



The Practice of '*Hanlam*' as Marriage Prestations Among Lotha Nagas: Narrations from Baghty Town

¹Tiatula Ozukum, ²Chumbeno Odyuo

¹Associate Prof, ²PG Final Year

¹Dept of Sociology

¹St. Joseph University, Dimapur, Nagaland, India

Abstract: Marriage is one of the central events of human life, and besides being the primary institution for procreation and continuation, it is seen as one of the oldest social institutions in human society. It may be argued that different societies have different ideas on marriage prestation. The present study examines the tradition of *Hanlam* among the Lotha Nagas. It discusses the significance of *Hanlam*, its rituals and the customs associated with its celebration. The study relied on both secondary sources as well as on a short-term primary fieldwork to understand and capture narrations on the practice of *Hanlam* first hand. The researcher spent close to two months in Baghty¹ Town in the months of March and April, 2024, interacting with the community members for data collection which provided insights into their unique perspective and experiences related to *Hanlam*.

Keywords - Marriage, Hanlam, Lotha Nagas, Bride price, customs

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage also called matrimony or wedlock is a socially or ritually recognised union between spouses and is considered as one of the most important social institutions in human societies. Hence, the institution of marriage plays an important role in the functioning of the society. Marriage is defined by Westermarck (1921) as more or less durable connection between a male and a female, lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offsprings. The exchange of gifts at marriage (be it bride wealth or dowry) is ever present that it is regarded as fundamental to human culture (Jimo, 2008: 43)

While defining marriage, marriage prestations plays a very important role. There are different views and ideas on marriage prestations. Jimo (2007) maintains that some scholars argue that marriage prestations are an economic compensation for a productive and reproductive loss of one group to another and that bridewealth is not paid where the cost benefit ratio is not balanced, and that the absence of the institutionalised groom may reflect the absence of such a loss by the groom's group (Jimo, 2007; 4)

¹ Baghty Hq is a medium size valley located under Wokha district of Nagaland. The total area of Baghty is 41.54 sq.km with population density of 65 per sq. m. As per constitution of India and Panchayati Raj Act, Baghty Hq is administered by Sarpanch (Head of Village) who is elected representative of village

The Lotha Nagas are one of the sixteen tribes of Nagaland who belong to the tibeto-burma group of language. Like the word Naga, the derivation of the word Lotha is also obscure and has a lot of interpretations. According to Mozhui (2004), 'Lo' means sacrifice or offering and 'Tha' means fully and satisfactory. Therefore, *Lotha* means people who fully sacrificed to the satisfaction of God (p.4). JP Mills also mentions that the Lothas call themselves as *Kyon*, meaning simply man (Mills, 1922;01). Among the Lothas, marriage is considered an essential obligation to be fulfilled by both man and woman for fecundity. One was disdain and looked down upon unless marriage had been fulfilled. Marriage, according to the traditional Lotha concept, is considered not only for sexual enjoyment and legalised procreation but also for the establishment of a good relationship (Mhabeni and Pongen, 2023; 54)

II. *Hanlam*: Meaning and Its Practices

The traditional marriage practice of the Lotha Nagas known as *Hanlam* act as a customary binding requirement without which the marriage is not officially sanctioned or officially recognised. The etymological meaning of *Hanlam* is *Hanlamvu* which means "carry back" in the cultural context of the Lotha Naga community. *Hanlam* is practiced by giving pig's meat – a pig without blemish – given by the groom to the bride's family (Nrio, 2009;82)

The practice of *Hanlam* was a part of bride price. This tradition has been practiced for generations and holds significant cultural and traditional value among the Lothas residing in various villages. The nature of *Hanlam* is closely tied with the *Hanlam-woko* (pig). In the ancient days, the *hanlam* pig was usually reared. According to the belief the pig has to be male without any flaws, injuries or infectious would be chosen and raised for about a year. The pig had to be a solid colour. Three key factors were considered for the *Hanlam* pig: its gender, health and colour, which were also used to assess a person's value traditionally. Three days prior to the scheduled wedding day, the groom is expected to bring the *Hanlam-woko* (pig) to the bride's home. Nienu (2021) argues that the quality of pig seems to have a direct relationship with the practice of *Hanlam* itself because it was considered inauspicious for the *Hanlam* pig to die without fulfilling its purpose. There were suspicions that perhaps the pair is not compatible or that the union between the two families is ill-suited. But there is no proof of such fears being validated. In cases where the *Hanlam* pig died, they would simply buy it and distribute the meat without much hesitation. The recipients also accepted it without any reservations (p.188)

Once the pig is brought to the bride's house, an elderly person prays over it and it is speared to death. Omens were observed on the basis of the size of the spleen. According to Mathew Khuvung, "if the spleen is long, they will live long life and the marriage will last long. However, if the spleen is small the marriages will not last long because of death, divorce, illness etc" (in Nienu, 2021; pp. 188-89). The meat is cut and distributed to the bride's paternal clan members and sisters. Those to whom the *hanlam-so* (meat) is given are expected to give various items on the wedding like *Mvuro*(winnow), *Khotarang*(hoe), *Yoko*(necklace), *rumbum*(bangles) and *Okhyak* (paddy carrier).

According to the couples that were interviewed during the course of the interview about the practice of *Hanlam* in Baghty, most of the couple stated that *Hanlam* still has its significance in marriage. Beyond its

material benefits, *Hanlam* serves as a crucial mechanism for social recognition and acceptance within the kinship network. Particularly noteworthy is its role in integrating the groom into the bride's paternal kin, essentially granting him the status profound symbolic significance within Lotha society, reflecting the intricate interplay between culture, identity and social dynamics.

The significance of *Hanlam* extends far beyond its married aspects. Symbolically, it plays a pivotal role in shaping social identities. Through *Hanlam*, individuals reaffirm their roles with the community, with the groom's acceptance into a broader social network. This symbolic integration underscores the interconnectedness of families and the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships within the kinship structure.

Moreover, *Hanlam* serves as a rite of passage, marking the transition to adulthood for the newly married couple. By participating in this tradition, individuals signal their readiness to assume their responsibilities and obligations associated with married life. This transition is not merely personal but carries communal significance as it reaffirms the continuity of cultural norms and values across generations. Additionally, *Hanlam* plays a crucial role in establishing and reinforcing the nature of relationships between people within the community. Through the exchange of resources and the symbolic act of integration, *Hanlam* fosters a sense of solidarity and interconnectedness among kinship groups. It strengthens social bonds, promoting cooperation, mutual support and collective identity within the community. As one of the respondent remarks,

“*Hanlam* goes beyond simply gifting a live pig to the bride's family but it also symbolises the union of a man and a woman in marriage and signifies their commitment of each other. It acknowledges and strengthens family ties, marking the couple as officially married²”

III. Hanlamvü ceremony

The practice of *Hanlam* was a part of bride price. This tradition has been practiced for generations and holds significant cultural and traditional value among the Lothas residing in various villages. The nature of *Hanlam* is closely tied with the *Hanlam-woko* (pig). The price of *Hanlam* differs from village to village. Some villages may demand very high while in other, it is relatively modest. Once the pig is brought to the bride's house, an elderly person would pray over the pig before it was slaughtered. Here, the husbands of women belonging to the bride's clan known as 'Ejanethyoe' convene to undertake a ritual division of meat. The head of the pig is offered to the religious leader, often the pastor of the church as a token of reverence and to seek blessings from the union. Meanwhile, the legs of the pig are traditionally gifted to the bride's sisters and aunts. As one respondent explains,

“One portion of the leg goes to the bride, one for her eldest aunt who carries 'Yinkhi' (yarn baskets), one for her aunt who holds a spiritual role within the family, and the remaining one is for the bride's married sisters. She further adds, these gifts represent a wish to have all the good things in life that married sisters and aunts have such as prosperity, long life, wealth and spiritual fulfilments”

² Interview with 'Tsitsamo Ezung' on 26th March 2024.

After distributing the head and legs, the remaining portion is carefully weighed and distributed equally among the members of the bride's clan, typically amounting to 1 kg per individual. In reciprocation for this symbolic gesture, those who receive the *Hanlam-so* (meat) are expected to give monetary contributions or various items such as 'Khotarang'(hoe), *Mvuro*(winnow), 'Yoko' (necklace), *rumpum* (bangles), *Okhyak* (paddy carrier).

The bride price (*Hanlam*) varies across different villages. It was found out that in Baghty, the area of investigation for the study, that the customary bride price is uniquely set at 75 kgs of pork meat. This specified quantity, when evaluated in monetary terms, translates to Rs. 26,250 based on the prevailing market rate of pork meat, which is calculated by multiplying the weight (75 kg) by the price per kilogram (350rs). Once the pig is brought to the bride's house, an elderly person prays over it and it is speared to death. Here, the husbands of women belonging to the bride's clan, known as '*Ejanethyoe*', convene to undertake a ritual division of meat. Each portion is carefully weighed and distributed equally among the members of the bride's clan, typically amounting to around 1 kg per individual. In reciprocation for this symbolic gesture, guests in attendance often express their gratitude by presenting monetary contributions. As one of the informants explain,

"It is customary for these cash gifts to meet or exceed the established minimum contributions which is set at Rs. 500 as per *Motsürüie* (phratry) ensuring that the financial support provided aligns with tradition. He further adds, individuals are encouraged to contribute more generously should they feel inclined to do so, reflecting the spirit of generosity and communal support inherent in the cultural practice surrounding bride price in Baghty³".

Furthermore, as part of the marriage customs, the groom also presents 2 or 3 pigs to be distributed among the close friends, relatives and colony members. Upon receiving these pigs, which may weigh anywhere from 300 kg to 400 kg or more a part of the bride price, certain rituals are observed. One respondent remarked,

"The legs of the pigs are traditionally gifted to the bride's sisters and aunts, symbolising a gesture of seeking blessings from them for the newlyweds. He further states that a particular significant gift known as "jo Chen" is reserved for the married sisters of the bride. This gift symbolises more than just material generosity; it embodies the desire to mirror the blessings that have enriched the lives of her married sisters, ensuring the continuation of prosperity for future generations.⁴".

In cases where the bride's family is affluent and able to offer more lavish gifts, the remaining pigs head may be presented to distinguished community leaders as a mark of respect and to seek their blessings for the couple's future together. Thus, the *Hanlam* holds significance for newlyweds as it greatly contributes to their future well-being and livelihood. Essentially, all the cash that is received in account of *Hanlam* will be given to the bride and the groom, symbolising generosity and respect from the bride's family. This process embodies the essence of *Hanlam* which translates to "carrying back". As one of the informant states,

³ Interview with 'Zubemo kikon' on 28th march, 2024

⁴ Interview with 'Thungchio odyuo' on 17th April 2024

“*Hanlam* means that whatever we give, we eventually receive. It is called *Hanlam* because it is a cycle of giving and receiving. She further adds, if the couple fails to organise the *hanlam* ceremony even after marriage, they are not considered officially married even after they have multiple children⁵”.

Furthermore, during the course of interview many couples believe that the practice of *Hanlam* doesn't financially strain them because they receive a significant sum of money in return. And most of the couples nowadays want to keep this tradition alive because it's the only traditional practice left in Lotha marriage systems and all the other ceremonies and practices have been influenced by western culture.

IV. Changes in the Practice of *Hanlam*

With the advent of Christianity and modernity, Lothas like other naga tribes have accommodated patterns of change within the cultural fabric. Customs related to marriage have also seen many modifications. The bridal and the groom wears, wedding ceremony, meals, decorations and others are more seen in modern style than in traditional way. Today, the practice of *Hanlam* is far from what it was in the ancient times. Some obvious shifts from the original practice are as follows:

- 1)The *Hanlam* pig is not specifically reared but can be bought from anywhere, even without asserting its health condition. Its gender and colour are far less considered.
- 2)The manner in which the *Hanlam* pig is killed is also more straightforward; it is shot with a gun.
- 3)There is never only one pig that is slaughtered but several, depending on the demands set forth by the Motsürüie (phratry), the village and specific demand from the bride's family.
- 4)Ancient rituals of prayers and augury for the married couple associated with *Hanlam* are no longer practiced due to the influence of Christianity.

V. *Hanlam*: Response from the church

Hanlam is/was a traditional practice among the Lotha Nagas before the advent of Christianity and it may be maintained that certain elements of the practice are still in vogue in most Lotha villages. Before the advent of Christianity, it held significant importance, embodying rituals and customs that bound families together in matrimonial bonds. However, with the passage of time, the landscape has shifted, and the once cherished tradition has encountered challenges, particularly in the realm of economics.

As the modern world encroaches upon traditional practices, the cost associated with *Hanlam* has surged, presenting a formidable barrier for many. This surge in expenses has led to a dilemma, especially for economically disadvantaged individuals, referred to here as the 'poor ones'. For them, the dream of a traditional marriage becomes overshadowed by the harsh reality of financial strain. In some cases, the financial burden becomes so overwhelming that individuals choose to elope, circumventing the traditional marriage ceremonies and the need for family consent.

The churches in the area are deeply concerned about their situation. They view marriage as a sacred institution and emphasize the importance of seeking blessing from elders and fellow believers within the

⁵ Interview with 'Zubeni Ezung' on 28th march 2024

Christian community. To address the issues, churches are organising seminars and counselling sessions aimed at educating people about the importance of abandoning traditional practices like *Hanlam* in favour of more modern and Christian- oriented approaches to marriage.

Despite these concerted efforts of the churches, the deeply entrenched nature of traditional customs makes it challenging to eradicate them entirely. However, there are signs of progress, as some individuals and families are beginning to embrace the idea of forgoing *Hanlam* in favour of alternative marriage arrangements often involving mutual understanding between the bride and groom's families and the involvement of religious leaders who bless the union in accordance with Christian principles.

VI. SUMMARY

Marriage, a tradition found across all cultures, has always been the cornerstone of family life. It's commonly understood that marriage creates the ideal environment for nurturing love between partners and achieving personal fulfilment. The Lotha Nagas has a traditional marriage practice called *Hanlam*, which is essential for official recognition of the marriage. *Hanlam* involves the groom presenting a specially chosen pig to the bride's family, symbolizing the groom's worth and compatibility. The pig is then slaughtered, and omens are read from its spleen to predict the future of the marriage. Recipients of the pig's meat are expected to provide various items for the wedding. In essence, the tradition of Hanlam reflects the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, economics and culture, spirituality and pragmatism. It underscores the evolving nature of societal norms and the enduring struggle to reconcile tradition with contemporary realities. As the journey unfolds, guided by the beacon of faith and community, the Lotha Nagas navigate the delicate balance between honouring their heritage and embracing the winds of change.

REFERENCES

- Ezung, E.Nrio. (2009), Socio-Cultural Theology of Marriage in Tribal Context: With special reference in tribal context, KBES: Wokha
- Jimo, Lovitoli (2007) *Marriage Presentations: The Social Context and Meaning in Sumi Naga Society*, Unpublished Dissertation Submitted to the Centre for Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Jimo, Lovitoli (2008). Marriage Presentation and "Ame" Bridewealth in the Sumi Naga Society . *Indian Anthropologist*, Vol. 38, No. 2 pp. 43-60.
- Mhabeni, W & Pongen, Moameren (2023), Hanlam: Marriage Payment in the 21st Century: A Case of Wokha Town, *Journal of Humanities and Education Development*, Vol. 5 Issue 1, Jan-Feb 2023. Pp 53-56
- Mills, J.P (1922) *Lotha Nagas*, Macmillan and Co Limited, London
- Mozhui, Zanao. (2004). *The Impact of Christianity on the Naga people*. Dimapur: Lotha Baptist church

- Nienu, Eyingbeni Humtsoe. (2021), Hanlam (Bride Price): The Question of Relevance Today. In Eyingbeni Humtsoe et.al (Eds.), *Lotha Women in the 21st Century, Celebrating Progress, Advocating Gender Equality*, Tribal Development and Communication Centre: Kohima

