



# A threat to environmental ethics: a case study of the angami tribe of kohima district, Nagaland

Keneikhoto Yano and T. Lanusosang

Department of Geography, Nagaland University, Lumami

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 3 July 2015;

Received in revised form:

1 August 2015;

Accepted: 11 August 2015;

#### Keywords

Environmental code,  
Harmonious relationship,  
Environmental ethics,  
Sustainable.

### ABSTRACT

Each culture has an environmental code to maintain a harmonious relationship between man and nature ensuring the well-being, and material and cultural enrichment of the society. With the entry of industrialism and consumerism, man has become a factor of production and nature a resource only to be exploited for meeting man's never ending greed. Also, Science and technology has placed an enormous power in the hands of man and this in turn is posing a threat to the different moral codes of conduct of human beings which directly or indirectly are responsible for the environmental degradation. Kohima district of Nagaland which is located in the north eastern most part of India is the home of the Angami tribe, and has a sub-tropical climatic condition. The Angami tribe lies between the border of Manipur state in the south towards the north of Rengma tribe and also spreads along the west towards Dimapur District National Highway 39 passing through Kohima and going towards Imphal in Manipur, cuts across the higher slopes of Japfii range and transverses the entire area under study roughly in north-south direction whereas National Highway 61 passes along the north direction connecting the northern Angami region with the town and also with the rest of the district making the region an easy prey to any cultural and socio-economic changes. Consequently, sustainable environmental ethics which the different communities of the region were equipped with for protecting the environment in the past are now losing ground in this rapid changing world. Sensing the danger ahead, the present study is an attempt to evaluate the precious environmental ethics which protect the region environment and the reasons responsible for the loosening of the grip of environmental ethics in the region.

© 2015 Elixir All rights reserved.

### Introduction

The English word "Ethics" is derived from the Greek "ethos" which means "custom" or "manner". Ethics whether is of ancient or modern or any kind talks of duty, goodness, values, conscience and so on. It is concerned with individuals and groups relating to actions, that is, as doers and as things to which things are done. Environmental ethics tends to find the ethical standard about the conditions that are required to be fulfilled in attaining the stability and upkeep of the environment. It inculcates a precious code in the individuals and societies and is to be developed in each person to command as a force in decision making or taking actions on the different aspects of the environment. Actions are not be harmful to the local, national and international community, and are only to sharpen the judgement, not jeopardizing the health and security of other fellow beings for the sake of material and political gains. Ethics commands us not to endanger the health of an individual and communities, but to serve as a proud honest person in the service of humanity. (Ghaznawi, 1990)

Nature, the provider of everything to mankind is the sculpture of cultural niche as well. Each culture has an environmental code to maintain a harmonious relationship between man and nature ensuring the well-being, and material and cultural enrichment of the society. With the entry of industrialism and consumerism, man has become a factor of production and nature a resource only to be exploited for meeting man's never ending greed. Also, Science and technology has placed an enormous power in the hands of man and this in turn is posing a threat to the different moral codes of

conduct of human beings which directly or indirectly are responsible for the environmental degradation.

Kohima district of Nagaland which is located in the north eastern most part of India is the home of the Angami tribe, and has a sub-tropical climatic condition. The Angami tribe lies between the border of Manipur state in the south towards the north of Rengma tribe and also spreads along the west towards Dimapur District. National Highway 39 passing through Kohima and going towards Imphal in Manipur, cuts across the higher slopes of Japfii range and transverses the entire area under study roughly in north-south direction where as National Highway 61 passes along the north direction connecting the northern angami region with the main town of Kohima and also with the rest of the district making the region an easy prey to any cultural and socio-economic changes. Consequently, sustainable environmental ethics which the different communities of the region were equipped with for protecting the environment in the past are now losing ground in this rapid changing world. Sensing the danger ahead, the present study is an attempt to evaluate the precious environmental ethics which protect the region environment and the reasons responsible for the loosening of the grip of environmental ethics in the region.

### Methodology

The study is mainly based on the primary and secondary sources of data. Since there is no previous record in the ethical studies of the region, extensive field study has been done to collect first hand information of the study area so as to garner common ethical values which are still dearly uphold by the people. Secondary data include the articles from journals, books,

Tele:

E-mail addresses: [keneikhotoyano@gmail.com](mailto:keneikhotoyano@gmail.com)

© 2015 Elixir All rights reserved

research works, and reports. Intensive interviews of the elders from different villagers and government official from the region constitute a major part of the methodology adopted for the study.

#### **Customary laws/ practices and social ethics of the region**

The Angamis like other social groups have a set of customary laws and ethics that determine the life of the individuals and his societal behaviour as well. This makes the individuals accountable to the society for whatever they do and how they behave. In general, the mindset is, if I do this, what will my villagers and the society say? Wherever he goes, there is always the customary law behind him that guides him. Thus, an Angami is a community seeking one, for he knows that he belongs to the society and is impossible to stay away from other members of the society. Moreover, the different customary laws and practices are either governed by or associated with taboos which have a bearing on their ethics. Some few important customary laws and social ethics are as follows:

- Elders are never addressed by names out of reverence instead are respected
- Due regards are given to the needs of others
- Community property is regarded as of one's own and is protected and preserved
- Feast of merit is given not only for enhancement of one's social standing and status but also as a means to share with the poor
- Wasting is regarded as unethical
- Houses are locked with just a log that is put across the door and to break open it is a taboo
- Stealing someone's properties is highly regarded as immoral and unethical. If caught in the act of stealing than he or she has to pay seven times of that materials or items and even the punitive action to the extent of excommunicating from the village is carried out
- Killing even the smallest creature that comes to their house or under someone's shelter looking for protection from its prey is regarded as a taboo
- To take away someone's best property even when the owner gives him the choice is also regarded as unwise and uncharitable (e.g. cutting someone's best or the healthiest tree in a particular forest)
- Torturing of any living creature is highly objectionable from ethical point of view as they believe that plants and animals too have feelings like human beings
- Claiming for oneself of those materials or things having a name such as stone, tree, ponds, etc. is a taboo

Though people do not know for sure the reasons behind these laws or taboos, yet they consider them as highly sacred, and religiously adhere to them.

#### **Ethics and environmental management**

Like any Naga tribal group or for that matter any tribal group of the hills, Angamis are very deeply attached to nature and their life is integrally interwoven with the surrounding environment. Their environmental ethics is like a lamp post which guides them in protecting their environment in the most sustainable way. They are dependent on nature for every activity, and they always do whatever they have to do only in rhythm with the directives of nature. Their food, shelter, firewood, works, etc. are all supplied to them by nature. So, their belief, customs, rituals, 'taboos' and 'genna' help them shape and organise their activities. Some of the ethical practices associated with the environmental management in one way or the other are discussed as under:

Forests are meant for the extraction of firewood, timber, and agricultural activities, charcoal, and which also provide aesthetic

pleasure. More than 70% of the area is covered by forest but due to the developmental activities and the introduction of alien tree species, the indigenous trees which fit the ecological system of the region are decreasing at an increasing rate. Thick forests are believed to be the abode of spiritual beings and so, are left untouched. These are cut down only while in groups, never by the individuals. Moreover, it is a taboo to destroy someone's tree siblings. For, in the event of doing defying the accepted norms it is believed that the family of the defaulter will never prosper and will have a hard living at least for seven generations. When trees are cut down, pollarding method is done to those quality trees so that new buds will grow again. In Jhum cultivation alder trees are planted or protected from cutting and the healthy ones are always kept from cutting. This is for enrichment of soil and the replenishment of the soil fertility.

Animals are even protected and conserved in accordance with their traditional ethos and customary laws. Birds like sparrow and swallow are low altitude flying birds and generally, these birds fly inside the houses and make their nests endangering their lives either to be killed for eating or just for the sake of killing. But, it is believed that the eating of these so called village birds will make a person lazy to work in the field. It is rather taken that a swallow bird making its nest in the houses brings prosperity and congeniality. Hence, these birds are left undisturbed. The birds and animals which depend on rats, pests, insects, etc. also come under their taboo i.e not to be consumed. For instance, animals and birds having nails are not normally eaten by the women folks. There are some kinds of birds such as *sekodzii* (Vernacular name in *Angami*) which are eaten only by the elders, not by children and youngsters. Most of these birds are seasonal birds. Hunting is usually done in the winter season and that also in groups. The notion is that a person often going for hunting alone will become lazy and usher in famine and ill luck to the family. Domestic animals such as, cows, pigs, dogs, cats, chicken, etc. are reared for different purposes and also for the sake of status.

#### **Traditional knowledge**

The people of the region are very closely linked with their environment and that all their traditional knowledge and skills are based on their ethics of environment which are not only accurate but also very scientific. Most of their activities are in sync with lunar and solar calendar. For instance, cutting of timbers for any kind of constructional work is done only during the full moon night when it is free from pests which at other times eat into the sinews of the fallen trees. Hence, more durability of the timbers. On the other hand, the sawing of any kind of seed is never done during the full moon night time. For, the seeds sawn during this time never grow healthily. The seasons which are hectic with different agricultural activities are also gauged or ascertained from the movement and chirping of different birds. For example, the chirping of the cookoo birds heralds the rainy season, most suitable time for plantation of various crops. Moreover, whether there would be rainfall or not in a particular year can be predicted by observing the bamboo trees on upslope of the land i.e when the tip of the bamboo trees fall towards the west there is abundant rainfall in that particular year. Even the chirping of the birds is minutely observed by the people in order to know whether the production will be good or bad in a particular year.

The traditional knowledge of practising terrace cultivation along the hill slope in steps formation is another valuable account of scientific knowledge of the people since early times. The most striking difference between the Angamis and their neighbours on the north is their cultivation of wet rice. The

Angamis has an elaborate system of terracing and irrigation by which he turns the steepest hill sides into the flooded rice fields. The method of preparing land for wet cultivation is to dig and build the side of the hill into terraces of from 2 to 20 feet broad-200 feet broad if the ground is level enough. The stone taken out of the soil are used to bank up the walls of the terraces. The terraces are irrigated by channels which carry water from some stream or torrent for a distance that may sometimes be measured in miles, many fields being fed on the way. Each terrace, of course, cannot have its own channel, but usually obtains water either from the next terrace above it or from one of the terraces in the same row, the terraces being so carefully graduated that the water may flow from terrace to terrace round a whole spur and back again to a point little below that from which it started. Water is also often carried from one terrace to another terrace in a hollow bamboo passing over other terraces and channels in between. The terrace fields are the most valuable lands to them since it is prepared through their hard work without the help of any machinery. The soil fertility remains almost constant without being deteriorated despite the fact that a particular plot of land is constantly under cultivation for years/ decades together. For, people traditionally use the manure of the droppings of their domestic animals such as, cows, pigs, etc. These are organically rich which rejuvenate the soil condition. Apart from these, leaves of tree and hays which are the left over of the harvest are used to increase the soil fertility. The hays are buried under the soil during the ploughing season, whereas the leaves of trees are buried under the soil with water during the plantation season so as to make them decompose. Generally, the field nearby the village produces continuous supply of food throughout the season, thereby increasing the sustainability of agricultural products. Besides terracing, jhum and potato cultivation is done but on a smaller scale. In jhum cultivation, every sustainable method such as the cycle of 8-10 years and the bundling to check the soil erosion is maintained. Multiple crop cultivation to tone up the soil nutrients is also taken into account side by side with the alder tree cultivation in order to keep the richness of the soil intact in the best possible ways.

Storing of seeds for sowing in the coming year and the grains for consumption are persevered in traditional granaries finely knitted with bamboo which are urn-shaped and are covered with a conical lid shaped. Granaries are made in such a way that there is free flow of air. It helps maintain the potency of the seeds for the next use. The other seeds of vegetables, maize and even paddy are kept hanging in the kitchen or courtyard of the house and are amazingly preserved in good condition.

Apart from the agricultural knowledge, the people also have the traditional knowledge of herbal medicines which are in practice since the days of yore. The use of common medicinal plants is known to almost all the members of the community. However, it is only the elderly members who possess the deeper knowledge of medicinal plants even for the cure of life threatening diseases. People use the indigenous plants as medicines mostly in combinations. In fact, every plant species present in their locality is regarded as having a medicinal value. For instance, to cloth a blood from a cut, they just collect any three types of plant species and squeeze it on the cut or wounds. The plants species used for medicine are collected in a particular time or season.

Another traditional knowledge of the region is the construction of house which is simple yet strong and lasting. The house is constructed in a very sustainable way with the use of timber, bamboo and climber such as *Paedaria Floetida* for tying

and welding the post of the house. The timbers used for construction are cut during the full moon day when they are free from any kind of pest for the obvious reason as stated elsewhere.

#### **Present status of the environmental ethics**

It may be appropriate to mention how the traditional society of the region maintains such a scientific knowledge in a most sustainable ways. It has been possible through the practice of a moral principle which characterises the tradition-bound etiquette, social manner, honesty, integrity, virtue, and much more than that. The socio-ethical principle that forces a person to deny oneself for the sake of community or lose oneself for the common cause is the reason behind the secret. Entrenched themselves in the traditionally practiced code of conduct people so far have been able to conserve the genetic strains for a long period of time. However, at present, because of increasing population in the areas and contact with the people hailing from the mainstream who are marked by less sustainable lifestyle, there is every possibility of their genetic material and knowledge conserved by the people till to-date being threatened and saturated. The commercial attitude of outsiders results in overexploitation of resources on which the sustenance of the region is dependent. This is detrimental to the very sustainable ethics of the people. Moreover, the so-called science and technological knowledge is polluting the mindset of those common farmers. Introduction of alien trees such as, teak, hallock, etc. and the use of inorganic fertilizers are incessantly on the increase fouling the whole ambience. Those of the modern machines and techniques which are not favourable with the physical and chemical properties of the land are degrading the soil fertility further. Though the forests are the major source of resources the indigenous trees which grow fast and meet the needs of the people are fast vanishing from the natural landscape on account of man's greed and the increase of population. As such, the environment-based ethics is under the threat. Another vital factor that has led to the loosening of peoples' adherence to traditionally bound environmental ethics is Christianity which emphasises spiritual life than the temporal one. Globalization and modernization which in a way encourage the creation of modern entertainment and recreational facilities do play a role in winning away the people from traditional practices ingrained in their culture. Oral transmission, without any written record, of those traditional values and knowledge is another main cause for the less observance of traditional ethics. On the other hand, it appears that the new acts and laws adopted by the government and which are being encouraged through various governmental programmes seem to be not so fitting to the environmental ethics of the region.

#### **Conclusion**

As it is a known fact that the rural and tribal knowledge is not created in a distant laboratories and then brought to the users but it is the product of the environment itself. This experimental knowledge may be out of date when seen against the scientific knowledge of today, but it is benign without side effect and hence futuristic too. The traditional practices of the villages or rural societies give more to the environment than what they have taken from it. Hence, anticipation of the society, constitutional and legal support, policy and law of the Government, developmental processes, etc. should be encouraged with a view to retrieving the ethical values of the people. Or else, the ethnic people who are at the bottom line of social strata and are the worst affected in any environmental crisis will ultimately bear the brunt of their gross negligence of traditionally preserved ethical values and practices in relation to their surrounding environment. Loss of environmental ethics results in the loss of

cultural diversity, which is the cradle of knowledge on the values of environment. We have to move towards a society in which man-nature relationship is not based on wants but on needs; and the unity and integrity of all life on the earth. We should keep in mind that "Environment is what we have inherited from tomorrow rather than from yesterday".

#### **Acknowledgment**

The author expresses gratitude to the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship Scheme for financially helping me through the entire research works.

#### **References;**

1. "Adding Value to Shifting Cultivation in Nagaland, India", NEPED (2006); Published by NEPED; ISBN 978-81-904537-0-5
2. Benson, 2000. "Environmental Ethics- An Introduction with Readings", Routledge imprint of the Taylor & Francis group; Pages 9-16, 68-82
3. "Building Upon Traditional Agriculture in Nagaland, India", NEPED, 1999. Published by NEPED and IIRR
4. Singh, R.B; "Towards a Culture of Care, Share, Quest and Bequest" in Environmental Ethics: A dialogue of Cultures edited by Misra, R. P, 1995); Publisher Concept, ISBN 8170225701; Pages- 78 & 9
5. Shiva Prashan, 2001. "Social Ethics: Concept, Issues and Challenges", Rajat Publication; ISBN 81-7880-007-1
6. Shimray, Shimreingam. "Globalization Process and Tribal People" in Tribal Woman and Globalization, edited by Imchen, Narola, Published by Woman Studies Center, Eastern

Theological College, Rajabari, Jorhat-785 014, Assam, India, Pages 5-18

7. Souza, Alphonsus D, 2001. "Tradition System of Forest Conservation in North East India", The Angami Tribe of Nagaland, Published by North Eastern Social Research Centre Guwahati 2001
8. "Statistical Abstract of Nagaland", 1992. Directorate of Economics & Statistics Nagaland, Kohima
9. Verma, D. K; "Social Environment for Sustainable Development", Ahmad, Afroz; "Impact of Development Policies in Sustainable Development" in Social Environment for Sustainable Development, edited by Joshi, Y. G. & D.K Verma, 1998. Published by for Rawat Publications; ISBN 81-7033-455-3; Page 149
10. Wangshimenla, 2002. "Environmental Ethics, Social Norms and Land Use Practices in Ao Region", Nagaland, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Geography, Nagaland University, Lumami
11. "Community forest Management in Nagaland", [http://iasc2008.glos.ac.uk/conference%20papers/papers/G/George\\_211601.pdf](http://iasc2008.glos.ac.uk/conference%20papers/papers/G/George_211601.pdf),
12. "Nagaland forests face destruction", [http://www.illegal-logging.info/item\\_single.php?it\\_id=5171&it=news](http://www.illegal-logging.info/item_single.php?it_id=5171&it=news)
13. "Indigenous control and sustainability of common resources in the hills of North East India", <http://www.ibcperu.org/doc/isis/5184.pdf>