



Seed Sowing Festival Of Chamu Village Tangkhul Naga Tribe Of Ukhrul District, Manipur: An Epitome Of Cultural Festival.

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Abstract.

Amidst modern changes, some practices remain inherent in tribal communities reflecting traditional and customary significance. Luira festival, one of the most popular festivals is one such practice in the Tangkhul Naga tribe bearing great cultural and symbolic identity. It is no exception for Chamu, a Tangkhul Naga village in Kamjong District of Manipur. In the annual Luira festival (Seed Sowing festival), the village Awungawhich, which is hereditary would invoke blessings to mark the beginning of seed sowing. This auspicious role is entrusted only to the village Headman not by the yardstick of modern/western democracy but rather by customary traditional authority. The Awunga established the villages. Therefore, the position represents awe and reverence which denotes the obligation of the villagers. Notwithstanding influences of the modern socio-political system, this exclusive role is retained by the headman. Chamu village has an added uniqueness to the general Tangkhul Naga way of observing LuiraPhanit. Along with Loteah/LuiraPhanit, the village also celebrates Piteah (Yam Sowing Festival) as well. In this festival, instead of the headman, the Village Mantri which is also a permanent and hereditary seat, sow the first yam of the year. This privilege recognizes the clan (Muinao) which partake in the founding of the village apart from Kasarclan. Socio-cultural events such as celebrations, rather than observing such festivals, enunciate, propitiate and protect the structure of traditional authority.

KEYWORDS. Luira Phanit (Seed sowing festival), Awunga (headman), traditional authority, customary, modern/western democracy.

INTRODUCTION.

Customs and culture are important elements of identification. Even more so for a tribal community since it has survived on oral tradition. It is through customs and traditions that the tribal communities exert their identities and being. In a tribal community, the role and position of an individual are categorized by culture and tradition. The individual is the first member of the family, next a clan and finally, the village. The socio-political fabric is woven around a well-organized form of structure based on the customary position each clan occupies. In the Tangkhul Naga tribe, the traditional institution continues to exist through the institution of Awunga(Headman) and his Hanga (councillors) which is mostly hereditary and clan-based. This institution, especially, the Awunga, exercises paramount authority during festivals and other important occasions. The continuity of this unique tradition has become a matter of significance today. Preservation of tradition is paramount for a peaceful and progressive community. Vital to the preservation of culture are festivals since they are the repositories of oral traditions and practices. There are several festivals Tangkhul has celebrated since time immemorial. Amongst many of the festivals, Luiraphanit (Seed sowing festival) deserve a special mention since it epitomizes traditional authority.

The paper is a study of Chamu village in Kamjong District, Manipur. It attempts to find out how the celebration of festivals of Loteah-Piteah (LuirahangkorpaiPhanit) or Seed Sowing-Yam Festival) is associated with the political and administrative structure of the village.

METHODOLOGY.

Primary data is collected through qualitative methodology such as Interview and Observation.

PROFILE OF THE VILLAGE.

Located in the northern region of Kamjong district, the village is of strategic significance since it lies on the Indo-Myanmar border. It is situated 65 km (approx.) from Kamjong district and 85 km (approx.) from Ukhrul district. The village is remote with dense greenery and virgin forest. Transportation and connectivity are still a challenge. Infrastructure too is far behind. There is only one government high school under the Department of Education, Government of Manipur, one Post Office and a health centre which is an NGO-government partnership project under the Department of Tribal Welfare, Government of Manipur. There is a Dispensary under the Autonomous District Council. The village has a high literacy rate of 80.19 per cent and a commendable sex ratio of 1167 as per the 2011 census.

The village is popular in Tangkhul Folklores since it is the abode of Chamu(Chakmon) Kazeiram (the place where mortals live after death). There are four major indicators in the folklore of Kazeiram at Chamu village:

1. Aze Lu Leikhku (KazeiKeirak): Aze Lu Leikhku roughly means the stone ladder of the dead. It is believed that this place served as a gate or a portal where souls travelled from the mortal world to Kazeiram. Once a soul passes this point, it cannot return but if the soul hasn't passed this point, souls can be called back to life. There was a belief that dead people could be called back to life by being called loudly through a shimkhur (wooden mortar used for pounding rice). Beyond, kazeikarek, it did not work. A popular Tangkhul folklore "Kamringphi eina Longyao" supports the Tangkhul Naga belief of recalling the dead back to life.
2. Aze Karilu (Kazei Karailung) : It means whetstones of the dead. The mark on the stones determines the gender of the person who is going to die. If it shows the sharpening of bigger implements or tools such as dao, axe, javelin etc which are masculine in nature, they would assume that a man will die and if the signs are smaller and feminine such as spade, a woman will pass away.

3. Aze Reusuah (Kazei Rakhong): Ancient people believed that those in Kazeiram fetch water from this pond which is visible to mortals in the form of honey bees. Mr. Ramrei Kasar, whom the researcher interviewed, himself has witnessed the buzzing honey bees in the place.

4. Aze Suphu (Kazei Shimpam): It is believed that in Chakmon Kazeiram, there are two colonies/zones: Azing tang(lower colony) and Atung tang (upper colony). In the past when jhum cultivation was done in that area nearby, people could hear the sound of acts of domestic chores of the other world. They could hear the beating of the wooden basin used to feed the pigs. In the past pigs were let free and were called for food by beating on the wooden basin. There is a belief that even in life at Kazeiram, we live more or less in the same way we live in the world.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE VILLAGE.

Chamu village of Manipur is inhabited solely by the Tangkhul Naga tribe. The Naga tribe consists of many sub-tribes. SK Chaube quoted SE Peal that there are two distinctive features of the Nagas – definite geographical limit and further sub-division of innumerable independent tribes constantly at war with each other (Chaube,2012). Analyzing the origin and the use of the word "Naga" in various historical accounts of colonial writers and Greek historian Ptolemy, Prof Gangmumei Kamei opined that albeit no final agreement on the derivation made, the word is popularized by the Ahoms and British and it is used to describe the group of people who are further subdivided within themselves. He further remarked, "In Manipur, the people were known by their Tribe's names throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. But the British for administrative convenience applied it to mean a group of tribes who according to their anthropological classification were Nagas (Kamei, 2015)." Chamu village can be considered one of the oldest villages although not the first or the earliest. Based on the folklore of Kazeiram, the village has its existence knitted in the mythology of the Tangkhul Naga community. On the migration and settlement of the Nagas, Prof Gangmumei stated, "It is reliably believed that these tribes were in occupation of the present habitat in the early centuries of the Christian era or even in the centuries before Christ. The Meitei historical and literary works refer to the Naga tribes as having been in occupation of the hills of Manipur. (Kamei, 2015)."

Handed down over centuries of oral tradition, Chamu village was founded and established by two brothers from the Kasar Clan of Tangkhul Naga. They are originally known as Karaori. The oral tradition projected their sojourn at Phungcham village before reaching Chamu village. To quote JJ Hutton, "Clans in all tribes(of Nagas) normally claim descent from an eponymous ancestor (the Angami ask not 'what' or 'which' but 'whose clan are you?'), but sometimes have a place-name, usually when they have originated in a group of immigrants from another village (Hutton, 1965)." The Kasar clan in this context came from the North and occupy Khayuh part of the village, thus declaring the title of "first settlers" or "founder of the village". After performing the necessary rituals of establishing the village, they embarked on a journey towards the south to demarcate their boundary and realized that they were not alone. There was another group from the Muinao clan who had landed there. As recounted by Shimreishang Muinao, the present Mantri, from the legacy left behind by his forefathers, the Muinao Clan came from the south-eastern direction and occupied the Ramphei part of the village. They moved from Ngainga village and settled for a while at Hungdung. Both the parties felt the presence of another group by the human scent 'mi nganam'. Upon the Kasar clan tracing the scent, they found the Muinao brothers on a tree. Before coming down the two groups exchanged lukhauru/rukhaorui (a type of tobacco) as a sign of friendship and promise to not behead each other. Rather than violence, both clans chose peace and mutual co-existence to live in Chamu village.

As per the customary practice in all Tangkhul Naga villages, the Clan which establishes the village shall be the "First Clan" from where the institution of Awunga will be set up. Owing to this fact, the position of Tangkhul Naga Awunga is to be revered and respected. It is a single-head position. By convention, he is the eldest of the "First Clan" and thus the eldest(not by numerical age but by position and title)of the village. Kasar clan thus becomes the "First Clan" which produces the wonga. The position is always

hereditary generally based on primogeniture. In the words of Ramrei Kasar (current acting Awunga), only the Kasar clan can be addressed Amei/Achon to address men and women. The entitlement is more like an award or recognition for being the "first clan". It is taboo to not address likewise. Other tribes are prohibited from using this title. In stronger terms, it cannot be taken away or usurped. In the olden days, people strictly adhere to and respect the title one is born into. Muinao clan is given the title of "Ado" since they are considered second in line in the traditional hierarchical structure. It is accorded a significant position in the village which is also hereditary and permanent.

Starting a livelihood in a new place would mean starting everything anew – agriculture, building houses, domesticating animals and so on. When they migrate they would carry seeds, domestic animals and other essentials. Among the seeds, rice and yam are probably considered stable crops. It becomes a symbol of authority and legitimacy for Awungato to have control over the sowing and reaping of crops. Thus, one of the most important roles of a Tangkhul Naga Awunga is to declare the time of sowing and propitiate blessings of the deity for the same. No one till today dares take over this special responsibility. It has become part and parcel of the political structure in the Tangkhul Naga community.

In Chamu village, an accommodation of the Muinao clan in the socio-political structure is made since they are the second group to migrate. Thus, they asked the Muinao clan, between paddy and yam, which crop they gather better harvest. It happened that the Muinao clans are bearers of rich Yam harvest for with 1 sopkai, they gather Yam 10 sopkai but with Paddy 1 saikhao they gather only 1 luk. On the other hand, Kasar clan harvested 10 luk for 11 luk paddy, but poor yam harvest. Accordingly, Kasar clan took the responsibility of sowing the first paddy during the Luira festival (seed sowing festival). Another festival known as Piteah was also celebrated during which the Muinao clan took the responsibility of sowing the first yam of the year. Thus, both the Clan heads partake in the blessing ceremonies of seed sowing.

Later many other clans came to live in the village. At present, there are ten clans: Kasar, Muinao/Muthaneoh, Rungsung, Lungleng, Tamangnao, Shatsang, Pheinao (Pheteihneo), Shangh (Shurineo; children of Shirui), Hungshi, Zimik. Zimik clan was previously called Zathaneo in Chamu, Pihuaneoin Phungtha village and Thaniahneo in Kachauphung village.

LOCAL POLITICAL INSTITUTION.

The local political institution exhibits a mix of both traditional and modern forms of governance. The Traditional practice is represented by hereditary Awunga(1), Mantri (1) and Village Authority (VA) members (6). The office of Awunga and Mantri is strictly hereditary. The headman is also the head of the Kasar Clan and the Head of the Muinao clan is the Mantri. This arrangement was officially made during the period of Lt Wungmaso Kasar commemorating the nature of the special relationship both the clans shared at the beginning of the village settlement. Modern political practice is seen in the post of Village Secretary. For a village secretary, a literate person who is dynamic in handling paperwork is usually preferred. It is not a permanent position although, the current VA Secretary has held the post for more than a score owing to his efficiency, wit and trust by the headman and villagers.

Out of the ten clans, at present Hungshi, Pheinao and Shangh do not have representatives in Village Authority. Kasar clan will send one representative apart from the office of Awunga. Thus in total Chamu Village authority consists of Awunga (1), Mantri (1) and 6 village Authority members. It is the apex decision-making body in all matters and affairs of the village. They are responsible for both customary (revenue and traditional) duties and modern developmental activities. Although the school Headmaster and Pastor are not members of VA, they also enjoy great privilege as the village relies on them for many important matters.

SEED SOWING FESTIVAL (LUIRA/LOTEAH PHANIT).

Seed Seed-sowing festival is known as Luiraphanit in the Tangkhul dialect. Tangkhul is considered a common language amongst the Tangkhul Naga community. However, each village has its spoken dialect apart from the Tangkhul dialect. JJ Hutton rightly remarked when he said, "Turning to language, I suppose there is no part of the world with so much linguistic variation in so small a population or in so small an area. The result of the isolation of village communities, living entirely independently and often with almost entirely self-contained economies, cut off from their neighbours by forest, mountain, and river, has led to the development of some thirty different languages, as different as those of different nations in Europe, in an area the size of Wales, and that without taking account of dialects often so different in neighbouring villages of the same tribe as to make mutual understanding difficult (Hutton, 1965)." Thus Tangkhul, although a Naga tribe do not necessarily speak Nagamese or any other Naga tribe dialect. Borrowing the similarities down the hierarchy, the Chamu village although one of the Tangkhul villages has its dialect. The people of Chamu like any Tangkhul are proficient in the Tangkhul dialect and know bits of other languages such as Meiteilon, Hindi, English etc but they are fluent and comfortable in their local dialect which is known as Tamutoh (ChamuTui or Chamu dialect). Chamu dialect is spoken in five neighbouring villages – Khayang, Phungtha, Kachauphung, Roni and Madoyah. In the Tangkhul dialect, the seed sowing festival is Luiraphanit (Seed Sowing festival) and is known as Lohteahin Chamu dialect.

Luiraphanit is not necessarily celebrated on February 15 which is an official day observed by the Manipur state government. There is no fixed or common date. T Luikham (2009) noted, "Since seeds of various crops had already been sown during the last part of February and whole of March, the seeds are germinated and expect monsoon rains for their survival and growth. At this point, the farmers anxiously await transplantation of paddy when in May, the chief's wife intimately performs rituals of 'Shom khamashar.' Thus, the months of February and March are considered perfect for Luiraphanit since seeds are best sown during this period.

According to ASW Shimray, Luiraphanit is the New Year Festival of the Tangkhul. It is a celebration to begin the cultivation of the year. He made a detailed description of how it was celebrated in the past. The Awunga (headman) along with Hanga fixes the date and duration of the festivals. It lasted for days. On the first day, pigs and cattle are slaughtered for meat and Awunga enjoys the privilege of first taste of it after which villagers follow suit. Several restrictions and taboos were observed during the festivals such as no visitors and no travelling activities were permitted. Observing the first few days as "solemn" no work can be done and instead, there were days of feasting, singing and dancing day in and day out.

TC Hodson remarked, "Not only is the village a distinct unit of political and economic importance but it is organized as a religious community, acting as a whole by food gennas, participating in the ritual associated with and intended to assist the cultivation of the staple of the country (Hodson, 1911)." He further mentioned the association of religious duties with the position/office of the clan head. For the Tangkhul community, therefore, public offices/position comes with duties and responsibilities attached and pre-defined.

Every year during Luiraphanit, the Headman will invoke blessings of God for the entire year. The role and privilege of Awunga in connection with the festival is explained by Shimray in the following words, "After first few days of the solemn period, the Awunga and his wife got to the field with a chicken and perform the ceremonial rite, offer prayers for the protection of the crops and bumper harvest of the year. The blood of the chicken is sprinkled on a clean handful of paddy seeds and sprayed on a prepared ground as a symbolic sowing. Thus, the sowing season is inaugurated, and this occasion is followed by the common people. If anybody violates the rule and sows ahead of Awunga, the harvest is usually very poor and the whole village might face famine (Shimray, 2001)."

In the past, it was a grand affair with a series of activities. Shimray (2001) listed hosts of entertaining items and sports activities that Tangkhul engaged in during this period – singing and dancing competitions, tug-of-war, wrestling, long jump, high jump, and javelin throw. Another significant activity taken up during Luira festival (seed sowing festival) in the Tangkhul tribe is the Beauty Contest (Laa Khanganui) as many Tangkhul authors have claimed.

T Luikham gave a neat and beautiful description of Luira, especially the event of Laa Khanganui in his words, "Luiru alungli mawon poda la nganui. Tang tangwui ngalanao thot mati phanga kathan korhai laga tangtangwui nganui phungli laa nganui. kongsangphor, kongsang shimcha, chichi ngacha, khom masimthang, huishon khanongda pheikhan pangkhan riprip shilengthada nganukta kharar mirinwui maran philakasa la phor chitheida tingting-seoseo la nganui. Kachicha jatwui angashanna da ngalanao khipakha nganuiphungli kachon kathitha keina zang khanganing chi kachihui malei mana. La nganui mahung lakha mayar naobingna talongli khom phahamda pamrip laga ngalanaobingwui phaphor kapha, samhung katung, Tholaa ngashan leingapaoli kala shida mazang kharar ningai mala makhui mana."

FREE TRANSLATION.

The beauty contest is a part of Luira's festivities. Young maidens of four to five batches(peer groups) from all localities participated in the contest. Every young maiden would bare their upper torso, oiled and ornamented their body and perform with a unison movement of arms and hands which resembles bees (shileng); singing melodiously about the glorious past. Being proud of their culture, the young maidens were not ashamed of their bare upper torso. The boys seated on bamboo mats upon a lifted platform (made of wood and bamboo) would enjoy the beauty and sensuous movement of the young maidens in the contest. It is such a regret to have missed such an event.

Falk song competition (Laa Khanganui) is an event during seed sowing festival (Luira Phanit) in which every young virgin maiden took pride in their beauty. Dressed in a traditional dress consisting of a length wrap around the waist and beaded ornaments and dancing in a uniform and graceful movement was a mesmerizing sight to behold. According to Shimray, "This(dance) is the most exciting and fascinating event of the Tangkhul festive activities." YK Shimray is quoted by Ninghorla Zimik referring to Virgin Dance as "the secret declaration of virginity." Further, the chosen girl from Laa Khanganui would be honoured with the privilege of hosting Yarra Phanit (Youth Festival). This dance consists of one of the major events of Luira phanit (Zimik, 2002). Unfortunately, such a delightful event is lost in practice today.

In Chamu village in the past, Luira Festival is celebrated for about a week. The first two days are reserved for the Awunga and his family to take up the necessary rituals of seed sowing. In the remaining three to four days, the people would celebrate with much fun and merriment. In the olden days there used to be folk song and folk dance competitions between the two localities/tang of the village.

A special folk song dedicated to the Karaori/Kasar clan is sung during this festival. The HaoLaa run thus;

Mahui se Oh! Ehra! Kathuarilo (Mahon se Oh! Iram! Kathongralo)

Let us celebrate O! my village! Beckon on!

Tamu Havi saalu loehlah (Chamu Awungshi alungli anganinga)

Chamu King and his clan stood in the middle

Oh! Lotha ne Harianeothieh (Oh! Lothava Harkho Khalang thai)

Oh! Lotha Hornbill like

Harianeo thieh Lotha he koveah (Harkho Khalang thai Lothawui khavei)

Hornbill-like is Lotha's forehead

Oh! Shija khoyueneo thieh (Oh! Ajuk kapei Seichang ngachithai)

Oh! Like a beautiful Mithun's horn!

* Author's free transcript in Chamu dialect in the left (italics). There is no script for the Chamu dialect as the majority of languages are spoken in the Tangkhul Naga community. The right (italic and underlined) is also a free translation of the author in the Tangkhul language. Free English translation runs after every line.

This haole (folk song) was sung to celebrate the beauty of the Awunga clan (Kasar) of Chamu village. It celebrates the beauty of a handsome man named Lotha of the clan whose beauty is compared to the Hornbill and majestic horns of Mithun.

Festivities in the modern day are not as grand as in the past. Several domestic authors have hinted at the impact of Christianity and Western education upon the erstwhile socio-cultural traditions. Mayirnao and Khayi have pointed out several indigenous practices were abandoned to fit into the colonial agenda and proselytization efforts. They stated, "Continuity and discontinuity of Naga (Tangkhul) cultural practices were contingent on the whims and policies of the missionaries and colonial officials (Mayirnao, Khayi, 2022)." A break in cultural practice is certainly a threat to tradition. The same is the case with Chamu Luira Phanit. The village is trying to hold on to traditional practices by keeping some indispensable rituals today. The date is fixed by headman and his council member (Awunga and his Hanga) and accordingly a programme will be organized. On the appointed day, the Headman will announce to the villagers that it is now time to come and collect the first paddy seed from Philava (either the wife or daughter of Awunga can perform this task). Women will come and collect a handful or cupful of paddy from the assigned place from Philava along with an offering as a sign of gratitude. There is no fixed neither the least nor maximum amount for the offering. After which the headman will conduct the rituals of blessing. He will dig a small part of land right in the spot with a small spade (tin in Tangkhul dialect) where the programme is being organized and sow a few paddy in them. He will then pray to God to bless the agricultural activities to be undertaken by the village in that year. That completes the blessing ceremonial rituals. The ceremony is then followed by regular events of the festivals such as a Speech from the Chief Guest, sports and games, folk songs, folk dance competitions etc.

Piteah (Yam sowing festival)

Pi in the Chamu dialect is generally referred to as Yam. Piteah means Yam sowing festival. It is usually celebrated in the month of January. This festival is unique to Chamu village. As the tradition in Luira during the Yam sowing festival, the head of the Muinao clan will take up the ceremonial rituals to sow the first yam of the year. Folk dances and folk songs are major events and many other games are played except Tug of war. This special restriction is based on the belief that if it is played, yam is affected with excess fibre making them unpalatable. Also, in the period of the festival, any food made with yam cannot be made. It is a taboo. There are usual restrictions associated with every Luira Festival in the Tangkhul community such as;

Travelling is banned. No guests can be received.

Combing hair or using of comb is forbidden.

Bathing is also forbidden lest rain carries away everything.

The necklace cannot be made.

Loom activities such as mending and weaving clothes are forbidden.

There is a special folk song (HaoLaa) dedicated to the Muinao clan and it is sung every year during the festival (Piteah). The HaoLaa run thus,

Oh! Pupu papa Oh! Kwareiru (Oh!pupu papa Oh! Kongrara)

Oh! Pupu papa Oh! River water

Oh! Khenijolenelo(Oh! Kheirakalatrало)

Oh! Will thou sweep or recede!

Oh! Khisikhereło, lutti khana neshukhaye (Oh! Khisada kheira, lunggui khanina shung khamma)

Oh! Why swept away, two boulders blocked.

Chi Mathale razane Oh! Kwa wukhitha phuluphu ye (Chi Muinao yararchiva Oh! Khai thingphun-lungphunga)

That Muinao man (matured adult) Oh! Harvest fish like loads of logs and stones

Oh! Zaso woo reruolo, Mahuisuakho lo (Oh! Zingsuipava rangaroklo, Mahui suakho li)

Oh! Zingsui lady come (and help), at Mahuisuakho (name of a place)

Oh! Zaso woo! (Oh! Zingsui pa va)

Oh! Zingsui lady

* Author's free transcript in Chamu dialect on the left. There is no script for the Chamu dialect as the majority of them are spoken in the Tangkhul naga language. The right (italic and underlined) is also a free translation of the author in the Tangkhul language. Free English translation runs after every line.

One interesting observation is the level of cooperation and mutual trust each of the two clans professed upon each other. During Loteah Festival, the Muinao clan will police the villagers on behalf of the Karaoriand report anyone violating the gennas and taboos. Accordingly, punishment will be awarded to the offenders. The penalty for breaking the taboo is a pig which is to be slaughtered. The head of the slaughtered pig will be awarded to the reporter. The Karaori clan will again do the same during Piteah Festival making sure that each of the festivals is celebrated in a peaceful, grand and successful manner.

CONCLUSION

There are many festivals in the Tangkhul Naga community celebrated for different purposes. However, Lura festivals in general and both Loteah and Piteah for Chamu village, in particular, stand out since they epitomize the power and authority of who's who in the village. There can never be Loteah and Piteah without the office and the authority of the Headman and Mantri in Chamu village. Several aspects of the festival have seen changes under the influence of modernity and Christianity. The celebration has been Christianized by including items such as singing of hymns, delivery of biblical lectures, reading of the Holy Bible etc. Event management and arrangement have been modernized as well. However, the true essence of Loteahfestival, that is, the role and duty of the head of the Kasar clan as Awungaand Muinao clan as the Mantri persisted. It has withstood the test of time which signifies acknowledgement of painstaking difficulties and challenges faced and conquered by forefathers in protecting and preserving the village.

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