

Socio-Cultural Significance Of *Rih-Ngai* Festival Of Kabuis Of Manipur

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to examine the socio-cultural significance of the *Rih-ngai* festival of Kabui inhabitants, Manipur. The Kabui people celebrate *Rih-ngai*, war festival on the 13th day of Manipuri lunar month *Phairen* (February) for one day every year. The practice of head hunting was gone. But, it is preserved in the form of narrative. The male members of *Khangchu*, male's dormitory perform the war rituals like *Ritaak Phaimei*, *Kabaomei*, *Chong Kapmei* etc. at the village gate to preserve and promote the rich culture and tradition of the people. The young men have opportunity learn the tradition of their forefathers by participating in the festival. Dance and music are part and parcel in the celebration of the festival. Kabui Naga dance is popular outside the state of Manipur and it also brought a name for the community. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

Key words: *Rih-ngai*, Manipur, Kabui, *Khangchu*, *Chong Kapmei*, Dance

Introduction

The Kabuis¹ are one of the natives of Manipur belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid racial stock. According to local tradition, the Kabui ancestors came out of a cave known as *Mahou Taobei*; they moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin*, and then to *Makuilongdi*, Senapati District of Manipur. From *Makuilongdi*, they migrated to the South; other cognate tribes like Zeme moved to the West and Liangmai, to the North. On the basis of traditions and linguistic history, it has been identified that the original homeland of the Kabuis and other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family was in South West China. As the Kabuis belong to "Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in South West China about 1000 B.C and migrated to their present habitat"² through various routes

in batches and at different periods. Now, they are found inhabiting in three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

Materials and method

The study was based on ethno-historical approach. The required data have been collected from primary and secondary sources and also from selected well-informed native informants of the Kabui community.

Culture can be preserved when the religion of the community survives. Culture is a vehicle of religion. Culture and religion are inseparable in Kabui indigenous religion known as *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC). Festival is the time of “worship and prayer to Almighty God for plenty and welfare”³ and the Kabuis celebrate festival with honor and respect to the elders. The socio-cultural value, the aesthetic and creative senses have been reflected in the dances and music of the festival. In a year, they celebrate many festivals at different stages of agricultural operations according to lunar calendar with festive spirit and prayer.

The Kabuis live in the villages and village is the important socio-cultural and economic unit. Some days ahead of the *Rih-ngai* festival, the villagers arrange all the necessary objects of the festival such as food and drink (rice beer) for the festival. Usually, an elder of *Pei* (village council) inform to the villagers about the coming of the festival by crying.

According to Allesandro Falassi, festival is “...a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, all members of a whole community, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and a sharing a worldview.”⁴ It is regarded that festival is safety valve for the society.

Different ethnic groups of the world celebrate festivals under different names, but their functions are basically the same. These festivals unite people in a common exercise and thus strengthening the bonds between the partakers. They observe rituals in the festivals for wellbeing and prosperity of the community. Although some festivals, they celebrate primarily for worship and ritual, they also provide us a relief from daily toil and a major source of recreation. The common function of the festival is to give up and to announce culture, to renew occasionally the life stream of a community by making new energy, and to give sanction to its institutions, the symbolic means to attain it is to present the primordial disorder before creation, or a historical disorder before the establishment of the culture, society, or regime where the festival comes about to take place.⁵

The literal meaning of *Rih-ngai* is war festival; (*Rih* means war and *ngai*, festivity).⁶ This festival is observed in remembrance of war and victory.⁷ The Kabuis

celebrate *Rih- ngai* on the 13th day of Manipuri lunar month *Phairen* (which falls in February) for one day every year.

In early hour of the day, *Gucheng Phaimei*, ginger offering at the abode of village presiding deity (*Bambu*) is performed by an elder of *Pei* not to occur any untoward incidents in the festival.⁸ With this they throw away the usual and daily work, and turn to the festival; it is observed only within the parameter of the village as village is the socio-cultural unit of the Kabuis. *Gucheng Phaimei* is followed by a number of rituals. There are rites of purification like *Maithan Duithan Lamei* or expulsion of evil forces (*Hoi* procession) and negative out of the village community.

In the festival, only male members of the village take part in the performance of the festival and female members are simple spectators. One day ahead of the festival every male of the *Khangchu*, boy's dormitory observes fasting for the sanctification of one's body, soul and mind and thus making oneself fortunate and for every challenges of life say ready for war, hunting, fishing, cultivation etc.⁹ This is known as *Lumthengmei* in Kabuis dialect. As a general rule men do not sleep with women in the festival, and also fetch water independently for cooking and making rice beer. R. Brown wrote, "The reason for the males and females bringing water separately during this festival is to begin with this ceremony the making of liquor; and the separate eating and cooking of the sexes to be a mark of respect to their gods."¹⁰ The male members kill animals like pigs and they take a portion for them and a portion is given to the women. They cooked them alone with newly extracted fire (*Mhaithan*) and eat separately.¹¹ It is not different to the first day of *Gaan-ngai* festival, but there is absent of feasting or communal meal at the dormitory. In the festival, the elderly men of the village perform *Kabaomei* (warrior talks), *Ritak Phaimei* (throwing of rice, and pork meat with war hymns), etc. at the village gate.¹²

In the afternoon of *Rih-ngai* festival, all male members of *Khangchu* with their best colorful shawls meant for different ages, headgear and holding spears in their hands will go from one end of the village to another shouting *Ho-hoi* in chorus. It is an invocation to God for safety and wellbeing of the village community. It is also an expression of the strength and unity of the village. Usually, the march begins from *Khangchu* after offering of holy wine to God and presiding deities of the village and return at the same place.¹³

Usually, rites of competition in the form of games are inseparable part of the festival. After the *Hoi* procession, the young men perform competitions like long jump (*Daan Chammei*), stone throwing (*Tao Phaimei*) etc. at the village jumping ground (*Daanshanpung*) for wellbeing and prosperity. An elder of *Pei* introduces it first with a sort of religious hymns. The winners are required to pay *Shon* (fees) for declaring and acknowledging their power and ability. As per custom of Kabuis they are not given prizes for their achievements. Before starting the competition, *Chong*

Kapmei (shooting of or spearing of the human effigies made of the plantain tree) are performed at the *Raang* (village gate).¹⁴ They strongly believe that one who strikes the head of the effigy will be victorious in war and hitting on the chest of the effigy is a good luck in hunting. He who hits at the belly of the effigy will be blessed with plentiful harvest in the year.¹⁵

Dance and music are closely associated with the Kabui festival. According to their myth and legend, the Kabui dances have a divine origin. One myth tells that two Gods namely *Gomtu* and *Gomning* taught men how to dance, but ordinary men could not follow them. So, two persons called *Kungda* and *Senshui* learnt the dance forms from them and later, taught others how to dance. Another myth says the origin of dance traces from the big ritual sacrifice of *Mhung*, the prophet, lawgiver and culture hero known as *Mhung Jourumei*.¹⁶ All the living creatures attending this sacrifice performed their respective dances and men who were witnessed these dance forms imitated these creatures movement and adopted their dances. Through the centuries, the Kabuis have almost perfected the various forms of dancing. The main purpose of dance is to express an emotion or idea or to narrate a story or simply to take delight of the movement itself. Besides, dance is an art which has spiritual message; its beauty and spiritualism are clearly exposed in the *Maku Banlu* and *Taraang* dances.¹⁷ The Kabui dances may be categorized into ritual dance and festival dance.

There are four dance techniques developed by the people. They are *Makhom Laam*, *Dinglen*, standing in rows, *Phaicheng Laam*, dance movement from left to right feet and *Pheigoumei Laam*, waving dance of cloths by standing. *Makhom Laam* is originated from *Makhom* village (*Marangjing*). In the *Makhom Laam*, the dancers involve the movement of only the hands and feet but not the face. The art of facial expression is altogether not present in these dance forms.¹⁸

In the evening of the festival, the boys and girls of the dormitories in colorful traditional attire perform various dance forms. The dances performed in the festival are known as *Chapa Laam*.¹⁹ Dances like *Laophun*, *Laoreo*, *Laotai*, *Laodi Laam* etc. demonstrate the movement of hands depicting the seed sowing, weeding, cutting of paddy plants, and harvest. These dances reflect the economic way of life of the people. *Rih Laam*, war dance is performed by male members dividing into two groups; they dance with spear in the form of attack and retreat. Man learns from nature the form of dancing based on the movements of birds, animals and insects. Dances of imitation of animals and insects are *Gaa Laam*, crab dance, *Khoiguna Laam*, bee mating dance, *Raangdai Laam*, hornbill dance, *Goichei Bang Laam*, the dance of movement of the horn of the bull, *Tareng Laam*, spinning dance etc. Some of the imitative dances represent the activities of women in domestic chores like spinning and so they are mimetic.²⁰ *Seemna Laam*, fly dance is imitative of driving away of flies by swing of a piece of cloth. *Raangdai Laam* is a dance in imitation of a

mother hornbill which constantly does fly round her nest and tries to persuade the young ones to come out flying like her. The Kabui dances are always accompanied by songs attuned to instrumental music mostly of drum, cymbal, and sometimes gongs. All the dances are performed in group and there is no solo dance. The Kabui dance shows the close relation between dance and religion, dance and art and dance and social life. The artistic appeal of the Kabui dance form is known to the outsiders not only for its tranquil grace, its pliancy and plasticity, its ease and flow of movements but also for its very unique and festinating costume.²¹ Here, it may be mentioned that Kabui Naga dance is one of the contributions of Manipur culture to Indian culture.

The folk songs form the essence of the Kabui culture. Their songs express their love, their hardship, hope, frustration, victory etc. Festival songs are also known as *Chapa Lu*. In the festival, singing of song competition between girls and boys is performed at *Luchu* at the night time and no song will be repeated by any singer. On the other hand some boys will go around the village singing songs in praise of the might and courage of the people of the village. The participants are entertained with drink by individual families. This is called *Kairong Lonmei* (guarding the village).²²

At the close of the festival, all the young men of the village will march to the Northern village gate with bamboo cups which they used for drinking purpose. And the cup will be split in the middle at one stroke with dao and taken the omen. If one half of the cup turns open and other half turns closed the omen is taken as good. If both the halves turn open or closed simultaneously, the omen is taken as bad. This rite marks the end of the festive activities and the return to the normal spatial and temporal dimensions of daily life.²³

Conclusion

To conclude, in the remote past, inter-village war was a common occurrence among the hill tribes of Manipur. The male members/warriors of the village at the cost of their lives defended the village from enemy's attacks. The practice of head hunting was gone. However, it is preserved in the form of narrative. The war rituals continue without the violence in the *Rih-ngai* festival for wellbeing and prosperity. It helps to sustain the rich culture and traditions of the people. Young members also have the opportunity to learn the historic culture, social ethics and ancestor's wisdom through the process of the festival. Kabui Naga dance has brought a great name in the State. Festival gives an opportunity to reunite of family members, relatives, and friends. People settle disputes and misunderstandings by participating in the festival.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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