

The Shompen

The Shompen were known to Ptolemy and Arab geographers, but there's still no reliable information before the 19th century. It wasn't until 1846, British officer, Frederik Adolph de Roepstorff, published works on the Nicobar and Andaman language; thirty years later, he collected linguistic and ethnographic data. Geographer *Robert Blench*, exclaims that very little information has been added since then because the Nicobar Islands has been restricted for foreign researchers since Indian independence. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands hot climate has developed a raw sense of style within the culture. The conventional attire for the men is generally just some type of cloth that only covers the genitals and decorations are limited to a bead necklace or an armband. The women wear knee-length skirts made of barkcloth, which is a cloth made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry or any similar tree; additionally, they're decorations would include jewelry such as armbands of bamboo, bead necklaces or bamboo ear plugs.

Scholars have found that the Shompen are an isolated group of primitive Malaysians, and although they must be regarded as the aborigines of the islands, many features amongst them point to the fact that they are no longer racially pure. Additionally, the facial appearances are a very clear and infallible indication of the primitive people.

The economy of the Shompen culture is really interesting; they definitely have a hunter-gatherer subsistence providence. In 2001, they estimated the population of the Shompen to be around 300 people. The social structure of the Shompen is definitely based off of tradition; everyone is related to one another through blood or marriage; there aren't any small groups of division, everybody is connected. Family is uberly important, a husband, wife and unmarried children symbolize an economic unit. When the son gets married, he builds a hut in the same village and lives with his wife. In polygynous families, where the man marries more than one wife, the wives and their kids will actually share the same hut and hearth. The oldest family member is considered to be

the head of the household; meaning any duties that are carried out by the wife and children, it must be first

brought to the head. Women can't move about as they please in the village, at least not without permission from the "headman of the band"(Rizvi pg. 37). Dr. Rizvi exclaims that the relationship among the Shompen is very informal. They eat together from the same leaf-plate and sit together or relatively close even in the presence of the elderly of the community and outsiders. The relation between the parents and children is found to be informal as well, fathers will boldly sit together with their sons and chew tobacco and "paan". Paan is a stimulating and psychoactive preparation combined with areca nut and/or cured tobacco (*The Lancet*). The way they treat their daughters are equally just.

Due to the inadequate knowledge on the Shompen because of legal access to the territory, researchers have small kinship information on them and practically no ethnographic data available. The oldest brother is called 'Nayan' by male and female, while a younger brother is called 'Ukaac'; which refers to any younger brother/male, irrespective of the sex of the speaker. Now, when it comes to women are the sisters, they are referred to as 'Agat'...whether younger or older. Dr. L.P. Vidyarthi goes even further to say that

"The children of the male parallel cousin and female parallel cousin are, likewise, designated by the same terms as used for one's own children. In other words, no clear-cut distinction is maintained between one's own children and the children of the female parallel and cross cousins, or the children of the male parallel and cross cousins in the first descending generation of the ego."

So, children really have to pick up the sound of the parents voice because everyone is 'Agat' or 'Ukaac'. Even more interesting descriptive terms are used when referencing relatives of the siblings of the same sex of one's parents. One would use 'Fa' and 'Fa Br' (*Father's brother*) and 'Mo' and 'Mo Br' (*Mother's brother*). In regards to the Shompen kinship terms, Mathur, author of *History of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands pg303*, implies that marriage regulation of the cross-cousin type, with the result that affinal relations generated by marriages in previous generations should normally determine marriages in succeeding generations. But in actual retrospect marriages with the generations to come didn't repeat and follow down that same path. A very peculiar form of marriage that I found among the Shompen was that of the grandparent and grandchild. It was set up as a

conventional institutionalized attempt to meet the actual sexual desires of the significant other in old age;

something intimate and everlasting.

The author of "*The Shompen*" Dr S. N. H. Rizvi, affirms that the Shompen are an endogamous and really strong inter-ethnic marriage believers. monogamy is most definitely the most commonest form of marriage, followed by polygyny. In his study, out of eighty-three marital unions recorded by the author, only two of those marital alliances married outside of the Shompen.

As far as birth is concerned the Shompen don't really have a special thing they do during the pregnancy of a new born. The women perform all of their regular duties, they're just not allowed to run or walk briskly. The delivery of the child is done in a particular hut and after delivery, the mother remains in that hut for about a month and is looked after by an elderly woman. No one is allowed to touch the baby on the first day except the mother, on the second day, the child is given a cold water bath in an indigenous vessel; Lime paste is also rubbed on the mother and baby...lastly, a small stick made of wood is burned and waved around the newborn to protect from evil spirits. In 1974, Mukherjee writes some interesting findings on menstruation and childbirth recorded in '*Preliminary Report on the Reconnaissance of Survey of Shompen Settlements (Unpublished)*' and it's as follows:

The periods of menstruation and childbirth considered as unclean among the Shompens. During the menstruation period the woman puts on the barkcloth though normally she wears cotton textile. There is much restriction after childbirth on the neo-mother and the baby. The delivery takes place in a specially thatched shed with no stilt. The girl lies down the ground under this shed at the time of labour pain and the elderly women of the village play the role of midwives. After delivery for about a month the neo-mother and the baby stay in a separate small hut with stilts of hardly a metre. The food for the neo-mother is served in this hut. The bark trays and troughs made for the use of the new-born baby are not mixed up with the family basketry and discharged after their utility is over. In one corner of this small hut a stone hearth is made in which fire is kept burning. The hearth is used for preparation of herbal medicines required for the new born baby...paste of some bark [is] applied on the head and forehead of the newborn baby. After a month or so the neo-mother and the baby leave this hut and stay in another hut. The neo-mother now discards the bark-cloth and puts on cotton cloth. The

deserted hut is dismantled. In the second hut they stay for another month or so and then come to their own hut.

During this period the husband is not permitted to stay with the wife. (Mukherjee, 1974: 32)

As far as death is concerned, the Shompen have certain rituals that they perform. When a person dies, whether in a hut or outside, they immediately take the body outside and place it flat on the ground. They then cry and weep over the body, even more excessive weeping for youth, for a good period of time. Then, a wooden bier (*moveable frame*) is prepared from a log of fresh wood and they place the dead's arms to their sides while the hands are kept open and they're hosted on top of the bier. Next, only two pall-bearers are required to take the body away from the village, but right before that happens, a pig is slaughtered in their honor. Lastly, they take all the implements of the deceased and they are placed upside down in the grave and the body is covered by komba leaves. The very next day, they move from that locality where the death happened and move to another place.

The author of *'The Shompens'* explains the Shompens rather interestingly. They practice hunter-gathering economy. He writes that keeping with the tropical climate of the islands, traditional attire includes only clothing below the waist. The traditional attire for men is a short, thin loincloth made of bark cloth, covering only the genitals without a 'tail' of cloth in front. Decoration is limited for men, consisting of bead necklaces and armbands. Women wear a knee-length skirt of bark cloth, occasionally with a shawl of bark cloth covering the shoulders. Decorations include bamboo ear plugs (*ahav*), bead necklaces (*naigaak*) and armbands of bamboo (*geegap*). Both sexes are barefoot. The Shompen probably learned to make and use bows from the Nicobaris. The main weapons are the bow and arrow. They do not use quivers but carry arrows by hand. Numerous types of spears, spear throwers, fire drills and a hatchet are the main tools.

To a group of people whose entire economic structure is based off hunting, gathering, fishing, the Shompen's forest terrain takes things into an interesting dimension. Dr. Rizvi exclaims that the majority of their food is built around horticulture, which is the art of practicing garden cultivation and management; gardening is the prime economic activity that the Shompen exhibit. They'll generally maintain one garden relatively close from their settlement and the other gardens are about two to three km from where they live, which is usually along the river banks or on gradual slopes of hills. Some of their gardens, such as the Pandanus *tanctoria* gardens, have

something called natural growth; little to no effort is required to produce the fibrous edible fruit. Both men and women of the village carry the pandanus fruit on the ends of a pole until it balances comfortably on their shoulders and that's the most efficient way they collect it. The Shompen still don't have any modern agricultural implements for their gardens, they still use big pointed sticks for digging/any other stabbing ground purposes. The east-coast Shompen, who are relatively close to the sea, use tools such as harpoons and iron rods to capture octopi, crabs and even molluscs (*snail-like*) from the muddy banks of the streams. The women are exclusively gatherers, they gather the honey, which isn't immediately consumed but it's actually placed in bottles for barter and to consume at a later time. Dr. Veau of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Switzerland, says that similarly the yam collected and roasted is preserved for days of scarcity. The Shompen are very fond with a particular material called 'rattan'. Rattan are thin pliable stems of a palm, they don't only use them for basket-making (*which they love... Pg. 44 The Shompens*), but it's also used for housing and barter.

A man usually carried a bow and arrows, a spear and through his loincloth belt, a hatchet, knife and fire drill. The Shompen are a hunter-gatherer subsistence people, hunting wild game such as pigs, birds and small animals while foraging for fruits and forest foods. They also keep pigs and farm yams, roots, vegetables, and tobacco. Shompen huts are built to house 4 people, and villages are made up of 4 to 5 families. Once a child is grown enough, he makes his own hut. The lowland Shompen build their huts on stilts and the walls are made of woven material on a wood frame and the roof of thatched palm fronds, and the structure is raised on stilts. The highland Shompen build their houses on the ground, and are made of the same materials as the raised houses. The interior is covered with mats, with sleeping mats on one end and tools and utensils hung on the walls and rafters. Cooking is done outside.

In the late 1980s the Shompens were living in ten groups, ranging in size from 2 to 22 individuals, scattered across the interior of the island. *Weber, George. "The Shompen People". The Andaman Association.* In 2001, the population of the Shompen was recorded to be around 300 people. Fun fact, because of their very isolated lifestyle in the interior of the island, the Shompens were largely protected from the 2004 Indian Ocean

earthquake and tsunami that completely devastated the coastal regions inhabited by Nicobaris and the Indian population.

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