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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank the Bujuur elders for their contributions on the accounts of traditional marriage and customs. In addition, the author is indebted to those Bujuur women for sharing their life experiences for case illustrations.



WOMEN IN BUJUUR SOCIETY: MARRIAGE, IMAH-ITU AND ETHNIC LINEAGE ELIJA CHARA¹

Abstract

The role of women in Bujuur social identity is often overlooked by emphasizing the general patrilocal and patrilineal customs. Traditional Bujuur society was characterized by ambilineage as well as matrilocality whereby women contributed to the making and remaking of Bujuur identity. This paper explores two spaces within the theme of marriage: i) *Imah-Itu* (the residence of a husband at his wife's house) and ii) children of mixed marriages identifying with the mother's Bujuur ethnicity. The objective is to critique the everyday emphasis on patriarchy, patrilineality and patrilocalism among the Bujuur, all of which are in contrast to historical traditions. A further aim is to discuss women's historical role in the making of the Bujuur identity through their rejuvenation of extinct clans and the sustenance of Bujuur demography. The article's emphasis on Bujuur women stems from the contemporary Bujuur's emphasis on purity of identity and ethnicity based on the male progeny; this not only distorts traditions but also misrepresents the community to the younger generations.

Key words: Bujuur, Matrilocality, *Imah-Itu*, Ambilineage, Identity-ethnicity.

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Introduction

Naga society is objectively misinterpreted as a "homogenous group of people" contrary to the heterogeneous reality—that is, they are a "conglomeration and confederation," of various "tribes and sub-tribes who are historically, geographically, socially and genetically unrelated, although many may describe otherwise." The only common determiner of these unrelated groups of people is the nomenclature "Naga" which "they accepted as a common umbrella term for the purpose of politics," to express nationalism and guarantee sovereignty. However, at the ethno-structural level, the Nagas are incredibly diverse with each constituent tribe having its own unique and distinct history, customs, and practices.

There are about sixty-six tribes that constitute the Naga with a total population of about 4.5 million people. The Nagas are spread across the two countries of India and Myanmar. In India, the Nagas live in the North-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland; whereas in Myanmar, the Nagas live in the Sagaing Region. The dominant Naga tribes are the Ao, Angami, Lotha and Konyak in the Indian state of Nagaland; the Mao, Poumai, Rongmei and Tangkhul in the Indian state of Manipur; and the Tangshang and Konyak in Myanmar. Each of these tribes has a population of over 200,000. On the other hand, the Naga also includes small tribes like the Koireng, Kharam, Monsang, Bujuur (Moyon)⁶ and Tarao from the Indian state of Manipur; these small tribes have a population of less than 3,000 people each.

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¹ Julian Jacobs, *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of North East India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 64; Abraham Lotha, "Naga Identities: Enduring Heritage," in *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in Northeast of India*, ed. Michael Oppitz et al. (Gent: Snoeck Publishers, 2008), 47-48; Iris Odyuo, "The Various Aspects of Naga Art," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 4 (2013):13-22; The Concern Senior Citizens' Forum, The Nagas Among The Nascent Nations (Mokokchung: The Concerned Senior Citizens' Forum), 8; Marrion Wettstein, "Origin and Migration Myths in the Rhetoric of Naga Independence and Collective Identity," in *Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas*, ed. Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 234.

² Elija Chara, "Naga Nationalism's Dilemma Over Meanings, Politics and Religion," *Journal of North East India Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019): 67; Wettstein, 234.

³ Lotha, 47; U.A. Shimray, "Women's Work in Naga Society: Household Work, Workforce Participation and Division of Labour," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 17 (2014): 1698-1711.

⁴ Lotha, 52, 54.

⁵ "Nagalim," Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, accessed January 24, 2022, https://unpo.org/members/7899.

⁶ Bujuur and Moyon are names of the same tribe. "Bujuur" is an endonym and preferred named used by the tribe. "Moyon" is an exonym and the government approved name. The two terms are always interchangeably used in research reports and articles. This article uses the name "Bujuur" because this is how the community prefers to be called. In addition, Bujuur (Moyon) is also used few times in the article wherever it is necessary.

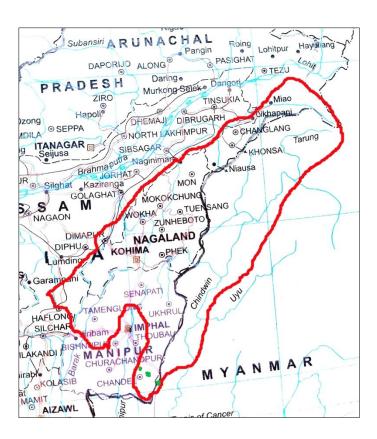


Figure 1. Map indicating the areas inhabited by the Nagas (enclosed by the red line); Areas inhabited by the Bujuur (Moyon) in green dots (Map source: Oxford School Atlas, 30th Revised Edition, 2004).

The Nagas have been considered to be one of the most advanced tribal/indigenous groups of people in India and South-east Asia. This apparent "social advancement" stood contrary to the supposed backwardness of the Nagas prior to the early twentieth century when the Nagas were considered as uncivilized and barbaric head-hunters by colonial administrators, anthropologists, Christian missionaries, and even Post-colonial researchers engaged in studies of the history of Nagas and present day Christianized Nagas. Much of the perceived Naga social advancement is credited by the Nagas themselves to the adoption of Christianity which ushered in waves of changes that transformed the Nagas from a traditional society to a Christianized and Westernized one. Despite the positive social development Naga society has undergone after adoption of Christianity and modernity, which the contemporary Nagas describe as a change "from darkness to light," one sector in which the Naga society lags behind others relates to gender equality, visibility and representation in social, cultural and political spaces. Despite Naga women's repeated pleas for gender equality and equity to

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⁷ For more details on gender inequality within the Naga society, see Naga Women's Union, *The Place of Women in Naga Society* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 2018); Lianboi Vaiphei, "Equality and Tradition Clash As Naga Women Fight for Representation," *The Wire* (2017), accessed January 24, 2022, https://m.thewire.in/article/government/naga-women-representation/amp; Dolly Kikon, "The Myth of the

the respective Naga tribal leaders and institutions, there has been so far no significant improvement in the situation of Naga women. In fact, each time Naga women plea for gender equality, Naga leaders (men) have always been quick to dismiss the concerns of women by stating that "the status of Naga women are better than Hindu or Muslim women" which indirectly meant that "Naga women should be satisfied with what they have and should not expect more." Gender inequality is still considered a controversial subject among the Nagas as such people tend to avoid free and open discussions and debates on the matter for fear of repercussions from tribal leaders.

Whereas women in general were traditionally considered insignificant by most Naga tribes, some tribes like the Bujuur, consider women as historically important in the development of their Bujuur identity. In fact, the Bujuur is one of the very few Naga tribes that traditionally (historically) followed ethnic ambilineage and matrilocalism. Taken as a whole, matrilineage and matrilocalism are rare among the tribal groups of North-East India, being prevalent at present only among the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos of Meghalaya, and the Rabha and Koch tribes of Assam. Although the matrilineal and matrilocal customs differ amongst these aforementioned tribes (including the Bujuur), all share the phenomena of patriarchy in common. Through this, men dominate and dictate the everyday social, political, and economic affairs.

Among the Bujuur of the Naga, the two most important traditional-historical ethnofeatures were *Imah-Itu* (the residence of the husband at his wife's house) and ambilineage. These two women-centered features set the Bujuur apart from the other Naga tribes who mostly were patrilocal and patrilineal. Historically, *Imah-Itu*among the Bujuur was a compulsory tradition and is still regarded as an important cultural component. On the other hand, matrilineage as one of the components of Bujuur ambilineage though a part of historical tradition is at present almost non-existent due to a contemporary staunch patriarchy and an over-emphasis on patrilineal descent for ethnic identity. Perhaps the roles of women in the Bujuur society has never been critically analyzed, as evidenced by the few works on and by the Bujuur (Moyons), all of which explained Bujuur society as patriarchal, matrilineal and following a patrilocal system.⁸ The statement could be true if judged from a very generalized

Empowered Naga Woman: Why Naga Women are Demanding a Chair at the Tribal Assembly," The Indian Express (2017), accessed January 24, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/gender/the-myth-of-the-empowered-naga-woman-why-naga-women-are-demanding-a-chair-at-the-tribal-assembly-4994021/lite/.

⁸ See Penny Rose Chinir, "Social Change Among the Moyon Tribe of Manipur," (PhD diss., Rajiv Gandhi University, 2015), 203; Langlom Naomi Moyon, "Women and Health among the Moyons," in *Tribal Health*

premise, but an in-depth study of Bujuur history reveals that the society was not as patrilocal and patrilineal as is presently assumed. In fact, the present Bujuur society takes pride in *Imah-Itu*, a form of matrilocality, and the passing of Bujuur identity via female descent even though women had been considered culturally and socially insignificant. This contradiction requires an explanation.

The uniqueness of Bujuur matrilineage is that it is concerned with ethnic identity (on being a Bujuur), but only in terms of marriages outside the community and especially with marriages between Bujuur women and non-Bujuur men. Going hand in hand with the matrilineal practice is also the *Imah-Itu*, a form of matrilocalism. As per the custom, men are to live at their in-laws' houses for a period of time after marriage. This residing of men at their wives' residences (Imah-Itu) historically shaped the discourse of Bujuur ethnic lineage identity to the extent that few members of the contemporary Bujuur clans could trace their paternal ancestry to other tribes despite belonging to different tribes (personal communication, Kapaam, 05.05.2013). They also rarely maintain close kinship ties with those related clans. However, it is also noticed in the recent years that the influence of outside cultures, including Christianity, and interactions with other tribes who are mostly (strictly) patrilocal and patrilineal, has slowly shifted the traditional and historical Bujuur matrilocalism and matrilineage towards patrilocalism and patrilineage. The historical "Imah-Itu has completely disappeared" and the space of matrilineage is also facing challenges from different members of the community who are of the opinion that children born of a Bujuur woman and with a non-Bujuur father should identify with the father's ethnicity (Personal Communication, Thangkin village, 15.05.2013).

The primary objective of this article is to discuss the Bujuur ethno-matrilineage in light of contemporary issues among the Bujuur society over ethnicity and ethnic purity based on patrilineage. The article contests the contemporary misconception that Bujuur society is always strictly patrilineal and patrilocal, and that matrilineage is an influence of westernization and modernism. The case of the Bujuur is taken to highlight that matrilineage

and Medicines, ed. P.C. Joshi and Aloke Kumar Kalla (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2004) 169; Bridget Nungchensha, "Moyon Cultural Traditions: Its Transitions," MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies 2, no. 2 (2015): 41; Dina Serbum, "The Changing Status of Women in Moyon Society," in The Place of Women in Naga Society, ed. Naga Women's Union (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 2018), 177; Gina Shangkham, "A Brief Account of the Moyons," in Manipur Past and Present Vol. III, ed. N Sanajaoba (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995), 446.

⁹ Nungchim, 38; Shangkham, 448.

and matrilocalism differ from community to community, and that these two women-centered customs can at times be at the mercy of patriarchy and patriarchal convenience.

The paper is an outcome of several years of multi-sited ethnographic research among the Bujuur community encompassing oral histories, life stories, interviews, and discussions. It is divided into the following components: a brief account of the Bujuur, marriage, *Imah-Itu* and its role in matrilineality, and concluding discussions.

Bujuur Clans in Brief

The Bujuur is one of the sixty-six ethnic tribes that constitute the Naga nation. The Bujuur are known to outsiders and in government records by various names, such as Moyon, Moyon Naga, Mueeyol, Moyol, Mayul and Meeyol. They inhabit the South-Eastern Hills of Manipur state of India in the districts of Chandel and Tengnoupal, as well in the Sagaing Region of Myanmar. They number around 2,600 (out of which "2,516" are in India) and are scattered among eighteen odd villages and hamlets.

Bujuur society is divided into two exogamous primary clans viz, *Shimphuw* and *Ziingven*. The two primary clans further consist of six secondary clans each. They are as follows:

- 1. Shimphuw: Nguruw, Laanglom, Charrü/Charii, Bungjeer, Sherbum and Suwnglip
- 2. **Züngven**: Chineer, Nungchim, Ruwen, Vaanglaar, Khaartu and Hungam. ¹¹

Of the twelve secondary clans, the Bungjeer, Suwnglip and Hungam no longer exist. The dual-clan system dominates Bujuur social-political lives including marriage, lineage identity and village administration. Traditionally, marriage within the same primary clan was a taboo. However, with the influence of Christianity, people began to question the practicality of clan systems and marriage rules starting in the early 1930s (Personal communication, Kapaam village, 10.02.2017). Thus, the clans were restructured into four groups to expand marriage

¹⁰ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India* 2013 (Government of India: Statistics Division, 2013), 178.

¹¹ There is no consensus within the community over the exact number of clans and their names. For example, Shangkham (1995), listed Hungam as one of the clans belonging to *Ziingven* but Nungchim (2015) omitted *Hungam* and instead add another clan, *Beengpih*. Because the clans Hungam and Beengpih are presently extinct, it is difficult to ascertain which oral sources are authentic. For more details, see, Elija Chara, "Past and Present: Analysis of the Social-Political Changes of the Bujuur Naga," *Socialsci Journal* 4 (2019): 81; Nungchim, 35; Serbum, 175; Shangkham, 446. Additionally, the spellings of the clans in this article are based on how they were supposed to be spelled and as recommended by the Bujuur Aanchung Puh; but presently, almost all the existing Bujuur clans use standardized variants- Ngoruw/Ngoruh, Langlom, Chara, Serbum, Nungchim, Chinir, Roel, Wanglar and Khartu.

choices:¹² the Shimphuw clan was divided into two marital groups in 1950 and the Ziingven clan in 1978. The present clan systems are as follows:

Shimphuw: i) Nguruw, Laanglom

ii) Charii, Bungjeer, Sherbum, Suwnglip

Ziingven: i) Chineer, Nungchim

ii) Ruwen, Vaanglaar, Khaartu, Hungam.¹³

Marriage

Traditionally, Bujuur marriage customs were lengthy and complicated. It was not a single-day formal event where a man and woman exchanged vows; rather it consisted of various stages. There is also no concrete word for marriage in Bujuurchong (the Bujuur language) albeit the word *shong* is often used to denote marriage in a poetic expression but not in real life practice. To correspond with modern formal customs, contemporary terms like *luhong* and *Rakhü/Rakhii* are often used to denote marriage or a wedding.

Bujuur marriage is not merely an institution of union between a man and a woman, but it is also a process of social union between families and clans. Apart from the prohibition of marriage within the same clan or clan group, there is no restriction upon individuals in choosing their life partners once they reach marriageable age. Most marriages are decided upon by the joining couple although in rare cases arranged marriages and betrothal marriages also take place.

Amidst the complications regarding a definitive term for marriage, Bujuur customs and traditions have also undergone changes with their conversion to Christianity, which began in the year 1922. The interpretations of customs and traditions were all modified to suit the Christian institution of marriage and perceptions of modernity. Accordingly, many pre-Christian customs were either modified or abandoned to be replaced by new customs which blended non-Christian and Christian values. In this complicated maze of changing customs, it is also difficult to exactly locate the concept of traditional marriage because what is tradition/custom largely depends on what an individual defines it as. According to few elderly individuals, practices common before the arrival of Christianity are to be regarded as

¹³ Chara, "Past and Present," 81-82; Shangkham, 446.

¹² Shangkham, 446.

customs, while others define the customary marital space as those from after 1922. As such, the marriage section touches on the two forms of traditional marriage (that are considered traditional before and after Christianity was adopted) as narrated in the field discussions, in comparison with Christian marriages among the Bujuur.

Pre-Christian Traditional Marriage

Bujuur traditional marriage was simple and secretive. The parents of the man approached the woman's parents at night, taking with them chicken and distilled alcohol known as jeeruw. This event was known as Zuwtuw. If the woman's parents accepted the proposal, they consumed the items. This legalized the children (man and woman) to be husband and wife. The next day, the man would take his friends to the field of his in-laws to do manual work. After the day's manual work, the man went to the woman's (his wife's) house accompanied by his parents and friends. From that day onwards, he became one of the family members of the wife and would be known as *Imah*. It was also from this day onward that he would start his *Imah* duty, known as *Imah-Itu*, whereby he served his in-laws for a period of at least three years. All the earnings during the period belonged to the in-laws. During the course of *Imah*-Itu, the man was expected to host a small formal ceremony known as Charaa, which is a feast for his parents-in-law and their clansmen. It was on this occasion that the tentative schedule for the third ceremony, known as Men-Itu, and the bride price were decided. The bride price was a gift (a gong, or a shabaken, or both) from the man's family to the woman's family. Depending on the value of the bride price, the woman's family arranged the dowry.¹⁴ Men-Itu signaled the end of Imah-Itu, typically held at the end of the three years of Imah-Itu. It was the biggest and most important marital ceremony in which all the well-wishers would be invited for a feast. Appropriate meat, alcohol and other items were exchanged between the families on the occasion. The man's family also formally handed over the bride price. Depending on the value of items, the woman's parents and relatives prepared appropriate dowry gifts; "[t]he dowry consisted of everyday articles, items, tools, and accessories which were necessary to start a new family." The dowry was not necessarily arranged by the woman's parents; instead, all her relatives who received the special meat portion, known as zuwrsha and shakam, contributed to the dowry. "Any items presented by friends and wellwishers were also considered as part of this dowry; as such, the concept of dowry in this

¹⁴ The wife's family arranged the dowry only after receiving the bride price(Personal communication, Kapaam village, 15. 05. 2021).

¹⁵ Shangkham, 447-448.

traditional space was a gift to the couple that provided them with a resource to start life after marriage" (Personal Communication, Tungphae village, 20.05.2013).

Thus, the traditional marriage process prior to Christian influence consisted of four stages within a period of three years: *Zuwtuw*, *Imah-Itu*, *Charaa* and *Men Itu*. All of these stages were traditionally considered to be part of the marriage ceremony because even if the secret *Zuwtuw* legalized the union, marriage was said to be incomplete if the other three were not held.

Modified Traditional Marriage (Post-Christianity)

Contemporary Bujuur people have incorporated the Christian philosophy of marriage and union into these pre-Christian practices. Continuing from the pre-Christian period, a man's parents still approach a woman's parents secretly at night, taking with them chicken and red tea (known as *Chongthang*). However, unlike the historical *Zuwtuw*, the present *Chongthang* does not unite the man and woman as husband and wife; instead, it is merely a ceremonial event akin to a betrothal. It is, however, it is interpreted as a form of *traditional* engagement ceremony by many. Following this event, a non-mandatory formal event known as *Cha Ynsuw* is held to announce the betrothal/engagement: on the occasion, the man's parents and relatives bring meat and tea to the woman's house where selected male members of the woman's clan are invited. After a short period of time lasting a few days or months, a formal traditional marriage ceremony known as *Juktuw* is held. The *Juktuw* is followed by a Christian marriage on the next day.

Juktuw in practice is similar to Men-Itu. On the occasion, families exchange gifts. Well-wishers and friends are invited for a feast. Zuwrsha and other customary meat portions are presented to the woman's clan members who would also prepare appropriate dowry gifts. The woman is expected to move to her husband's house after the event with a ceremony known as ZuwrIthak.

Thus, the modified traditional marriage practiced at present includes four steps: Chongthang, Cha Ynsuw, Juktuw and ZuwrIthak. There is no Imah-Itu or Charaa. It can be stated that the contemporary Juktuw is a mere namesake ceremonial event in lieu of Men-Itu and is held without undergoing Imah-Itu and Charaa processes.

Christian Marriage

Because the Bujuur are Christians, a Christian marriage is also considered mandatory. The Christian marriage is usually held the day after the *Juktuw* event. Although Christian marriage caters to religious aims, an effect of Christian marriage is that it impacts the status and interpretation of modified traditional marriage. That is, although *Juktuw* is the present traditional and formal wedding event, the man and woman are not considered to be husband and wife unless they also have a Christian marriage. Thus, even though *Juktuw* is the marriage ceremony in theory, in practice *Juktuw* is reduced to a mere ceremonial event and treated as a celebratory event wherein meats and dowries are exchanged. ¹⁶

Marriage in Case of Elopement (Itaen)

There is also another customary marital space for those individuals who elope, known as *Itaen*. Elopement can be due to reasons like pre-marital pregnancy, parents objecting to the relationship or desire for marriage, avoiding the heavy expenditures of *Juktuw/*Christian marriage, or simply peer pressure. For any of these reasons, elopement/*Itaen* is considered a shameful act. The eloping couple, especially the man, is penalized by the respective clans for bringing shame. Thereafter, the eloping couple must undergo the following marital stages:i) *Chongthang* (informing the woman's parents of the elopement) and ii) *Cha Ynsuw* (the man's family presenting meats and hosting feasts for the woman's family; it is like an announcement of the union). Eloping couples are not entitled to *Juktuw* (the contemporary traditional marriage) or Christian marriage; instead, "they are to have *Men-Itu* after an appropriate period of time." As usual, *Imah-Itu* and Charaa are not followed.

The above constitutes the various forms of marriage practices; their interpretation and enforcement depends on the whims and wishes of the people, as such there is no concrete practice which is consistently followed. During an annual assembly of the *Bujuur Aanchung Puh* (Moyon Naga Council) in November 2016, the cultural committee presented a number of recommendations to homogenize the marriage process which were endorsed by the assembly. In addition, the assembly also recommended to phase out unnecessary events like *Cha Ynsuw*

¹⁶ From observations of recent marriages from the field. There was an incident in 2017 of a man from Kapaam village requesting a Juktuw certificate from the village saying that it was the duty of the village to issue him and his wife a Juktuw certificate as it was traditional marriage. His request was turned down.

¹⁷ The contemporary concept of Juktuw and Men-Itu are confusing and there is no consensus over the matter; some consider Juktuw as contemporary Men-Itu performed before a Christian marriage, thus, those who do not have a Christian marriage also do not perform Juktuw. On the other hand, Men-Itu is wrongly considered to be solely for those who do not have a Christian marriage.

and ZuwrIthak, because they were not a part of the original tradition, and were perceived as a waste of economic resources. Nevertheless, people have continued their marriage practices in the ways they wished, and to date there is no consensus over the traditional marriage system. Some would consider Juktuw be the traditional marriage ceremony, while others disagree with the concept of Juktuw and instead opine that traditional Zuwtuw at night should be the ceremony that formally legalizes the union. To be precise, even terms like Cha Ynsuw, Chongthang, Zuwtuw, Juktuw and Men-Itu are now loosely used as per individual choice. But one thing is shared in common: Imah-Itu and Charaa have completely disappeared.

Imah-Itu and its Role in Sustaining Bujuur Identity

Imah-Itu is, in theory, one of the defining characteristics that set Bujuur society apart from the other Naga tribes. It used to be one of the most important marriage components; without *Imah-Itu*, prior to Christian influence, marriages were said to be incomplete. Such was the importance of *Imah-Itu* that it was the desire of every family to have a responsible *Imah*.

Imah can be loosely translated as son-in-law. But not every son-in-law is an *Imah*. A son-in-law was called an *Imah* only if he underwent the matrilocal servitude, or *Imah-Itu*, by residing at his wife's house. What matrilocal servitude was and how it is related to Bujuur matrilineage are discussed accordingly.

As per the tradition, a Bujuur man was to reside at his wife's house after *Zuwtuw* for a period of time (at least three years). During his stay at his wife's home, the man was considered as the *Imah* of the family; this term is translated as *the responsible son-in-law*. However, this *Imah* differed significantly from the general understanding of a son-in-law, because the *Imah* was entitled to use all of the resources and services belonging to the inlaw's clan. The duration of the *Imah-Itu* was traditionally set for three years, although there was no restriction if he desired to prolong it. During *Imah-Itu*, the man served his parents-in-law religiously through material and non-material contributions; whatever he earned belonged to the parents-in-law. In addition, despite being married to the daughter of the family, the *Imah* was not considered as the head of the family; rather, he was a member of the family. In the event of the absence of the father-in-law, the mother-in-law assumed the head of the family. The *Imah-Itu* also served as the path for the newly married man to become acquainted with the in-law's clan. He was also expected to take part in any social event of his wife's clan during which he would perform the customary slaughtering, preparing, and distributing of meats and other items. Any man who refused to undergo *Imah-Itu* was

regarded as arrogant and uncultured, and in extreme cases, the Zuwtuw could also be annulled. Though women were considered generally inferior in position to men, a family with no daughter(s) would be regarded as unlucky because they would have no *Imah*, which was considered a great social shame. This could be considered contradictory, i.e., if daughters were considered inferior to sons, why would a family with no daughters feel ashamed? This is because all the sons would leave their parental homes to live with their wives' families, thus, there would be no one left in the family to take care of the parents; in addition, all of the earnings and labor of the sons would go to their in-laws. Thus, to have a daughter meant that the family was assured of an *Imah* who would contribute to the family's wealth. Even though Imah-Itu involved matrilocality and matrilocal servitude, it was practically an institution of patriarchal economic power whereby the father-in-law and the son-in-law benefited the most while the woman (daughter/wife) was just the medium through which the power flowed. Women's families were generally welcoming of the *Imah* and there were many instances whereby the *Imah* ended up living permanently at the wife's house. During such an event, the *Imah* assumed the position of the head of the family after the demise of the father-in-law, but the *Imah* did not have the right to claim ownership of the father-in-law's properties which by virtue would either belong to his brothers-in-law or his wife (if she did not have any brothers). Imah and Imah-Itu were culturally so very significant to the Bujuur that there was a separate genre of folk song known as "Imah Laa" dedicated to the system.

The first children were usually born and raised at the wife's house. After the *Imah-Itu* period ended, the man (with the wife and children) would either return to his parents' home or build a new house for his new family. But there was no choice for the youngest or a lone son as he was expected by default to return to his parents' house. As most of the sons would be staying at the wives' houses as *Imah*, the *Imah* of a particular family took the role of the family's son. The experience as narrated by an elderly person in the field as follows:

We had the *Zuwtuw* ceremony at my wife's house. The next day, I took my friends to my wife's agriculture field for doing manual work. In the evening, they dropped me at my wife's house and from that moment, I started my *Imah-Itu*. I dutifully served my in-laws. After *Men-Itu*, I could have continued to stay at my in-laws but we (my wife and I) decided to move out. We built our own house with assistance from our parents and friends. We never lived at my parents' house, so, I guess, I did not marry my wife; instead, I got married to my wife. (Tungphae village, 22.05.2013, field communication)

Even in cases of elopement and taboo marriages (marriage within the same clan), the man was still be expected to honor his *Imah-Itu* duty. It was only after the *Imah-Itu* that the final marriage ceremony, *Men-Itu*, could be held. Men who refused to undergo *Imah-Itu* were denied the *Men-Itu* ceremony. In extreme cases, the family of the woman could also demand for the annulment of the *Zuwtuw* if the man refused to undergo *Imah-Itu*. ¹⁸

In the past (prior to Christian influence), Bujuur society strictly adhered to the *Imah-Itu*; thus, marriage of Bujuur women to men outside the community was discouraged if not prohibited because of the fear that the non-Bujuur sons-in-law would not be willing to undergo the *Imah-Itu*, and the family would then become a laughing stock. Apart from that, Bujuur women who married outside the community would often be mocked by their friends as the beliefs were that- only "leftover" women would think of marrying outside the community and if no Bujuur man was willing to marry her, she must be unproductive, useless and an ugly woman (Personal Communication, Kapaam village, 05.05.2013). In one of the folk tales, a lady by the name of Tudeen was considered a disappointment by her father. In anger, Tudeen eloped with a nobleman from another community. The angry parents cursed her saying that she would not have a happy marital life because she eloped to another community, thus, they would become a laughing stock of the society. On the other hand, when Tudeen visited her village after many years, she was teased by the villagers that she was dragging her *inih* (sarong) on the dusty ground like a rooster dragging its heavy tails (to indicate that she must be surely suffering at the hands of her in-laws).

In such a condescending attitude against marriage outside the community, Bujuur women were forced to bring their non-Bujuur husbands to their home citing the compulsory *Imah-Itu*. Once the husband agreed to live at her house, the probability of settling permanently was very high as the woman's parents would persuade the son-in-law not to return home out of fear that their daughter would not be treated fairly by her non-Bujuur inlaws. The interesting custom about non-Bujuur men was that they would be offered the opportunity to request any Bujuur well-wishers to customarily adopt them. If the requests were accepted, then they would be allowed to settle permanently, and any children born from the marriage would be considered a Bujuur. That was where the Bujuur matrilineage came into the picture.

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¹⁸ The accounts are constructed from personal communications (interviews and informal discussions), Kapaam village, 10.05.2013, 11.05.2013, 01.06. 2020; Thangkin village, 15.05.2013; Tungphae village, 29.05.2013, 01.08.2021)

Even though the Bujuur custom emphasized patrilineal descent and that only the children born to a Bujuur father would be considered a Bujuur, in practice most of the children born in a marriage between a Bujuur mother and a non-Bujuur father had the right to identify as Bujuur or with the mothers' clan. However, this matrilineage of children rarely extended to marriages within the Bujuur and the children were always identified with the father's clan even if they were born out of wedlock or outside the marriage.

Thus, it can be said that there are two forms of lineage traditions within the Bujuur:

- i) Patrilineal, which is customary, and
- ii) Matrilineal, which is reserved only for those children whose fathers are not Bujuur.

A core question then arises: how is the practice of Imah-Itu and Bujuur women marrying outside the community a crucial subject of inquiry? The answer lies in the dynamics of identity within Bujuur society and the contemporary interpretation of Bujuur identity.

For centuries, Bujuur society was closed with little interaction with other communities. The limited interactions that did take place were through marriages following the system of an "absorbing organism," that is, inter-community marriage took place only if was to benefit the Bujuur. The social space was constructed in such a way that if a Bujuur man married a woman from another community, he was expected to bring her to his home. At the same time, Bujuur women were also expected to bring their non-Bujuur husbands to their homes. The space of Bujuur men needs no discussion, but the practice of Bujuur women bringing their non-Bujuur husbands to their home is crucial to discuss as it shaped the lineage and demographic history of Bujuur society.

Traditionally, there were two primary clans, known as *Shungkhur*, and twelve secondary clans (also known as *Shungkhur*). As per the oral history, most of the secondary clans became extinct sometime in the course of history. This clan extinction was attributed to wars, famines and especially an uneven sex ratio. The Bujuur population was, and is, renowned for its overwhelmingly disproportionate female to male sex ratio: that is, there are more women than men. For instance, according to the 2013 Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India report, the sex ratio of Moyon (Bujuur) was 1147 females per 1000 males.¹⁹ The high female sex ratio meant that some clans and families ended up with no males to

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¹⁹ Ministry, "Statistical Profile," 178.

continue the clan and family line. Men from other tribes settling in Bujuur villages also preferred to be adopted by bigger clans for social-political security, which meant that the children were considered as belonging to the adopted clan. Since the Bujuur matrilineage in the past was limited to ethnic identity, the children born of a non-Bujuur man and a Bujuur woman from a small clan did not contribute to their mother's clan demography. Thus, smaller clans became smaller with each passing generations and bigger clans got bigger. In addition, low birth rate was also an issue among the Bujuur since time immemorial and continues to the present day.

Some of the historically extinct clans were i) Shimphuw- Bungjeer, Sherbum and Suwnglip and ii) Züngven- Ruwen, Vaanglaar, Khaartu and Hungam/Beengpih.²⁰ Among the seven, only four, (Serbum, Ruwen, Vaanglaar and Khaartu) were revived, while Bungjeer, Suwnglip and Hungam/Beengpih remain extinct to this day. From various sources of oral narrations, the following accounts of the revival of extinct clans were reconstructed. As per the oral accounts and narrations, there were three spaces that contributed to the revival of clans:

- i) Compulsory Imah-Itu,
- ii) Prohibition of Bujuur women marrying outside the community, and
- iii) If women married outside the community, they must bring their husband back in accordance with the point (i).

Thus, when any Bujuur women married outside the community, they had to bring their husbands back to their village as part of the *Imah-Itu*. The husbands were then adopted by the clans of their mothers-in-law based on the social custom that everyone should be associated with a clan. Through this kind of arrangement, most non-Bujuur husbands ended up settling permanently in Bujuur villages and swore oaths of allegiance to the clan; the descendants were considered as Bujuur even in the event of the fathers' departure. The following is an illustration of such cases,

A Shimphuw woman marries outside the community; she brings her husband back to her house for the *Imah-Itu*. During the period of *Imah-Itu*, the man is adopted by the Ziingven clan if he wishes to settle permanently. All the children born from the marriage would be considered as Bujuur belonging to the adopted Ziingven clan. In cases where the man wishes not to be adopted,

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²⁰ Condensed from information provided by several individuals during personal communications (2013-15).

the children would still have to be customarily adopted by appropriate Bujuur clans because the custom prohibits non-Bujuur individuals from settling in Bujuur villages.

The practice may seem incoherent and not clearly related to a general understanding of matrilineality where children are identified with their mother's clan; but to a Bujuur, everything makes sense. To understand this complexity, it is necessary to also understand the concept of lineage and identity among the Bujuur.

Identity inheritance among the Bujuur is not just about the clan lineage, but it is also about the entire social identity. Thus, when a Bujuur talks about matrilineality, it is not about children taking the surname/clan of the mother, but it is about the children identifying themselves as Bujuur even if the father is a non-Bujuur. "Bujuurness" is treated as the primary space for identity and lineage, and supersedes the clan space. Thus, from a general point of view, the traditional Bujuur matrilineality may not look like a general matrilineal system because the children did not inherit the mother's clan, but if viewed from the Bujuur's lens of lineage, the children inherited the Bujuur identity from the mother.

Few of the instances of inheriting the Bujuur identity from the mother, as narrated in the field, were as follows:

Case 1:

Our great grandfather belonged to an Anal Naga tribe from Anal Khullen. He moved to Khungjuur (Bujuur) village, married a Bujuur lady and had children. Even though he was Anal Naga by birth, his children and descendants were/are all Bujuur. (Condensed from personal communication, Kapaam village, 01.06.2013)

Case 2:

Our grandfather belonged to the Monsang Naga. He married our grandmother and dutifully underwent the *Imah-Itu*. He overstayed his *Imah-Itu* and decided to live permanently; accordingly, he performed all the customary ceremonies and become Bujuur. If Bujuur identity was strictly restricted only through the male lineage, then, we would be Monsang, but we are not Monsang. We are Bujuur because our grandmother was Bujuur, and nobody can question our Bujuur identity. (Condensed from personal communication, Kapaam village, 10.10.2015)

Case 3:

My grandfather belonged to the Züngvun clan of the Aemo²¹ sub-tribe. He married a woman from Khungjuur village. And that was how we are Bujuur; we don't identity ourselves as Aemo. (Personal communication, Nungthar village, 15.05.2015)

Despite the children taking their mother's ethnic lineage, they were not allowed to take their mother's clan because of custom of strict clan exogamy. But they were allowed to take their grandmother's clan. However, there are also few exceptional contemporary cases, as given below,

Case A:

Shanuw Laanglom got married to a Meitei Pangal. After separating from the husband, probably due to cultural differences, she took the children with her, and they were gladly accepted into the Laanglom clan. The daughter of Mrs. Laanglom also married into another community but soon returned home after separation, bringing her children with her. The children are all considered as Laanglom. (Kapaam village)

Case B:

Shanuw Chineer decided to be a single mother, but there was pressure from the society that the child should belong to the father's clan. But she stood firm with her decision to keep the child with the reason that she bore the child and thus the child biologically belonged to her and the child had the full right to be considered a part of the Chineer clan. (Kapaam village)

Case C:

Shanuw Ruwen was married into another tribe. At the insistence of her family and to continue the family lineage, the child was also made a Ruwen. (Kapaam village)

The above cases illustrate that Bujuur matrilineage is still prevalent at present although not very common. Despite the historical matrilineage, the present Bujuur society keeps insisting that there is no space for matrilineality among the Bujuur. The irony of such a statement is that it mostly comes from the families whose paternal ancestries were in other tribe.

²¹ For details on Aemo, see Elija Chara, "Memory and Identity: Narrations on Aemo-Bujuur," *Asian Ethnicity* 22, no. 3 (2021).

Discussions

The contemporary emphasis and interpretations of Bujuur society as 'patrilineal and patrilocal,'22 in addition to the obvious patriarchy of the society, limit discussions on the Bujuur history of clan rejuvenations because it was considered a social taboo to discuss these realities. At the same time, there are unconscious insecurities among the clans that were revived. However, it would be wrong to interpret the fact that they were revived as evidence that they do not see themselves as *pure Bujuur*. This insecurity is because of the default patriarchy and non-acknowledgement of the role of women in the making of Bujuur identity.

The contemporary social rants on "Pure Bujuur, half-Bujuur"²³ happened because of the influences from other cultures that are predominantly male-centric in nature, for example Christianity and the larger Naga family. The practice of Imah-Itu was abandoned because of the conversion to Christianity that emphasizes the submission of women to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22) as well as the Christianized Bujuur's decision to do away with pre-Christian traditions; thus, Imah-Itu was misinterpreted as subjugation of men by their wives. In addition, during the early years of Christianity among the Bujuur, many conflicts occurred between the Christians and traditionalist over the question of culture and customs that some Bujuur Christians chose to give up all prior traditions and even challenged the concept of taboo against clan endogamy ultimately leading to the breakage of the Shimphuw clan in 1950 and the Ziinngven clan in 1978. At the same time, Christianity also opened the doors for Bujuur men and women to freely marry outside the community without social repercussions. Accordingly, many Bujuur women married into other tribes/communities; and since they already disregarded many traditional practices, they followed their husbands as dutiful Christian wives; on the other hand, many Bujuur men also married women from other tribes.

The issue with inter-community marriage is that it strengthens the space of patriarchy in patrilineal and patrilocal cultures contrary to the traditional customs. For example, Bujuur women no longer give emphasis to *Imah-Itu* out of respect for their husbands' strictly patriarchal and patrilocal cultures or Christian doctrines. Many women have been forced to change their denominations if they desired Christian marriage; but men have not been required by the Church to change their denomination. On the other hand, non-Bujuur women

²² Nungchim, 41; Serbum, 177; Shangkham, 446.

²³ From field observations and personal experiences. The author's relatives and acquaintances used this term many times to undermine the ethnic and cultural legitimacy of anyone they disagreed with, picking on the ethnicity of the father/mother.

who married Bujuur men brought their patriarchal notions along with them such that they could not comprehend why Bujuur folks emphasize historical *Imah-Itu* and allowed the children of Bujuur women and non-Bujuur men to identify themselves as Bujuur. This generated confusion among the younger generation who were often led to believe that *Imah-Itu* is shameful and that children of non-Bujuur fathers are not Bujuur (Personal observation, Kapaam village, 17.09.2015). At present, the practice of *Imah-Itu* is often so dreaded by men that a song was composed. An extract from the song goes,

"Shuplu luhong mahdeh ning (I will never ever get married)

Lunghah bi mahning (I will not marry a woman)

Imah-Itu ka ring tahna (Because I don't want to undergo Imah-Itu)

Mukhuwpa'ng ong ka ta."²⁴ (I rather remain a bachelor)

The neighboring tribes/communities often ridicule Bujuur people for allowing the children of non-Bujuur fathers to identify as Bujuur out of a belief that such a practice will dilute the ethnic purity of Bujuur. Members of other tribes do not seem to realize that the Bujuur allowing matrilineage was not invented in the modern period due to influence of feminism and ideas of gender equality, but that it was a practice that has been part of the Bujuur social life since time immemorial. In fact, if Bujuur women were not allowed to pass on their Bujuur identity to their children, then it is probable that the present Bujuur population would number only few hundred considering that five out of the nine existing lineage clans were the result of historical matrilineality.²⁴In addition, the spaces of ethnicity and identity were never exclusively male; instead, ethnic ambilocality was the defining value that made the Bujuur.

Since the year 1922, when the first Bujuur converted to Christianity, the social practices have been undergoing paradigm shifts to limit the importance of women in the construction of Bujuur identity. For the sake of cultural protection and promotion, numerous customs and norms were invented by the Christianized Bujuur to suit their own purposes (Personal communication, Kapaam village, 10.10.2015): for example, the expectation that women live at their husband's house after marriage, the disappearance of *Imah-Itu* and the

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²⁴ The song was composed by a renowned Bujuur composer by the name Morenchung; it presents the excuses made by a man and woman over their unwillingness to get married. For the song lyrics, see, Sherung Iduung, ed., *Chithaereer* (Kapaam: Sherung Iduung, 2006), 36.

introduction of a new custom known as *ShanuwIthak* ²⁵ (sending the bride to her new/husband's house) reinforces patrilocalism and the subjugation of women. Over and above, the biblical verse of Ephesians 5:22 was regularly cited by members of the Church to assert that Bujuur women had to submit to their husbands; this verse was interpreted by Church leaders in a way that led to the refusal to permit inter-denominational marriage, forcing women to convert to their husbands' denomination. This justification has even led to discouragement of divorces even when a husband is abusive to his wife.

Notable excuses made for non-observance of *Imah-Itu* are:

- i) the man is the only son and needs to take care of the parents,
- ii) the couple settles somewhere else for work related purposes,
- iii) the husband/wife is from another tribe, and
- iv) it is no longer relevant to a modern lifestyles and Christian values.

These excuses are simply flimsy as though there was never a lone son with ailing parents in the past and there were never inter-community marriages in the past; there might be wars and famines in the past, but people adhered to the social customs because they considered customs as their identifying feature. (Personal communications, Kapaam village, 10.05.2013; 20.05.2014; 10.02.2017; 05.04.2018; Khungjuur village, 04.04.2018; Thangkin village, 15.05.2013).

There are also challenges from the younger generations because their understanding of the historical customs and practices are limited. Rather than being proud of their rich history, many younger Bujuur are main aloof to their history, customs and traditions and at times even feel ashamed of certain historical customs like *Imah-Itu* for fear that "their peers and friends from other tribes/communities would make fun of them." This fear is logical to a certain extent if viewed from a patriarchal lens, but the basis of the fear is invalid because the insecurity arose from misunderstanding the past and historic Bujuur identity. Had the younger generations been acquainted with the historical customs, they would have been equipped to address the taunting curiosity of outsiders. Instead, they became victims of their own ignorance. A Bujuur leader once remarked during a personal speech (Kapaam village, 15.09.2015), "It is not our culture for a man to live at his wife's house...;" this is an indication

²⁶ The present society often makes fun of Bujuur men who wish to spend considerable time at the in-laws; if the men folk actually stay at their wives' houses, they are taunted even more as having become their wives' subordinates.

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²⁵ Ruel writes that the patrilineal ancestries of the Ruwen, Vaanglar and Khaartu clans were of Anal Naga and Monsang Naga while their matrilineal ancestries were of Bujuur. For details, see, Ruel Rumchung, *Ruel Wanglar Khartu Shageigi Puron Paron* (Khongyon: Ruel Koren, 1987).

that even leaders, especially if they are men, are unaware of the historical customs and practices despite the expectation that they ought to be aware of them. This in turn affects the everyday opinions of the masses who come up with new ideas like "Pure Bujuur, half Bujuur" as a means to differentiate between a Bujuur whose father is Bujuur and those Bujuur whose fathers are not Bujuur. In the past, as narrated by the elders, there was no such notion like "pure Bujuur, half Bujuur" based on the father's ethnic identity: Bujuur women's children were treated as Bujuur as much as Bujuur men's children were treated as Bujuur, and it was this inclusive system of lineage that contributed to the retention of Bujuur history, customs, and practices.

By and large, the role of Bujuur women in the sustenance of Bujuur identity continues to be unacknowledged. Bujuur men could be excused for their staunch patriarchal mindset that blinded them to the historical realities. But Bujuur women cannot be excused for not being able to comprehend their historical roles and contributions to the society. There are many instances where Bujuur women did not support each other. For example, in the year 2017, there was disagreement among Bujuur women over wedding dress codes; the disagreement escalated to the point that many women started verbally abusing the Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh (Moyon Women's Organisation) for trying to interfere over the dress code at Christian weddings. In addition, some women leaders were also shamed at being unmarried. Likewise, the demands for social, political, and economic equalities made by the Bujuur Shanuw Ruwrkheh were not received well by many Bujuur women. The lack of this kind of support among the Bujuur women stems from a belief that gender equality and fair representation of women in social-economic-political institutions could deprive their husbands and sons of representation and entitlements. In short, most Bujuur women care more for the welfare of their male kin (husbands, sons and male relatives) than the welfare of Bujuur women as a whole. Even in the past, as per oral history, Bujuur women would often handpick and beat up vulnerable women for pre-marital pregnancy and eloping. It was also a mandated tradition in the past for women leaders to ganged up in order to punish unwed pregnant women by forcing them to voluntary undergo abortion or suffer further consequences including punching the pregnant woman's stomach with a pestle in order to kill the fetus; in extreme cases where the unwed woman gave birth, the in fact was immediately killed by smashing it between pestles. Even at present, many Bujuur women would busy themselves in snooping into the private affairs of other women, including scolding or

gossiping against single mothers or any women who refused to follow their husbands after marriage.

No Bujuur (men or women, young or old), at present, is interested in discussing the traditional institution of *Imah-Itu* and clan rejuvenations via matrilineage. Every time a discussion is initiated on *Imah-Itu* and matrilineage, people would simply state that pre-Christian traditions and practices have no space in the Christianized society. Gender discussions are even more emotionally challenging for Bujuur women who choose to marry outside the community because they somehow lose their bargaining power out of fear of being ridiculed as "bad women" by their husbands, in-laws and society. In fact, it is an overlooked and undeniable reality that other communities often believe that Bujuur women would make bad daughters-in-law because they take their husbands back to their village instead of living at their husbands' house, and that traditional institutions like *Imah-Itu* are against the Christian teachings of wives submitting to their husband. ²⁷ These kinds of negative comments affect the well-being and aspirations of Bujuur women and in turn contribute to the dilution and corrosion of Bujuur social customs and practices in order to be accepted by other communities.

Some concluding points worth highlighting are:

- i) Because of globalization, modernity, and cultural interactions, patriarchy manages to reinforce its dominance among the Bujuur.
- ii) *Imah-Itu*, which was an integral part of the Bujuur marriage process, has been abandoned to fit into the expectations of other communities/cultures.
- iii) The ambilineality of Bujuur identity needs social recognition, without which the future of Bujuur identity will be unsustainable.
- iv) Even though matrilocality and matrilineage are regarded as integral to Bujuur identity, they are at present reduced to theoretical customs no longer practiced.

The customs of matrilocalism and matrilineality are relative, that is, "one cannot simply use an objective lens to structure the practices of the Bujuur Nagas by basing the arguments and rationales from other cultures and civilizations."²⁸ To mimic Descartes's famous line *I think*,

²⁸ In a similar fashion, researchers and writers would often use the cultural traits of tribes from the Indian state of Nagaland to define who was and who was not a Naga, or to construct the common history/cultures of the Nagas. The problem with such objective definitions is that it tends to dismiss diversity and "generates

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²⁷ Condensed from narrations by various women; personal communications, Kapaam village, dated- 01.06.2013, 02.06.2013, 15.05.2014, 20.09.2015, 05.04.2018, 19.02.2021; Khungjuur village, 04.04.2018.

therefore I am, the Bujuur thinks, therefore the Bujuur exists. To a very large extent, the construction and experience of Bujuur identity was the result of the Imah-Itu. As such, the contemporary construction and presentation of Bujuur society as patrilocal and patrilineal are contradictory to the historical roles of Bujuur women in the making of Bujuur identity.

Unfortunately, the historical customs remain only in memory and the possibility of reviving those customs is impossible due to increasing dominance of patriarchy and patriarchal defined cultural spaces as well as general disinterests in issues relating to customs and traditions. The elderly folks have realized the importance of gender equality and often speak about the need for the Bujuur society to treat women fairly and encourage *Imah-Itu*; unfortunately, they are dismissed as *itar choiron* (hallucinating senile). Even the Bujuur leaders, despite their vocal concerns about the demographic sustainability of the Bujuur tribe, are also not interested in reviving *Imah-Itu* and matrilineage citing their own newly constructed customs and traditions related to women following their husbands after marriage. Instead of recognizing matrilocality, the leaders are ever ready to penalize any woman who returned home (with their children) after a divorce or as a widow.

misinformation by faking or reconstructing the data to suit the existing theory/hypothesis/concepts," as stated by Rooney. See, Angela Gilliam, "Leaving a Record for Others: An Interview with Nahau Rooney," in *Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy: Scholarship, Empire and the South Pacific*, ed. Lenora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 42.

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