the forest for one's own plantation before the cycle is completed.

Nevertheless, the A'chik cultural practices was deeply rooted in the belief in the existence of spirit in man which after death, wend its way to an designated place, there to dwell for a period of time before being re-incarnated. Marak J. L.R (2000) noted in his book "*Balpakram*" that the soul of the dead go to a place known to them as *Mangru-Mangram-Chitmag-Bri-Bolmag-Chiga* (the land of spirits) along with the things that are given to the dead at the time of death. Thus, the designated place for the spirit of the deceased was believed to be *Chitmag hill* where the soul of the dead lives. But the life in the land of spirit was not at all happy one and hence, they look forward for reincarnation. It was believed that reincarnation of soul in the next life depend upon what sort of life he/she live while on earth. As Mihir N.S (1995) in the book "*Hill Societies*" noted that a certain conception punishment and reward does not want in their beliefs, for sin in one life affects the form of reincarnation in the next. If one lives a virtuous life on earth, it is expected to be born again into the same motherhood as before which was believed to be the highest reward. For the good life reincarnation take place in human form but the bad deeds of life reincarnation comes in the shape of insects and plants or may be in the form of animals and birds. In line, for the spirit of the deceased to be born again in the highest form of reward rites and rituals are being performed in connection with reincarnation known as "*Mangona or Chugan Ceremony*". It was also believed that for the spirit of the deceased there lives the king of the death to receive such spirits. The spirit of the dead could not received into the home of the spirit by the king of the death unless *Mangona*

ceremony is performed and hence, the ceremonial function is performed with full of love and affection to send the dead spirit so that it may reached its destination, the home of spirit and allow it there to settle at a suitable place and then live a virtuous life to born again into the same motherhood under the command of the king of death. Otherwise, the spirit would only be regarded as sinner and hence, reincarnation comes in the lowest form in the next life.

## **AN OVERVIEW**

What emerges in this respect is the fact that it addresses to how the A'chik lives is connected and also linked between culture and environment. Thus, cultural attitudes and intentions of A'chiks in relation to environment can be inevitably conceived on the ground of a social and moral relation between himself and other beings which determines at once their practical and moral obligations to each other. In other words, one of the most significant points is that in the A'chik traditional culture there was no dichotomy between human and natural environment rather there was undifferentiated one reality

The episode reflects the A'chiks thoughts; wisdom or moral principles linked to environment by means of cultural practices and thus set an adaptive response to the environment. An important perception is that that the A'chik has a very good adaptive relation with environment embedded in their historical traditional culture. In fact, for the A'chiks, the entire culture springs from Nature. It was through environment that the A'chik knows their culture and tradition established by their ancestors.

## **CONCLUSION**

The traditional culture of the A'chik is consistency and dependence, which create harmony and conformity in the human mind for ecological sustainability and maintenance. No doubt the cultural practice associated with belief was in perfect harmony and spiritually attuned to natural environment in the ancient times. But what is a matter of serious concern was the sharp degradation of traditional cultural practices and religious belief in the name of development of modernity and changes. The globalization and influence of modern culture made the A'chik tradition and culture into the way of extinction. This modern culture and progress does not allowed nor favour the value of traditional culture that has been surviving for generations.

Today, the days of belief and practices are gone by and the tradition and culture of the A'chik is drastically changed and is replaced by modern culture under the force of development strategies that need to look back and examine how the traditional culture relate to biodiversity. It is worth mentioning that traditional cultural practices and religious belief has a direct contact with the environment are now being modified since Christianity came into being in the A'chik community. As Such, the belief and practices in its development that humans often make changes to meet personal survival and integrity which restricts him from the cordial interconnectedness with the natural environment. Such an attitude not only takes away the value of traditional culture, but also diminishes the ecological ethos that offer the recognition of interconnectedness between humans and nature. It can rightly assume the fact that the modern innovative technology and cultural ethos



as opposed to traditional oriented cultural societies finds its great complication in establishing long term values. On the other hand, environmental concern for over all development becomes widespread around the world that protection and preservation of nature is necessary for the survival of all life forms on earth. Perhaps, the only way we must agree and take into consideration is the traditional cultural practices and religious belief that has ecological ethos which in a way determines integrity, stability, and balance of all life forms and also into the relation of humans with its surroundings in a way extends ecological chain of harmony between humans and natural environment to achieve survival. The A'chik culture and tradition is indeed a part of flora and fauna. More importantly, the dichotomy between human and nature does not find a place in the A'chik culture and tradition. As a conclusion, we can argue that such an environmental insight is not something but inherent and intrinsic in the very tradition and culture of the community.

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