

# HILL WOMEN IN THE TIME OF TRIBAL WARS: A READING OF FOLK TALES FROM NORTHEAST INDIA

*MUJERES DE LAS COLINAS EN LA EPOCA DE LAS GUERRAS TRIBALES: UNA LECTURA DE CUENTOS POPULARES DEL NORESTE DE LA INDIA*

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## **Abstract**

What we know about women in traditional tribal societies in Northeast India is based on what oral traditions tell us about them. Although they were more resourceful and respected than the women of the plains societies, their disadvantages in a world teeming with tribal feuds were considerable. Ruthless enemies destroyed villages and killed everyone, but sometimes they spared the lives of women. When two hostile villages agreed to a truce, the women enjoyed freedom of movement, but only within the village. Kidnappings were frequent, and it was unsafe for women to leave the village unaccompanied by men. Their vulnerability prompted tribes to adopt measures such as face tattooing and the practice of tribe or village endogamy. Based on the evidence in oral traditions, mostly folk tales, this paper reconstructs the position of women in the tribal societies of Northeast India during the period of inter-tribal wars.

**Keywords:** women, war, tribe, strategies (for protection of women), Northeast India

## Resumen

Lo que sabemos sobre las mujeres en las sociedades tribales tradicionales del noreste de la India se basa en lo que las tradiciones orales nos cuentan sobre ellas. Aunque eran más ingeniosas y respetadas que las mujeres de las sociedades de las llanuras, sus desventajas en un mundo plagado de disputas tribales eran considerables. Enemigos despiadados destruyeron pueblos y mataron a todos, pero a veces perdonaron la vida de las mujeres. Cuando dos pueblos hostiles acordaron una tregua, las mujeres disfrutaron de libertad de movimiento, pero solo dentro del pueblo. Los secuestros eran frecuentes y no era seguro para las mujeres abandonar el pueblo sin la compañía de hombres. Su vulnerabilidad llevó a las tribus a adoptar medidas como el tatuaje facial y la práctica de la endogamia de la tribu o la aldea. Basado en la evidencia de las tradiciones orales, en su mayoría cuentos populares, este artículo reconstruye la posición de las mujeres en las sociedades tribales del noreste de la India durante el período de las guerras intertribales.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, guerra, tribu, estrategias (para la protección de las mujeres), noreste de la India

## 1. Introduction

Whenever mention is made of women in the context of the traditional tribal societies of Northeast India, emphasis is placed on such observations that she is better honoured and enjoys greater freedom than women from non-tribal societies in India. Although it is impossible to deny this clear and unvarnished truth, there are other things about the tribal woman that have not been described in detail in the books and papers that have something to say about her. Let us look back a few hundred years on the ethnic situation in Northeast India. We find that inter-tribal conflicts arising from competing interests for control of territory and resources were widespread. When unresolved, these conflicts led to inter-tribal wars, often destroying villages and slaughtering people. Warriors were usually men. In the stories and anecdotes of the elders of some tribal communities, women sometimes fight alongside men, not with conventional weapons but with kitchen tools and utensils. However, such incidents are few and far between. In general, women from tribal communities in Northeast India are not known to fight wars like men. The notoriously volatile situation made her particularly vulnerable to violence. If the warriors of one village defeated the warriors of another village they were attacking, the latter were usually killed instantly.

The lives of the women of the defeated village were sometimes spared. However, they were taken by the victorious warriors to their village, where they spent the rest of their lives serving as bondwomen in the houses of the chief and other influential families. They were also forced to work in their swiddens. In societies where people boasted of war and hunting, women depended entirely on men for protection. Only as long as a tribe managed to remain isolated from conflicts with other tribes did its women enjoy security. In areas of constant inter-tribal conflict, women from stronger tribes enjoyed greater security than women from weaker tribes. However, her safety was compromised when she attempted to leave her home and venture out of the village alone. In a world rocked by violence, bloodshed and retaliation, she could not afford the luxury of thinking about creating a space without strong, able-bodied men around her. This paper describes how the oral traditions of tribal communities in Northeast India consistently emphasise the vulnerable position of women over the many centuries of inter-tribal warfare.

## 2. Previous Literature and the Present Study

The early observations on the tribal communities of Northeast India were made by British and Austrian explorers and ethnographers (Mills, Parry, Playfair, Shakespear, Fürer-Haimendorf et al). In their first-hand accounts, we find interesting descriptions of the hill woman being more resourceful than the women of plains' societies of India and elsewhere (Lewin, *The Hill Tracts* 117; Parry 276-278; Shakespear 17-18). The sad fate suffered by the hill woman during enemy raids and tribal feuds was strikingly similar to what several authors such as Parry (207-08), Lewin (*The Hill Tracts* 94, 107), Shakespear (56-57) and Debnath (*Exploring Highlanders* 102-05) have described in their accounts of these tribes.

Few papers deal specifically with the role, position and resourcefulness of women in the tribal folklore of Northeast India, and they deserve special mention here. In "Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India" (2017), Brara explores the position of women in tribal societies and their ongoing efforts to fight for their rights. The paper also touches on the societal expectation of women's resourcefulness, which often involves menial tasks that men are exempt from. Brara also highlights women-led organisations in Manipur, Nagaland, and Sikkim that aim to address gender-related issues, specifically female victimisation. Debnath's paper "Women in Folktales: Introspection into Mizo, Rabha and Chakma Oral Literature" (2010) focuses on the strength of tribal women in building and maintaining homes

and families, as well as the freedom they have in choosing their life partner. Nonetheless, despite their patience and perseverance in household chores, women who venture outside their homes and villages without male relatives are often at risk of experiencing violence.

Although ethnographic accounts contain anecdotes describing raids by one tribal village against another or constant wars between villages, very few folk tales directly mention the atrocities committed against women. The hill tribes lived in small groups, and each established their own customary laws, including those related to the safety of their women. More tales mention measures to protect women in a world far from peaceful. The folk tales that helped build the central argument of this paper come from tribes living in Tripura (Tippera, Bongcher, Marma), Manipur (Poumai Naga, Meitei, Hmar), Assam (Pawi, Rabha, Mising, Dimasa, Liangami Naga), Arunachal Pradesh (Mishmi, Apatani), Mizoram (Mizo, Lushai, Lakher), and Nagaland (Ao Naga, Poumai Naga, Zeliang Naga, Sangtam Naga, Konyak Naga).

Some of the stories mentioned here were heard and recorded at different times during direct interactions with members of the ethnic communities living in the area. Rabha folk tales were collected from 2010 to 2012 as part of three field studies in Rongsai (Goalpara, Assam) and Tikrikilla (West Garo Hills, Meghalaya). Additional information on the oral traditions of the Rabha was obtained from Charu Mohan Rabha of Rongsai. The version of the tale of “Panthaoraja” used here was told to the author by Bhaskar Jyoti Barman of Silchar (Assam) in 2021. Bisnukumar Debbarma of Mandai, Sadar East (Tripura) narrated the Tippera tale of “Kwaikendraisai”. It was collected in 2018, along with other stories related to another folklore study the author is working on. In 2019, the Kalimpong Lepchas were reached out to for information. Although some stories were collected directly from Norbu Lepcha of Kalimpong (West Bengal), none were found for this paper. Published collections of Lepcha folk tales and folklore (such as Tamsang’s *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs* (2008); Beauvoir-Stocks’ *Sikkim: Customs and Folklore* (1975); Yishey’ *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* (2010)) contain many stories about Lepcha women, but they did not pertain to this particular study. Unfortunately, fieldwork could not be conducted on the Nagaland or Arunachal tribes, but printed editions of folk tales from various secluded communities were obtained. These oral traditions date back to a time before government intervention to stop tribal conflicts and wars.

In the two main sections of this paper, evidence from oral tradition is presented to show how the violence that unfolded around the tribal woman

made her position highly vulnerable and what strategies her community had developed for her protection.

### **3. The vulnerable position of women in traditional tribal societies**

Tribal women lived in a world where inter-village conflicts and inter-tribal feuds were widespread. Usually, these conflicts arose when several tribes lived in a particular region. Tribes competed with one another for control of the natural resources of that region compelling peace-loving tribes to disperse. Often the tribes moved from hill to hill or from the hills to the plains, as was the case with the Misings, who had made their home in the Damro valley in Arunachal Pradesh, but settled later in the plains of Assam (Taid, 12). It was not uncommon for the warring tribes to declare a truce occasionally, but in most cases, disputes were settled with extreme brutality. Primarily, the weak or unsuspecting were targeted. While men were killed and sometimes even had their heads cut off and taken away as trophies, strong women and children were usually abducted and taken to the enemy village. What happened to them next is described later.

In connection with the vulnerable position of women in these societies, it should be added that the presence of a man in the household and the village minimised the emotional and psychological stress women faced at the time. Regarding the protection of women in the customary laws of most tribes, one or two provisions recognise men as protectors of women. Although from a strictly feminist point of view, these provisions would amount to discrimination and oppression against women, we must not forget that we are dealing with a world where the abduction of women, particularly unmarried girls, was common. There were almost no immediate repercussions if the kidnapper was a man from a hostile village. Each tribe had customary laws, which the other tribes did not have to follow. For women, leaving the village alone was generally unsafe, even in times of peace or when enemy villages held a truce. When they had to go down to a nearby stream to fetch water or wash clothes or collect roots, tubers and yams from the forest around the village, they usually went in groups, accompanied by an old man or two. They were “excluded from hunting parties or from accompanying the males in the war path [sic]...because of the perilous nature of the enterprises” (Debnath, *Exploring Highlanders* 120; parenthesis added). In times of war, it was not even wise for women to move around, even in groups. The old men who accompanied them might have been great warriors in their prime, but time had made them weak and helpless against all savage attacks. An example is

Hungenang, the Liangami warrior, whom his enemies killed as he lost his skills with age (Miri 21).

Women in the traditional tribal societies of Northeast India were not trained for combat. Ethnographic records and folk tales do not mention them fighting alone against the enemy. However, there are some tales where women bravely stood alongside men to defend their village against surprise raids. They used tools such as cleavers, sickles, hoes, and even mortars and pestles. The story of “Gebu Achuk” recalls how the Denjong or Sikkim Lepcha men and women forced the Bhotias to retreat in shame (Kotturan 111). Garo women are said to have thrown mortars and pestles at Thobani, the formidable chief of Cooch Behar, and his men (Marak 58). The Garo men and women fought together for seven days to defeat their enemy. Hmar women in the tale of “Neilal and Tüoni” had frightened the Vais, or people of the plains, who had come to collect the annual tribute for their king (Dena 104). They had attacked them with the *tliem* or the long flat bar they used to weave. Similarly, in “The Story of Idwale”, brave Zeliang women who carried *nrei* or axes, bamboo winnowing trays, and other items to go about their business stood side by side with men defending their village against raids by men from the village of Riemdi (Thou 16).

In the past, women were often easy targets for the enemy. The continuous conflicts between villages and feuds between tribes forced the able-bodied men of some tribes to go on the warpath. In most cases, a defeat meant killing all able-bodied men on the spot, but the warriors of a victorious tribe sometimes spared the lives of their enemies’ wives and daughters. Lushai warriors were ruthless and did not hesitate to kill women, even children, and carry their heads (Shakespear 57). However, they would usually spare strong women and children (Shakespear 57). When “powerful Lushai chiefs... raided villages in Cachar [they took away] female captives to attend to their newly married daughters” (Debnath, *Exploring Highlanders* 90; parenthesis added). A bondswoman could not escape from the enemy village. In the Mizo tale of “Chala and Thangi”, when the Chins invade the Khaunglung village, many villagers manage to flee. However, Chala’s beloved Thangi is forcibly taken to a remote Chin village by the enemy. Thangi yearns desperately to return home and find Chala (Lalthangliana 378-79). Thangi represents those bondswomen who believe someone from their village will rescue them one day. However, that never happens. Chala manages to steal Thangi from her captors’ village, but she tragically slips and falls into the water while trying to cross it, and the current carries her away.

Unlike the Lushai, most other tribes in the region had taboos against killing enemy women. Usually, a Liangami Naga warrior would not harm women and children in raids, fearing that their clansmen would avenge their deaths more brutally (Miri 21). The Lakhers considered women defenceless and preferred to capture them rather than behead them (Parry 255). The Ato-Ke-pang clan had travelled to the village of Lo-ying Parags to seek revenge for killing Ane Yagong, the sacred bison, in the Mising tale “Why the Longgings Left the Hills”. Along the way, they met a little girl carrying a baby on her back. They spared her life, gave her a long rope with five knots, and asked her to give it to the elders. It indicated that they would return in five days (Taid 13). The head-hunting Nagas, Garos and Khasis tell no tales of their head-hunters (Playfair 23) bringing women’s heads to their villages as trophies. Tribes like the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh preferred to take the wives and daughters of their slain enemies as captives and employ them in various household chores and work in the swiddens. On rare occasions, folk tales or oral anecdotes depict a woman being tortured or killed by the enemy. The Apatani men of Hang had killed and burned one of the two female captives of Bua by taking her to *nago*, a small isolated hut, when they were attacked by the warriors of Bela, Mudang-Tage, Michi-Bamin and Bua for taking the women (Füer-Haimendorf 115-16). In the Poumai Naga tale of “Chepei Ro and Chemüpfü Ronai”, the enemies kill Ronai and carry her body to their village instead of beheading her because she is pretty (Punü 130).

When the men left the village to go to work or run errands, they usually left in groups carrying weapons so that they could at least fight if they were to walk into an ambush. The Mizo tale of “Zankhua” (Thanmawia and Ralte 91) and the Pawi tale of “The Crab-Catchers” (Barkataki 93) tell how the heads of unguarded or unsuspecting men were cut off and taken as coveted trophies. As already mentioned, it was too dangerous for the women to venture out of the village alone or in groups. The Lakher tale “The Girl Who Married a Monkey” (Parry 559) and the Rabha “Tale of the Peahen and the Peacock” (Gorai 6-7; 13-14) are two examples describing the misfortunes that can befall women who leave home or village, even in groups. In the first of these stories, a wicked monkey steals a young girl’s clothes while bathing with her companions in a stream not far from the village and forces her to marry him. The second story tells of young girls who took the form of birds and flew from their familiar place to an unknown land, where one of them was caught in a trap set by a Rabha villager in the forest. We come

across many tales from Southeast Asia, such as the Korean tale of “The Woodcutter and the Fairy” (Poitras 1-31) and the Mranma or Mraima tale of “Manari” (Chaudhury 63-79) in which a man hides the wings or clothing of one of the celestial damsels while bathing to prevent her from escaping. These tales share the same motif as the Lakher tale just mentioned, in which the monkey plays tricks on a young girl to win her as a human wife. In the Hmar tale “Buonhleis and the Fairy” (Dena 18), Buonhleis hides the clothes of one of the fairies who go down to bathe, forcing her to marry him and remain his wife. A variation of the same motif is found in “Liha Anghya – the Fairy”, where the fairy flies straight into the Konyak men’s trap while trying to retrieve her piece of cloth (Konyak 52).

At home, it is the family, and in the village, it is the community that ensures a woman’s safety. She becomes vulnerable when she risks leaving the safety of her home and village or is tempted to do something neither the village nor the family would approve of. A young Pawi woman left unprotected in the swidden in the story “Two Young Men and a Girl” is killed while trying to repel the advances of *mikei* or the tiger-man (Barkataki 93). Sometimes, when the woman is alone and exposed to a less familiar or unfamiliar object, circumstances can cause her to conceive a child. In the Dimasa tale of “Phanthaoraja” (Barma 81-88), a widow pricks her finger in an aubergine thorn. She begets the child Phanthaoraja, while a starving Tippera woman eats a lying betel nut and gives birth to a son named Kwaikendraisa (Personal Interview with Biswakumar Debbarma). There is no happy ending to the “Tale of Kongjomnubi Nongarol”: Soraren turns the six Meitei girls of the Luwang sub-clan into stars in the constellation Pleiades simply because they fell in love with Naga men of Haoku sub-clan (Singh 208).

The beauty that a woman admires above all others is often her downfall. Most Kuki-Chin tribes like to describe their women as the fairest of all, and in Hmar and Mizo tales, suitors from distant villages seek out beautiful women as wives. In the Hmar tale “Vanchunglaizour” (Dena 219), Vanchunglaizour is described as “the paramour (sic) of eastern beauty” and the people of Tlumte’s village were “excited and fully prepared to receive and welcome the most beautiful bride at the outskirts of the village” (Dena, 219). Suitors from the western villages came to seek Vanchunglaizour as a wife. However, bad luck changes everything. Tlumte and Vanchunglaizour travel through the forest to reach the latter’s village. A demoness devours the unprotected young girl her lover had hidden on a branch when he had to



rush to Vanchunglaizour's village to fetch her comb. The wicked demoness dons Vanchunglaizour's clothes and jewellery to accompany Tlumte home. In "Kungawrhi and the Goblins" (Lalthangliana 375-77) and "The Story of Küngöri" (Lewin *Progressive* 84-89), Kungawrhi is described as a "woman of considerable beauty" (Lalthangliana 375). The unknown storyteller adds, "Many men came to seek her hand for marriage and among them there was a tiger-man who succeeded at last to get her" (Lalthangliana 375). Kungawrhi was once carried off by the sly Keimi or tiger-man that had taken on human form. She is saved by the two brothers, Hrangchala and Phawthira, to be kidnapped a second time by Kuavang when she falls asleep. The Mizo tale of "Chhawnlaihawih" tells how the wicked bear Bakvawmtepu kidnaps a girl from her cottage while her six brothers go in search of the sky flower she desires (Lalthangliana 324). In a Lakher tale we noted earlier, the young girl was forced to marry a wicked monkey who stole her clothes while bathing in a forest stream. "Zongkhak tepu" (Bongcher 84-86), a tale of the Bongcher tribe of Tripura, tells the same story. There is also the story of "Chawngchilhi" where a gullible Mizo woman falls in love with huge snakes and helps multiply the snake's nest (Lalthangliana 341). Kachmoni, in the Rabha "Tale of Kachmoni," is an extraordinarily beautiful girl kidnapped by a trader while washing clothes in the river. Other women, also washing clothes in the river, tried to save her but failed (Gorai 50). In another tale, "The Unfortunate Husband", the King of Kachar kidnaps a Liangami jummi's wife after seeing the beautiful locks of hair that fishermen bring in a *tazia* or wicker basket (Miri 68).

#### **4. Protective measures for women in traditional tribal societies**

It is important to note that in the past, the constant conflicts between tribes had taught them to develop strategies which they believed would protect their women from hostile tribes. Some tribes practised methods such as tattooing and nose-plugging to disfigure their women, believing that their ugliness would protect them from being kidnapped by men from other tribes. Others used strategies such as village endogamy, restricting marriages within the village but generally strictly following clan-based exogamy. When social rules were violated, the consequences were catastrophic. The oral traditions of most tribal communities in Northeast India symbolically represent the consequences of breaking the rules: people lose their normal human form and transform into plants or animals. Inter-village marriages were not permitted until much later when new villages of people of the same tribe sprang up after

the population of the original village exceeded the subsistence level. But this is another story.

It would be interesting to imagine how different the women of certain tribal communities would have looked without the motifs and patterns that we see permanently marked by the insertion of pigments in the punctures made on the skin of their faces and bodies. A man with a tattooed face was considered frightening, and on a woman, a tattooed face discouraged excessive attention. The black pigment gave the skin an unnatural darkness. Naga women preferred to marry warriors whose faces were horribly disfigured by tattoos (Dalton 401). The tattoo ritual was performed only after a successful raid, during which the warrior brought home the head of the first victim. Those who refrained from doing so were considered “meek and had a hard time finding a beautiful wife” (Debnath, *Exploring Highlanders* 88). That some tribes elsewhere in the world achieved their goal of protecting their women by making them look ugly is illustrated by the example of the Malaka women of Timor. During World War II, their community encouraged them to get body tattoos so Japanese soldiers would not take them as ‘comfort women’ (Malay, 0:0:27-0:00:50). The tattooing of women’s faces and body parts seems to be a strategy that many tribes in Northeast India had developed to protect their women from marauding men from enemy tribes. However, the origins of the traditions seem to have been entirely forgotten. Renowned scholars and anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and Heimendorf, who worked with the tribes of Northeast India, have placed greater emphasis on tattooing as part of tribal identity. There is no folklore as to the origin of the tattooing among Apatani women. However, it would not be entirely conjectural to suggest that it was initially done to make their women unattractive to men of other tribes. Living further south in Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Khyang tribe was forced by circumstances to take protective measures for their women. Even in the mid-19th century, Khyang girls were denied the “right to look attractive,” and their faces were horribly tattooed (Debnath, *Exploring Highlanders* 103). As for the Apatani, we must remember that they were constantly at war with the Miris and the Daflas (Nishis), and it is likely that they originally tattooed the faces of their wives and daughters for the same reason as the Khyangs.

Zo or Chin women believed tattoos helped them find ‘good husbands’ and, above all, protected them from ‘evil’. Regarding this last reason, it should be mentioned that the tribe cannot forget the scary days when pretty women

without tattoos caught the attention of Burmese kings and were forcibly taken to Ava to be the king's concubines (Harvey 349; Vumson 46). During the early years of the invasion of Burma, Chinese plunderers called the Burmese 'black bellies' because they tattooed themselves to discourage attention and to avoid becoming the captives of war (Harvey 356). In a Wancho tale, the villagers tattoo a girl's legs because she had no one to look after her (Elwin, *Myths* 200). The Wanchos probably believed that tattooed women were less likely to be beheaded or captured in enemy raids, and propagated this among women as a beauty ritual: "They put marks on her legs and when she grew up, everyone thought she looked pretty. But her friend, who stayed at home did not look so beautiful. Ever since then parents have had their daughters tattooed" (Elwin, *Myths* 200).

It is very rare for one tribe to consider its women less beautiful than the women of another. However, this is precisely how the Dimasas of Assam portrayed their women in popular tradition. A story goes that Princess Deshrudi, saddened that her mother was killed on the orders of her cruel father, then King of Dimapur, left her village to drown in the Dhansiri (Barma 15). As she walked, she met a Dimasa girl and asked her in which direction she should go. The girl pointed the wrong way, and poor Deshrudi became exhausted, hungry and thirsty trying to find the river. Sometime later, she met a Manipuri girl who showed her the right way to the river. So she granted Manipuri girls the benefit to be born beautiful forever but cursed all Dimasa girls to be born with imperfections. In this story, we find a strategy used by the Dimasas to minimise the interest of other tribes in their women deliberately.

In the past, the tribes of Northeast India followed tribal exogamy as their strategy for marriage. This practice originates in village endogamy, as indicated at the beginning of this section. Later, as the population grew and new villages were founded within the same tribe, inter-village marriages started happening, but never outside of the tribe. The Zeliangs of Riemdi will probably never forget the fateful day when Idwale, the most beautiful girl in Poila, married a Riemdi warrior. Unfortunately, the two villages were enemies and often attacked each other. Idwale married the enemy warrior not to secure peace but to learn about Riemdi's war strategies. She tricked her husband into revealing the weaknesses of the Riemdi men. In the ensuing war, Poila emerged victorious over Riemdi (Thou 16-17).

The consequences of inter-tribal marriages were considered disastrous as far as the popular tradition was concerned. In the "Tale of Kongjomnubi

Nongarol”, six Manipuri girls fall in love with six Naga men they met while fishing outside their village. The girls ignore the advice of their kinsmen and are disavowed by the villagers. Wandering like castaways, they encounter Soraren, who transforms them into six stars that form the constellation Pleiades. However, he grants the girls a wish to descend from heaven once a year to reunite with their lovers but also warns them that they would only give birth to cicadas (Singh 205-10). The Mizos also tell the story of six sisters visited by six winged brothers every night. When the villagers find out about the affair, they try to kill the six celestial brothers. A battle ensues, and the heavenly brothers set the entire Mizo village on fire. All die except the six sisters and their father, whom the brothers save. They rise into the sky in a thick cloud of smoke, eventually transforming into seven stars that glow in the form of the constellation Pleiades (Thanmawia and Ralte 69-74). Sometimes it took effort for the woman to deal with the consequences of intermarriage. In the “Tale of the Peahen and the Peacock,” Rabha storytellers recall the extreme possessiveness of the six heavenly sisters towards the seventh sister, who had married a man from the Rabha tribe (Gorai 14). The marriage had challenged the general custom of the community to which the seven sisters belonged. One day, the six sisters come to take her away. They use their magic to turn the husband into a peacock. When the Seventh Sister saw what had happened to her husband, she turned into a peahen, preferring to live with him rather than accompany her sisters to the land which she came from.

## 5. Conclusion

In the oral traditions of tribal societies in Northeast India, there are two distinct aspects to the representation of women. While existing literature may highlight the honour and freedom enjoyed by hill women compared to women of non-indigenous societies of India, their vulnerable position has often been overlooked. However, it is crucial to note that traditional tribal societies were not always glorious, and their oral traditions passed down from a time when tribes were often hostile towards each other reveal the suffering hill women endured for centuries. Fortunately, significant changes occurred since the mid-19th century when the British government intervened to end inter-tribal conflicts, and missionary organisations like the American Baptist Missionary introduced modern education to many tribes. Oral traditions continue to reflect the terrifying experiences women endured in the past, providing a glimpse into life not so long ago.

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## Notas

1. Several ethnographic records provide information on the various ethnic communities in Northeast India. Some notable works include J.P. Mills' *Report on the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills* (1857), *The Lhota Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926), *The Rengma Nagas* (1937), Nevill Edward Parry's *The Lakheres* (1932), Major A. Playfair's *The Garos* (1909), John Shakespear's *The Lushai Kuki Clans* (1912), Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours* (1962), Thomas Herbert Lewin's *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers therein* (1869), and Rupa Debnath's *Exploring Highlanders of Tripura and Chittagong Hill Tracts* (2010), among others.
2. The custom of beheading enemies and collecting their heads was widespread among some hill tribes and Ao and Sangtam Naga tales such as "How Head Hunting Began" and "The Origin of Head Hunting" recall how ancestors learned to hunt heads after seeing a victorious army of ants carrying off the heads of their slain enemies (Ao 104; Chodongse and Kapfo 16).
3. An example from Kuki-Chin oral tradition may be cited to illustrate how certain tribes justify the killing of women. In a Rivung village, a woman was late to join sowing seeds in the swiddens, and when asked why she was late, she said she was busy preparing things for her husband, a warrior going to the war. Another man from another tribe overheard this conversation; he was her husband's enemy. The woman probably escaped as she had her tribe to protect her, but from then on, women were killed, and their heads were taken so they could not help their men when they went to war (Rawlins 187-88).
4. The successful exploits of Naga warriors in battle earned them the right to tattoo their bodies with specific patterns or legends associated with the hills to which they belonged (Woodthorpe 74; Vetch 94). Women tattooed their faces and certain body parts with designs that indicated the achievements of their husbands. Karbi women were tattooed during rites of passage – puberty, marriage and motherhood. *Duk*, or face tattoo, is a simple vertical line running from the Karbi woman's forehead to her chin. However, not all the hill tribes of Northeast India practised this art. For the Lushai, the tattoo is not of great importance (Shakespear 12). The Taramon Mishmi living in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh did not tattoo themselves (Elwin, *Tribal World* 275).