

Navigating Gender: Understanding Identity, Culture and Dynamics of the Mao Society

Dr. N Rosa Kashena

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Don Bosco College (A) Maram

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between gender, identity, and cultural dynamics within the Mao Naga society of Manipur. Rooted in a traditional patriarchal framework, Mao society structures gender roles and relations through customary law, social institutions, and ritual practices that reinforce binary understandings of masculinity and femininity. Drawing insights from feminist and gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, the study analyses how gender identities are culturally constructed, maintained, and negotiated within a socio-ethical order shaped by religion, economy, and polity. It examines the influences of factors such as the Morung system, property inheritance laws, and festivals in shaping gender dynamics and sustaining social hierarchies. The paper also assesses the transformative forces of Christianity, education, and modernity, which have redefined gender relations while simultaneously preserving patriarchal residues. Finally, it highlights emerging challenges to the binary gender norms, driven by global discourses on gender diversity and local efforts toward inclusivity. Through this multidimensional analysis, the study underscores the Mao community's ongoing negotiation between tradition and change in its understanding of gender and identity.

Keywords

Gender Dynamics, Patriarchy, Customary law, Identity, Socialization, Tradition and Change

1. Introduction

The Mao community of Manipur associates themselves within the nomenclature of the group of Nagas which is recognised as a tribe in Manipur by the constitution of India. Geographically, they reside in the northernmost region of the state and their population largely distributed in the Senapati district. They hold significant cultural, historic and linguistic ties with the other Nagas of the region. Ethnically, they belong to the Tibeto Burman group. Geographically, the region experiences a colder climate compared to other regions of the state due to its higher elevation. The ecosystem is dominated by myriads of hills and mountains, of which Mt. *Esii*, the highest mountain peak of Manipur is situated in the region. Thick forests like *Koziirii* and other lesser thicker forests around the region are important areas where the people carried on their regular hunting and foraging activities. Their economic activity of agriculture sustained by the monsoon rains, streams and spring waters in their terraced fields and by rivers like

Shiivorii (Barak) and others down the valley is an important source of livelihood for the people of this community.

Nestled in the north-eastern region of India, they possess a rich cultural heritage that intricately weaves together tradition, identity, and gender dynamics. Looking into the fabric of their society, it becomes evident that gender roles and relations play a significant part in shaping their social structure, cultural practices and vice-versa. The history of the Maos is firmly ingrained in their generation-to-generation transmission of traditions and rituals. Men dominated in community decision-making, perpetuating a patriarchal culture. The patriarchal structure of the society naturally and culturally placed men in a primary position and women in a secondary position in the social structure. This system of patriarchy set amidst their cultural background has played a great role in the gender identity and dynamics of the Maos. Gender dynamics are strongly established in cultural and societal institutions, shaping people's experiences, roles, and expectations in the society. Understanding these dynamics entails deciphering the intricate webs of conventions, values, and power dynamics that shape how genders interact in society. This paper examines the complex interplay of gender, culture, and social structures, offering light on the varied nature of gender relations of the society.

Gender, Identity and Gender Dynamics

Gender is a complex component of human identity, inextricably linked to societal conceptions, personal experiences, and cultural standards. Traditionally, gender has been defined through binary lens and either viewed as female or male depending on the biological functions of the sexes. Today, the binary definition of gender is challenged through different queer and feminist writings and also by the emergence of numerous gender communities who claims that they do not belong to either male or female. Therefore, gender conversations have developed over time, now including a wide range of identities and manifestations rather than just binary definitions. Judith Butler defines gender as something that is not innate or fixed but rather a social construct that is continually produced and reproduced through repeated acts and behaviours (Butler, 2006).

Gender identity is deeply personal and may manifest in different ways, including how one dresses, behaves, and relates to others. It is about how people view themselves and who they are, whether they consider themselves to be male, female, a combination of both, or neither. Gender identity may not necessarily coincide with biological traits or expectations from society. It is an essential component of self-awareness and influences how people express themselves and move through the environment. Understanding gender dynamics necessitates an examination of how individuals view themselves, how society perceives them, and what were the complex interactions between these perceptions.

Cultural Construction of Gender in the Mao Society

Through the study of the oral traditions, rites and rituals, customary laws and their administrative system, it can be understood that the Maos like other societies understood gender in binary terms as either male or female. The biological explanation of gender is found applicable to this society. In this aspect gender identity was not of personal or self-realization as the modern definition claims but rather

defined by each individual as prescribed to him or her by the norms and customs of their society based on their biological sex. Gender identity was defined with femininity and masculinity linked to the sexed bodies. Therefore, for the Maos, the cultural construction of gender and identity was created, applied and followed within the community by both men and women of different ages. This cultural construction of gender assigned to the biological sex was cemented through the various separate roles, duties and responsibilities which women and men played in the family and society (Kashena, 2024). There is nothing phenomenal about their cultural construction of gender as it was and is defined simply and directly linked to the biological sex. What is rather interesting is the upkeep of such ideas about identity, femininity and masculinity along the traditional norms and customs of the society which has been followed and guarded for generations.

Forces that Shaped the Gender Dynamics

Identity and Expression: One can ask how do the genders in Mao society identify and expressed themselves as belonging to the male or female? Here the identity of a person was marked since birth. In the past, a newborn male was welcomed with the performance of an initiation ritual which was not the case of a newborn female. Therefore, the identity of the biological male or female was assigned as soon as he or she was born. Simone De Beauvoir argues that a woman is not born but rather becomes one in the process of socialization and different cultural expectations (Beauvoir, 1949). Here she meant to argue that the different socio-cultural activities that each biological sex was expected to perform in the society became the deciding factor of their identity as male or female. In this context, understanding the gender identity of the Maos can be found similar to what Beauvoir had contented in her work, *The Second Sex*. From the way they dress, behave, roles they perform to how their customary laws ensured the upkeep of the culture, the Maos were taught the favourable and acceptable norms of identifying and expressing themselves in the society. If the simplest form of identifying oneself as a male or female was through the dress they wore, then the society had the custom of adding cowrie shells only on the kilt (*Tosii Mani*) worn by men depicting the different masculine traits. In this tradition, masculinity was also gratified within men themselves by giving certain preferences to some men who had performed extraordinary achievements to add more cowrie shells than those normal men who did not accomplish much. On the other hand the sexual maturity of a woman was identified through keeping of long hair (she was expected to stop shaving) and tying of a thread around her head symbolizing her availability for marriage. The achievement and competition for masculine traits like courage, power and protector among men eventually became the identity maker for men while feminine characters like modest character, submissiveness and fertility stood out as the expressions of identity for the Mao women. Whoever expressed themselves well within these norms of masculinity and femininity became the role models and legacy makers of the Maos in the past.

Customary Laws: Complex interactions between gender dynamics and customary law shape power structures, social norms, and resource access. Gender dynamics shape relationships, opportunities, rights and are intricately woven into the fabric of society. Customary law is a significant factor influencing these dynamics since it frequently reflects traditional norms, attitudes, and beliefs. Although customary laws differ throughout cultures and geographical areas, they often govern issues pertaining to property rights, marriage, inheritance, and family dynamics. The cumulative knowledge and experience of the

society shaped customary laws, which represented its values, traditions, and lifestyles. Since these regulations took into account their own traditions and customs, it gives the people a sense of identity and belonging. Different theorists have argued on the effects of customary laws on gender inequality. Multicultural theorists advocate for cultural diversity and preservation of traditional customs, while also raising concerns about the intersection of cultural practices and human rights (Shachar, 2001). Some theorists on the other hand prioritize cultural preservation, compromising equality to protect cultural identity (Kymlica, 1995), while another group of theorists prioritizes equality and defend equal treatment and non-discrimination principles. They believe that cultural practices should not affect individuals' rights, particularly those from marginalized groups and any cultural norms perpetuating inequality and violating rights should be removed (Okin, 1999; Barry, 2002).

The power dynamics in the customary laws of the Maos favoured the male gender over female gender. Time and again the discrimination and inequality pertaining to property and inheritance rights has been a subject of debate amongst the feminist scholars of the Nagas with whom the Maos shares a similar culture. According to the customary laws daughters were denied inheritance of ancestral property because of the fact that they are married off from her family and clan. Sons on the other hand were given full right and shares over the property because they were the guardians through whom the lands will be handed down to the descendants for generations. Even though this custom preserved their property, it was done at the expense of the sacrifice from women who were placed at the risk and mercy of her husband, brothers and her clan. At the same time it created a cycle of dependency of women on men to whom they were obliged to remain subordinated for their security and stability in the society. In marriage, the gender dynamics shows more equal and favourable characteristics although there were discriminatory elements. Although, it was possible that daughters were sometimes made to comply with the decisions of her parents in choosing her husband, it was not the custom of the society to force any woman to marry a man against her will. Rather they had their say in choosing their husband as their decision was taken as final. At the same time both men and women were permitted to remarry if their partner dies or the previous marriages failed. One advantage of men was their right to having their children in case of separation. In relation to this, it was not only the man but even of his sisters who shared the right with him which was not granted to the wife. Therefore, the power dynamics here was flexible even to the female gender depending on the demands of the situation. Examining the role of men and women in the family shows patriarchal dominance in decision making over the female members of the family. It was also evident that this patriarchal dominance followed the rule of primogeniture as sanctioned by the customary laws. Even amidst brothers, the eldest one held the supreme right after their father. This proves that age also played a role the in family hierarchy even within the same gender. Women on the other hand performed the role of an advisor which was secondary to men with whom the power to make and unmake the ultimate decisions of the family lies as granted by the customary law. It can be debated on how efficient such rights of men were exercised inside the walls of the family but the fact that customary laws granted such rights to men and not women can be seen as the society's acceptance of placing the male gender at a higher pedestal.

Socialization: From a young age, individuals are socialized into specific gender roles through family, peers, and social institutions. This socialization reinforces certain behaviors, interests, and expectations based on gender. People learn through socialization what constitutes appropriate gender-specific behaviour. Children are exposed to societal standards and expectations related to masculinity and

femininity from an early age. Girls may have been taught to be cooperative and caring, while boys may have been taught to be assertive and competitive. In this process people are exposed to role models who identify with their own gender, which can shape ideas about what is desirable and attainable for people of that gender. By supporting particular behaviours, interests, and characteristics as fundamentally masculine or feminine, it reinforces gender stereotypes. This can restrict people's ability to express themselves and their prospects since they could feel under pressure to fit in with the gender-specific norms of society. Peers are very important for socialization, especially in adolescence. Peer groups frequently uphold gender assumptions and norms.

The *Morung* system of the Maos was an important institution for learning, socialization, and cultural traditions in the past. It included separate dorms for unmarried men (*Khrucho zii*) and women (*Lochii zii*), which were managed by respected community members. Girls did not have to go through a purification process before joining the dormitories, although boys did. Men were free to enter women's dorms for socializing and courtship, but the opposite was prohibited. Despite these gendered spaces, genders collaborated on crafts, knowledge sharing, and social activities such as singing and feasting. The system was an important institution for socialisation and learning, especially during puberty. While everyday physical activities in the fields and woods improved physical health, *Morung* activities provided crucial mental and emotional recreation. It provided girls with personal space and freedom, allowing them to escape familial limitations. Boys might demonstrate their bravery and skill. The approach encouraged cross-gender interaction, increasing familiarity and also gave insight into the needs and experiences of the opposing gender, promoting understanding and acceptance. It did, however, highlight power disparities, with males having fewer restraints and more liberty, despite the fact that both genders have opportunities for socialisation and emotional exploration.

Celebrations of festivals and feasts have a significant role in maintaining gender norms and identities in the Mao society. Some traditional festivities like *Chiithuni*, *Saleni*, *Zhoso Mozii* to mention a few were the popular ones. These celebrations frequently include customs, acts, and ceremonies that honour the contributions and roles that men and women play in the society. For instance, men handled tasks like spearheading ceremonial rites or hunting, while women may play roles in preparing and keeping ready all the necessities required for the feasts. People are taught about gender-specific expectations for behaviours and duties at a young age through these activities. Festivals also offer a platform for the dissemination of gender-related cultural norms and beliefs. During these get-togethers, stories, songs, and myths are frequently told that reinforce conventional gender roles and relationships.

Traditional games and activities are also essential components of gender socialization in the Mao society. The games frequently reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes by emphasising specific talents or behaviours considered appropriate for boys and girls. Boys can participate in strength and skill competition games to gain important skills related to hunting and warring activities for supporting and protecting their family and community. Meanwhile, girls participate in games that taught them tasks related to childcare, gathering, or food preparation, refining skills necessary for their future responsibilities as mothers and nurturers. Games like *Jiithe kada* (flying of sticks), *Lerii kaphi* (throwing of javelin which was made the stem of a wild grass plant), *Otsu Koshu* (hitting the target) were played by boys and the *Kaka ka* (game played with a type of wild beans) was played by the women (Nepuni, 2010).

Economic Factors: The economic system and opportunities within a society can indeed significantly shape gender dynamics, and the example of the Maos highlights this interplay effectively. In the context of the Maos, their economic system was characterized by interdependence, particularly due to the geographical features of their environment. The mountainous and hilly terrain demanded equal labor contributions from both men and women for the production and gathering of food. Because of this necessity for equal labor, gender relations became more balanced and complementary. Both men and women were required to participate actively in various economic activities, such as farming, foraging, and other tasks related to sustenance. This shared responsibility fostered a sense of mutual reliance between genders. Importantly, this economic interdependence also meant that women were not economically dependent on men to the extent seen in societies where gender roles are more rigidly defined. In such contexts, where women contribute significantly to the economic well-being of the family unit, they often have more agency and autonomy within the household. But as mentioned before, one important disadvantage of women in this relation was their inability to own and inherit landed property although they contributed enough and equal labor on the lands of her family, clan and community which was permitted only to men.

Polity and Administration: Historically, the Mao Naga community has followed patriarchal standards, with men ruling over matters of government and justice. *Movuo* was the political head of the village and he was assisted in the administration by elder men belonging to different clans. Village assemblies, the foundation of political discourse and decision-making, serve as forums for men to decide the future of their communities. Women's views and opinions, however, are noticeably absent from these assemblies, having been relegated to the periphery of power relations. Women's exclusion from village assemblies not only demonstrates institutionalised prejudice, but it also perpetuates a cycle of gender inequity.

Religion: Religious ceremonies and rituals are fundamental to Mao society, as they help define communal identity and togetherness. Within this paradigm, gender roles are clearly defined, with men taking on leadership responsibilities and actively partaking in ritualistic acts. The title "*Khehreo*," bestowed upon the priest in charge of executing religious rites, exemplifies this gendered division of labour, as it was only held by men. This tradition emphasises the patriarchal roots that have historically defined many indigenous civilizations, in which male members have religious authority and ritualistic responsibilities. However, among the prevalent patriarchal traditions, there was one notable exception: the rite of removing the first paddy from the barn. Women's performance in this rite is significant for more than just symbolic reasons; it serves as a tangible demonstration of their economic contribution to society.

Continuity and Change

Modernisation was introduced to the Maos after the introduction of Christianity and western education. In the administrative report of Colonel J Shakespear, it was mentioned that a primary school was opened at Mao in 1892 without specifying the place (Shakespear, 1891-1907). With the arrival of Christianity, the original animistic practices faced a severe opponent. The initial period preceding independence saw a tug-of-war between traditional customs and the imposition of new values. While some aspects of gender relations were fluid, patriarchal ideals rooted in Christianity exerted their influence

simultaneously. Christianity, with its patriarchal foundations, established a new set of gender norms that frequently reinforced existing power systems. The legacy of male preference remained, manifesting in their possibilities for study and jobs outside village. As a result, while males took advantage of these new opportunities, women faced obstacles stemming from long-standing gender preconceptions. One arena where the burden of the women increased was the need to fill the void left in the arena of economy. The duty of providing financial assistance to the men who pursued further studies fell upon the daughters who were pressured to help her parents in providing food to the family as well as paying the study expenses of their brothers.

Central to Mao Naga society was the institution of the *Morung*, serving as a locus of socialization and cultural transmission. However, the encroachment of modernity, propelled by the spread of schools, churches, and evangelization, precipitated the gradual demise of this traditional bastion. As the *Morung* waned in significance, so too did the communal spaces where gender roles were traditionally delineated and reinforced. From the late twentieth century the expansion of educational facilities and religious centres signalled an enormous change in the society, hastening the adoption of contemporary ideals and forms of socialisation. With the progress of financial situations among the families in the community the former limitations of gendered venues gave way to more inclusive arenas, although within the context of Christian patriarchy. Women, despite being confined by patriarchal structures, found ways to empower themselves via education and interaction with the larger community. The journey towards a more equitable society remains ongoing, characterized by the delicate negotiation between tradition and progress.

Beyond the Binary, Attitudes and Challenges

In the heart of Mao society, a quiet revolution is taking place, upsetting long-held gender standards. Historically, the story was one of a binary construct, with people allocated roles depending on their perceived masculinity or femininity. The customary discourse focused on the measurement of a man's masculinity or a woman's femininity, ignoring the broad spectrum of human identity. Individuals who broke from these ideals were frequently marginalised, reduced to the shadows of societal acceptable. Taboos around gender roles were strictly enforced, reinforcing the rigid system that defined how people should behave depending on their ascribed gender. Today, a generation of young boys and girls are boldly asserting their right to self-identify, challenging the binary narrative that has long dominated discourse. This shift is not isolated but part of a global movement that advocates for the recognition and acceptance of genders beyond the binary. The emergence of various gender identities within Mao Naga society is a testament to the resilience of human spirit in the face of societal constraints. The worldwide trend of voicing and accepting genders beyond the binary has encouraged the young generation to express their identity as they find suitable to their mental and emotional health. No longer content to conform to predefined roles, they are carving out spaces where individuality is celebrated rather than suppressed. But this trend of individuals' exploration beyond the binary is not at all accepted and encouraged by the customs of the society.

2. Conclusion

The gender relations within Mao society can be better understood through the combined theoretical lenses of Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. Butler's notion of gender performativity reveals that Mao gender roles are not biologically inherent but are sustained through repetitive social acts such as men's cowrie-adorned kilts that signify masculinity and women's long hair denoting marital readiness, performed and reproduced across generations. These performances, reinforced through customary law, ritual, and the Morung institution, materialize gender identity as a social belief rather than an innate truth. Yet, as Butler anticipates, these repetitive acts also contain the potential for disruption; the younger generation's engagement with global discourses on gender diversity challenges the traditional binary framework, revealing gender performativity's fragility within Mao culture. De Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" further deepens this analysis by situating gender identity within processes of socialization. From male initiation rituals to the gendered divisions reinforced through games, family structures, and festivals, Mao men and women are taught to embody culturally prescribed norms of masculinity and femininity. In this process, women have historically become the "Other" economically interdependent but denied ownership and authority, their transcendence constrained within patriarchal institutions such as the *Movuo* polity and *Khehreo* priest. Yet, moments like women's performance in the paddy-harvest ritual represent subtle acts of agency and resistance within this system. When read together, Butler and de Beauvoir's frameworks reveal Mao gender as both performatively enacted and socially constructed, continually negotiated through economic interdependence, education, Christianity, and exposure to modernity. These transformations indicate a slow but perceptible shift towards greater inclusivity, as Mao society reinterprets its traditional structures in light of changing understandings of identity.

In navigating the intricate landscape of gender within Mao society, it becomes evident that tradition, culture, and social structures have profoundly shaped notions of identity and roles. The historical narrative has been one of binary constructs, firmly entrenched in patriarchal norms that dictated the behaviors and expectations of individuals based on their perceived masculinity or femininity. However, as we delve deeper, we find a nuanced story of resilience, adaptation, and change.

Gender, once narrowly defined, is now evolving, reflecting the broader spectrum of human identity. The emergence of diverse gender identities within Mao Naga society is emblematic of a global movement towards recognition and acceptance of identities beyond the binary. A new generation is boldly asserting their right to self-identify, challenging long-held norms and carving out spaces where individuality is celebrated. Yet, this journey towards inclusivity is not without its challenges. Traditional customs and patriarchal structures continue to exert influence, often resisting change and marginalizing those who dare to defy societal norms. The delicate negotiation between tradition and progress underscores the on-going struggle for gender equality and acceptance.

Recognizing gender as fluid, performative, and shaped by socialization thus opens pathways for re-imagining Mao gender relations where dialogue, reform, and cultural sensitivity can together nurture a society that values diversity while preserving its rich cultural integrity.

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