

## The Mountain People – Ethnic Teng

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The Teng people are an ethnic group who live in the boundary area of Tibet. For various reasons, the survey of ethnic minorities in China, conducted in the 1950s, excluded the Teng people. Nevertheless, the products, the lifestyle and even the culture of the Teng people are unique amongst ethnic Tibetan, Moinpa and Lhopa. They are, therefore, named as the “Teng people”.

Like other minorities in the Chinese nation, the Teng people have a rich culture with a tradition of fascinating legends, folklore and customs-all of which reveal the glory of their exclusive culture throughout its lengthy part in human history.

### Community and Surnames

Generally, the Teng people are divided into two big communities or tribes; Tarang and Dgeman. Together they are also referred to as two big surnames. The Teng population lives in the area between Dulai River and Traya River in lower Traya of Traya County. People in the Tarang community occupy the bank of the Dulai River, while the Dgeman people are generally scattered along the bank of Traya River.

The Teng population is about 50,000 people, and most of them live in the disputed area between China and India. In upper and lower Traya of Traya County, there are about 1500 Teng people. Before 1952, the local Kashag Government especially created an official post named “Bcu Dpon” to administer the affairs of the Teng people living in the lower region of Songgu and Shamar.

Tseten, who was living in Druni village of the lower Traya and had passed away in June 1952, had taken the post of Bcu Dpon before 1950. In obedience to their elders, every winter Teng people would bring tributes such as herbs, hides, clothes, satin, cutting knives and axes to present to the Bcu Dpon to show their loyalty and obedience towards the local government.

Within the two big communities of Teng people, some sub-communities are also divided according to the locality into a succession of sub-sub-communities. For instance,

Under the Tarang community, there are sub-groups such as Dabona, Ardzong, Dergya (divided again into Gling Gol, Gar Ro Ha Godon, Dgala and so on), Aphun, Manvu, Abeling, Maye, Phagon (divided into Hagon, Gda Ram Ba, and so on). The Dgeman community is divided into Tushi (further divided into Agong, Bugling, Goling, and so forth), Bule, Adung,

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Deme, and Khedung. According to a survey, Teng people have 50 odd surnames. People with the same surnames form families or small tribes. Different surnames also engender various kindred, but kinship usually follows the patrilineal line.

Basically, they marry different surnames rather than an inner group who have identical surnames. Amongst those having the same surname, a revered older man is usually chosen as chieftain to take charge of the community's internal affairs, known locally as "Bakhu". He is definitely obeyed by all people in the community, but his authority does not extend beyond it. Amongst the different tribes, large or small...production methods, custom and religious faith are more or less in accord with one another.

In India, people refer to the Teng people as the wild people living on a mountain range. According to research, Dgeman people are differentiated from Burmese and the language of these two communities is different. Interestingly, both communities understand the oral language of Tarang people. The Teng people have no written language. They prefer to use rope knots or wood engraving to record important events. For many events, they only rely on the individual's unbelievable memory.

With regard to this phenomenal memory, legend says that many years ago, a woman bore three children—an ethnic Tibetan, a Lhopa, and a Teng. At the very beginning, the descendants of the Teng people were studying with the children of Tibetans, but the offspring of Teng people appeared to be poor learners and finally they had to give up. Taught as Teng, they swallowed entire textbooks that made them stand out as having such outstanding memories. They could remember everything no matter how long ago it has taken place or how complicated it was. Remembering is no problem for them at all.

### **Production and Life Style**

The rich folklore of Teng people has abundant stories about their production and their way of living. One legend is very common: Teng people have the same mother as Tibetan, Chinese, and Lhopa people. Their mother brings them up, and they study, play and work together. Their lives are enjoyable. One day, their mother calls them together and asked everybody to detail what he has already learnt. The older brother, the Chinese, says he has learnt how to cultivate land, weave textiles and forge metal; the Tibetan brother says he has learnt about how to rear yaks and sheep. The, the younger brothers, Lhopa and Teng say: "Mother, all we have learnt is how to use the bow and arrow to shoot moving animals and nothing else." Having heard from her children, the mother says: "You've all grown up, and you should leave me alone to have your own lives and be independent." Then the mother calls on the Chinese brother to go to the plain to extend his life skills, and the Tibetan brother to move to the plateau. Finally she asks her little child to stay in the nearby forest by rely on hunting and survive. That is why Teng people have depended upon hunting for generations.

Virtually, though they have lived in forests for generations, the Teng people also know how to plow land but their production technique is a little backward and basically relies on slash and burn cultivation. They are equipped with very simple tools, such as knives and wooden tools. Knives are not only the principal tool of production, but also their main weapon of self-defense

and an ornament for men as well. They like to sharpen their knives and decorate them with exquisite scabbards and straps. They have no fixed land to plow; instead they change land every two to three years by leaving the previous one to lie fallow on the mountain and clear a new one by burning the vegetation and then cultivating it. Interestingly, Teng people dislike plowing new land before they plant the seed because they believe this plowing would surely wash lose moisture and fertility from the earth and result in the failure of their crops. They often dig a hole in the earth using either a knife or a sharp stick and then drop the seed in. Such production methods mean that they have no interest in soil fertility. They always believe that fertilizer is dirty stuff and will contaminate their product.

Very few Teng people like to feed yaks and pigs. When it is really necessary to use yaks to plow the land, they prefer to borrow from Tibetan neighbors. Whenever they need domestic animals to cultivate land or for worship, they often take grain, hides or herbs, to exchange with their neighboring Tibetans.

Teng people are fond of planting maize, corn, millet, buckwheat, potato, yam, taro, kidney bean, and cowpea. Some households also like to cultivate barley and early seasonal grain. Very few Teng people could subsist on agriculture so they have to offer their labor to Tibetans in order to buy grain. They like to pick potherb or wild nuts to feed themselves. However, they are really good at hunting. Few of them use a rifle, or bow and arrow, but most to them hunt with simple tools like iron wire, ropes, sharpened sticks, bamboo, and stones.

### **Marriage Customs**

The Teng people maintain a marriage system based on polygamy. One man usually has up to ten wives at most, and two to three at least. The marriage is a matter of buying and selling. The number of wives a man has virtually depends on his economic status. A Lo Skung, the current village party secretary of Za Chung Village in Traya Town had five wives, but he only has one wife with him now. Three of his wives were purchased and one was given to him. After he joined the party, he left one and let the others lead their own lives. In accordance with the custom of Teng people, men usually never allow sons to live with their wives' original families, and they have to live independently after they grow up and marry. In addition, girls must marry and are forbidden to stay with their birth families. Usually, the value of a girl relies on various things including the surname of her family. A rich and high-class family, plus the girl's beauty, will always cost the groom a fortune: at least the slaughter of 20-30 high quality cows, plus tens of pigs, fresh meat of wild animals mice and fish. Therefore, if the girl is from a lower class, she often costs less. Usually, four to five cows plus ten pigs and a small amount of betrothal gifts could buy marriage with girl from a low class family.

In the Teng community, Teng people also like to have somebody to act as matchmaker or mediators, called locally "Gar Pe Ya Khu". Usually, these matchmakers are men who are especially revered by the community. They negotiate with the girl's family and make a decision about the price of the girl. Most gifts presented by groom's family to the girl's family, such as a cow and a pig, are called "Phul Nor", and are seen as the payback for all the efforts made by the girl's family to bring her up. Teng people usually refer this payback as "Ri Bi Lu". In return, the girl's family will present gifts to the groom's family as the dowry of the girl. It includes a knife, a

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sword, a rifle, and a brass cooking utensil. The gifts between groom and the bride's father are usually standard; for instance, the gifts from the groom are usually a sword, a rifle, a knife, and suchlike. In return, the gifts from the bride's father are commonly a pig, a cow, and a brass cooking utensil. Only after the gifts, which have been agreed upon by both sides, are in position could the bride be allowed to enter the groom's family. Each wife has her own room and the groom will visit each of his different wives in turn.

Amongst these wives, only one is the legal wife who is most frequently visited by her husband. The households of Teng people differ from those of other ethnic groups. It is about three to four meters in width and ten in length, of which several rooms are given to individual wives and only one is left as guest room. Teng people prefer to hang up various kinds of skulls of domestic animal and wildlife to display the wealth of the family.

Apart from the gifts given to the girl's family, the groom has to present gifts to the father in particular and to the brothers and relatives of the girl. If the girl's family is not wealthy, too many gifts from the groom mean that the bride's family must struggle to give more gifts to the groom in return. Of course, this also means that a highly valued girl could possibly not get anybody who could afford to marry her.

Teng women usually dislike beef and pork, but eat meat from wildlife, chicken, mice, and fish. Few women with two or three children are allowed to eat pork, but none are allowed to eat beef. In addition, middle-aged women are forbidden to eat meat when they visit their brothers and brother-in-law. Also, women must deliver babies in the field, not in the house. Only after the baby is born can it be allowed inside. Having delivered their babies, women could eat buckwheat as their main staple, but men eat pork, chicken, and other highly nutritious food. People refer to this as "while the woman is delivering a baby, the man is nurtured". Locals believe that if man is not well-nourished during this particular period the baby's health is compromised, particularly a baby boy. In line with local convention, if the wife delivers more girls than boys, it means the wife has brought treasures to the husband and then, in return, the husband must present gifts to his father-in-law. On contrary, if baby boys out-number baby girls, the father-in-law has to return the gifts that the husband brought before his marriage.

If a husband has passed away or the couple is separated because of not getting along with each other, the woman cannot marry with any other man except the man who has same surname as her former husband. Other wise she must give back the presents from the husband's family or pay compensation.

## **Costume**

Teng people normally wear linen clothes and only a few cotton clothes, which are all homemade. The original linen color is their favorite, but sometimes they dye it red and black by using either bark or palm or broomcorn. The tool for weaving is very simple-several wooden sticks held together by narrow wooden slats. They first insert two rolls of wool on the ground to fix one end of the stick on which a horizontal line is tied. Then the other end of the stick, tied to the other end of the horizontal line is held on the waist of the weaver who is sitting on the floor.

The weaver usually tightens the horizontal line first and then passes the lateral line through while using another stick to separate each of horizontal lines.

In recent years, along with improvements in production and living standards, more and more Teng people are starting to use synthetic materials to replace linen. Teng people generally wear the same clothes all the year round, as all seasons are favorable and not clearly defined.

Men usually wear a long vest without collar or buttons, being long enough to cover their knees. Some like to put on a white shirt and small vest, but others prefer a big scarf on their shoulder. The scarf, being used both by day for warmth and at night as quilt, is usually one meter wide and two to three meters long. Silver necklaces often shine around the men's neck, but he sometimes wears the skeleton of an animal on his chest. While putting on a vest without a collar and a large bamboo hat, young men wear short pants with bare feet. Middle-aged men are fond of having beautiful long hair tied up on their heads, and then they like to wear a two-meter scarf in either white for young men or black for middle-aged men to circle around their head. They hang a half-meter long knife on their left shoulder engraved with an elegant linear motif, while the right shoulder is carrying a tobacco pipe. Both tobacco pipe and knife are treated as ornaments, tools, and weapons.

However, the women are accustomed to wearing colorful cloth that looks rather gorgeous. Their vest, without a collar, is often short and small, on which the principal black threads form linear motifs. The vest is too short to cover chest and navel, leaving it bare. However, most of them don't wear this dress alone to go outside but rather put on a colorful scarf as well. A bright and colorful pail-shaped skirt, long enough to reach to their ankles, with various linear motifs is their everyday dress. The skirt is divided into two layers. It is tied with a long cloth rope, perfectly displaying the narrow waist, but the hem of the skirt is wide at the bottom.

Teng women's hair is usually wound together and tied on the head with an engraved silver hairclip connected with a silver chain. The tied hair looks like a big whirlpool. The silver hairclip is carved with motifs such as the sun and moon. Women decorate their chests with three different shaped ornaments; one is called "Bao Wen De Khang". It consists of 20 pieces connected together. Each is the size of a walnut but shaped liked a lantern, representing auspiciousness. Another ornament is called "A Rim" –a 40 cm silver ring connected by several slim rings-the last one is like a silver dollar and the lot are linked together through a hole and hung on the women's chests. Teng women are fond of bracelets that appear roughly produced but are actually quite exquisite. Most of their ornaments are made from silver dollars, but some are pure silver.

Teng people particularly favor silver because they believe it looks elegant, expensive and luxurious. Usually, a well-dressed Teng woman shows her beauty by wearing various ornaments that tinkle when she moves.

Adult males and females prefer to wear big rings because they believe the bigger the ring is, the more beautiful it is. In particular, old ladies like a kind of big ring called "Gu Da Pe" – five to six cm. outside diameter and three cm. interior diameter. The ring weights 30-50 grams. Both men and women must have their ears pierced by using either a needle of Chinese pine or bamboo. Having been pierced, they insert a banana leaf by rolling it into a small tube. Until the

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earlobe hole is enlarged to certain size, they use slim bamboo stick to replace the banana leaf. Before doing that, the bamboo must be cut lengthways. When the bamboo dries, it slowly expands. They repeat this from time to time, and finally the earlobe hole is big enough to wear a big ring.

Both male and female Teng people like to carry a cotton bag, which is colorful but very basic. It is decorated with many silver dollars linked together through a small hole. The bag looks very beautiful because it is woven with various exquisite patterns.

### **Customs**

Both sexes like a smoke. Apart from eating and sleeping, they always have a cigarette in their mouths. They roll their own. A few have tobacco pipes made of silver, but most are from bamboo roots or of wood. They all look quite distinct and attractive. Unfortunately, some men are addicted to opium that they grow themselves. Usually, they first dip into the opium with a kind of spoon and cook it for a while. After cutting it into pieces, they mix it up with banana skin and then put the dried mix into a water pipe to smoke. Apart from smoking the opium, they also sell it to merchants. From February to March, the merchants come to purchase opium in high price. Many of them also have a habit and so are bankrupt.

Teng people attach great importance to “courtesy demands reciprocity” and brotherhood. For instance, if a friend were invited for dinner he would like to return the invitation with even greater hospitality. Without any chance to return the kindness, he would feel shamed forever.

Teng people are very serious about etiquette and hospitality when inviting guests to their homes. They welcome their best friends the most and differentiate between close friends and strangers or less familiar people who visit together with their good friends. Therefore, it is wise not to bring strangers with you when you visit a Teng household because though you, as a good friend, will be treated hospitably, your friends will be ignored—which will surely cause you embarrassment. Teng people are also very serious about hospitality to their friends. If you accept an invitation to visit, you must arrive on time. If you fail to turn up, you will definitely be looked down on by them and will never be forgiven. Fortunately, to be reconciled with them, you need only invite them to a big banquet while apologizing. This is their traditional approach to reconciliation.

Teng people usually eat food with their hands while entertaining guests. Their cooked rice, welcomed by other neighboring ethnic groups, is very tasty. Their only dish, apart from the delicious rice, is cooked meat cut into small pieces. The cooked meat is carefully placed in front of the guest as a gesture of hospitality.

While dining, Teng people customarily constantly encourage guests to eat, and expect their friends eat as much as possible. Failing to finish all of the meat, the guest has to take home a doggy bag. Whatever gifts the guest may bring, the host always pays back double.

Teng people dislike anyone to touch their shoulders. They believe the shoulder is divine. Touching it will bring misfortune. In addition, Teng people avoid others stepping over their feet.

Whenever you have to pass close in front of them, you'd better first ask them to pull in their legs and feet. When the son-in-law comes to visit, he is asked not to eat meat but rather drink and eat vegetables. Interestingly, when his wife's family members visit the husband's family, they are allowed to eat meat. Teng people avoid coarse language in front of the wife's brothers, and the brothers are also forbidden to share plates or dishes with others.

After the death of a Teng person his/her formal name is not allowed to be used again, but rather his/her nickname that he/she used during childhood. On accidentally speaking the name of a deceased, one must immediately apologize for the mistake. The only exception is when there is a conflict or lawsuit.

Teng people are deeply superstitious. Any improper behavior or any unconscious violation of their custom will result in conflict. This might be because their homes are widely separated in a harsh living environment. Fortunately they communicate easily, which makes it possible to dissolve the conflict through mediators named as "Gar Pe Ya khu". On having reached agreement through the mediator, the conflicting families or persons must hold a reconciliation ceremony.

Teng people will never forget a conflict unless it is finally resolved. It is said that if the old generation could not solve their conflict in their lifetime, they must plant a bamboo in front of their children's home and ask them to take the grown bamboo to make an arrow and bow to solve the conflict. It is their vow. Nevertheless, they generally prefer to solve their conflicts by themselves if possible.

### **Religious Faith and Conventions**

Teng people believe in divinity and ghosts. They conduct religious ceremonies to expel demons and worship the divinity by sacrificing domestic animals. Those rites vary in size. For a big event, they prefer to slaughter a large number of cows, pigs, and chickens; but for smaller rites, only a few domestic animals are killed. If people suffer from a headache or any other minor illness, they usually place a piece of burning skeleton together with rice inside a banana leaf. Then they fold the leaf and hang it outside their house. After the completion of all rites, they place a stick in front of the entrance to their home to forbid any others from breaking in. Meanwhile, they are not allowed to go out for work. Sometimes, it might last from one to five or six days, depending on the size of the rites.

Four levels of rites are included in their religious activities. Substantial worship is called "De A"; funerals are referred to as "Da Lo"; the third ritual is "kha Le" which is used for expelling demons and praying for safety and peace; the last is "Khe Le Ha Rol" -a group worship to pray for peace and safety, or to protect their livestock from illness. One individual, referred to as "Gar Ho", is prized at all religious activities. Leaders of different rites are named accordingly: for example, the man in charge of big religious events, such as "De A" is called "Ge De Rong", but for smaller activities he is referred to as "Gui Aa".

Teng people generally prefer cremation after death but the young deceased tend to have requested burial. The deceased's last words must be followed before and during the funeral.

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Teng people refer to normal death as “Da Gama” and abnormal death, such as death due to fighting, falling, drowning and suicide, are called “Da Re Ma”. The two kinds of death require different funerals. Usually, Teng people set up a special altar for the deceased that display all the tools and treasures used by the deceased. The family provides meals every day for the deceased with all of his/her favorable foods. Even if the deceased was addicted to opium, they also include opium on the altar. The altar will not be removed until a ceremony called “Da Lo” is held in the following.

All relatives must attend the “Da Lo” ceremony. Various activities, such as animal sacrifice, are conducted. When night comes, the “Gar Ho” starts to pray for the deceased and women, wearing scarves, circle around fire crying to show their grief. Those who have different surnames are not allowed to touch the deceased’s body, but any other assistance is appreciated.

The “Gar Ho” and not the family decide the number of sacrificial animals. Teng people believe the soul of the deceased will enter the earth and not Heaven. That is because they believe grain and animals grow from the earth and their souls return to the earth where they will enjoy paradise after death. Because of this the ladder installed on the altar of the deceased leads down-not up. Even more interestingly, they believe that Heaven is empty. If the soul goes there, it will have nothing to eat or wear. To slaughter domestic animals during the funeral is to force the soul to return to earth. Sometimes, the “Gar Ho” mimics the gesture of wrestling, seemingly fighting against the deceased. While doing this, the “Gar Ho” is saying the slaughtered animals are too few to push the soul back to the earth. Then the family of the deceased must follow the instruction of the “Gar Ho” to slaughter more. In fact, the cost of the funeral completely rests upon the degree of hospitality of the family and the satisfaction of the “Gar Ho”. If he is not kindly disposed to the family he demands a costly funeral-virtually a big waste of money. Because of that, hospitality toward the “Gar Ho” is in every family’s interest.

## **Traditional Festivals**

Teng people have no major festival. Their culture is mainly manifested through the process of expelling demons and worship. Teng people like to sing and dance and their dance themes basically focus on admiring natural beauty or history or their desires. Teng people like to sing everyday and their songs might be about love and mutual pleasure. They sing solo or group antiphonal singing, but they like group dancing most. At least five to six persons, with musical accompaniment, will dance. The instruments include a handmade drum and a brass gong. While one beats the drum and the other strikes the gong, the rest follow the rhythm in dance.

## **Today’s Teng People**

Since the peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951, Teng people have enjoyed a new life due to sharing in ethnic equality. Although they are not designated as a “Minority”, they enjoy the full authority and democratic right to be their own masters while they join with all nationalities to participate in national politics, economy, culture and social affairs. Governments at different levels strictly implement the relative preferential policies, law and regulations, which are specially designed for ethnic minorities. Governments organize human resources, such as



residing army troops and locals, to build new houses for Teng people. While helping them to cultivate land and provide agricultural tools, the governments also organize technological training (such as how to plant high-quality barley, wheat, and grain). All the government initiatives are to improve the Teng people's lifestyle, which all contributes to a lead forward in production and living standard so that they can keep abreast of other ethnic groups adjacent to them.

In 1970, Teng people ran their people's commune. In total, nice native villages at both the lower and upper reaches of the Traya were combined into seven communes, resembling a collective economic managerial approach to development. The achievements and progress made by the unification of leadership in planning, management, and payments demonstrates the appropriate collective strategy taken by governments, while starting from such a low, primitive base. Such a strategy not only solves the Teng people's problems with self-sufficiency, but also creates unprecedented development in agricultural production. For instance, several villages, such as Gyaya, Zhigeng, and Rushu are selling their extra grain to the nation. In tandem with the acceleration of agricultural development, the animal husbandry industry is also positively moving forward by exploiting local advantages. An integrated and diversified industry in which they develop the business of hunting, raising domestic animals, herb collection and textile production was developed through a collective approach to enhance cash income for individuals and collectives. From 1952 to 1985, the production development of Teng people was at a fast pace and their living standard is clearly improved.

In addition, governments at all levels attach great importance to children's education by adopting different strategies such as either convincing the Teng to send their children to various kinds of schools or organizing training programs for the community. From 1963 to 1967, the residing army in Chamdo organized two youth groups of Teng people to conduct a special training program. Over thirty excellent Teng youth were then promoted to leadership posts at different government levels. At present, the total number of Teng people in China is less than two thousand. But in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), there are thirty Teng people who are government cadres. They hold different posts in government such as key positions in county governments, the people congress of counties, some important government agencies, and even army troops. They have become key persons in those organizations. Some of them are also chosen as representatives of the TAR.

Nowadays, schools generally enroll the Teng people's children. The entrance rate and continuation rate for keeping them in school is usually 95 percent. Teng people are not only studying in preliminary schools, junior schools and senior schools, but also in colleges and universities.

For the last 50 years, Teng people have been their own masters and their productivity has been liberated and improved in tandem with overcoming outdated conventions that were blocking social progress and development. The abolition of old customs included removal of fees such as the traditional "buying and selling" marriage system, relief from the huge costs of funeral services, and control of opium addiction and drug dependency by offering assistance. All of these have blessed the future of Teng people.

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Since the 1980s Teng people, keeping abreast with the progress of other ethnic groups in China, have adopted a policy in which production is decentralized to each household. They are enjoying tax exemption on agriculture and striding down a new road to more prosperous lives.