

Significance Of The Kuki Feast Of Merit In Social And Religious Aspects

Thangkhohal Haokip

Research Scholar

North Easter Hill University, Shillong, India.

Abstract

The Kukis are celebrated for their valiant, brave, courage and in their merry-making festivals. In their traditional practices, there were three types of feat of merit namely the Sa-ai, Chang-ai and the Chon. The Sa-ai were performed by great hunters who killed many big wild animals. The Chang-ai were performed by the women in order to commemorate their victory over paddy. Chon, the highest rituals can be performed only by those who performed the Sa-ai ritual three times. The performing of all these rituals were connected with social and religious life of an individuals. The performers were well respected and accorded with high status in the society as it cannot be performed by the commoners. They were also respected in their life after death as the Thadou-Kuki believed that the soul went to the land of dead or Mithikhuo after death. Therefore, the present paper highlights the importance and significance of sa-ai, chang-ai and chon rituals in the Kuki socio- religious practices. By analyzing the role of these rituals, the study contributes a deeper understanding of the significance of rituals in human cultures. Through ethnographic research and interviews with the elders, the study reveals the intricate meanings attached to these rituals in the Thadou-Kuki tradition.

Keywords: *Feast of merit, Ritual, Significance, Thadou-Kuki.*

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I. Introduction

Feast of merit is a significant ritual ceremony that holds great cultural and social importance. It is a way of showing respect and gratitude to the ancestors for their blessings and protection. A ritual is a repetitive, ceremonial, and symbolic act or series of acts performed to fulfil a specific purpose or to mark and important occasion (Turner 1969: 13). It involves symbolic action, objects, or language (Levi-Strauss 1963: 210) and often involves formal, ceremonial elements such as specific clothing, music or gestures (Goffman 1967: 45). Thus, it is a behavior or an action that is performed to achieved a specific goal, marking an important occasion that is connected with something greater than oneself. This ritual and celebration always had connection with social and religious dimensions. All this feast of merit rituals has idiosyncratic rituals and customs that are unique to the Kuki people.

The term Kuki is a generic term which includes a number of tribes and clans, distributed in the present-day Northeast India, North West Myanmar and Chittagong hill tract in Bangladesh (Haokip 2018: 1). The Thadou are the sub groups of the Kuki community. They are the most numerous branches within Kuki groups in terms of population as per 2011 Census. In Manipur, the Thadou-Kuki has spread across various regions with a significant concentration in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Chandel, and Tengnoupal, western part of Tamenglong district and south eastern part of Ukhurl district.

The use of the word Kuki in many places refers to the Thadou dialect speaking group of the Kuki community. Methodologically, the researcher used both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include colonial sources while secondary sources include published books.

II. Problem Statement

The Kuki feast of merit still remains poorly understood and appreciated by outsiders, limiting opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration. It has been compromised which undermines the social and spiritual meaning and the purposes of the rituals. In this way, the significant of *Sa-ai*, *Chang-ai* and *Chon* in the socio-religious life of the Kuki for a long time got very little attention and is comparatively an unexplored area. An attempt is therefore made to highlight the significance of the Kuki feast of merit which has its own symbolic and significance meanings. There are different roles assigned to men and women, specific clothes in certain occasion, rites and rituals which has its own purposes and significances. Therefore, the present paper would examine the significance and symbolism of the Kuki feast of merit.

Sa-Ai

The Thadou-Kuki have a unique belief system in the existence of life and soul after death. Death is inevitable but every culture views the end of life differently. In the traditional concept and belief, the physical death was not considered the ultimate end of life but a journey to the land of souls. Every action of men was therefore embedded with meaning and spirituality. After death, the soul makes their way into the abode of the souls of the dead called *peogal* or *mithikho*.

The Kuki considered themselves great headhunters as they place great value on head because each head means an additional slave for the soul, also that unless a man takes a head, he is not keeping up the traditions of his ancestors who were all famous head-hunters (Shaw 1929: 78-79). The family of the deceased used to hang the head of humans and animals in the *Lhan-Khoum* (post erected in graveyard). The *Sa-ai* ritual is performed by great hunter to subjugate and gain complete dominance over the spirits of the animals killed. It is believed that if the spirits of the animals killed are left unsubdued and are not brought under the hunter's control, they may afflict the hunter spirit during his lifetime and after his death. Thus, by performing the *Sa-ai* ritual, the hunter is free from affliction caused by the animals killed in his lifetime but rather subjugate the animals killed in life after death (Goswami 1985: 115).

The family of the deceased even organized a hunting party for killing of animals to get their heads to be hoisted on the graveyard of the deceased. All this was done for the sake of the deceased that he would have additional slave in the *mithikho* or in the land of the dead. But once it so happened that the Sitlhou clan in order to show their superiority over others used to hunt men for the said purposes instead of hunting wild animals (Gangte 2003:111). The dead body of a man who performs *Sa-ai* during his lifetime is placed on a wooden plank and is carried to and fro between the house and the graveyard for three times (Goswami 1985: 103).

Besides, it was a symbol of masculinity. Men were required to display their manhood through bravery, courage, strength and virility which are the qualities that were greatly admired and highly prized. Every man in the village except men with disabilities was required to join in the *Sawm* institution (Bachelor's dormitory). A man who distinguished himself by taking many heads rose in status and prestige and was very much respected within the community and those not very successful in their pursuit were ridiculed. They were given respect and recognition in the society for their heroism. The warrior enjoyed a prominent position in the society with the greater number of heads he acquired during warfare. The head hunters were motivated to take an enemy's head not only to bring fertility in the village but also because of the fact that the society accorded them with special status and entitlement to wear distinctive attires and ornaments.

In order to accept and perform the *Sa ai* (literally *sa* means animal and *ai* means subjugation meaning victory over animals) ritual, the hunter should kill a large number of animals and birds. The tally must not be less than two hundred, preferably it should be five hundred (Gangte 2003:179). This will include big animals like tiger, elephant, yak, bear etc. and birds like owl, eagle hornbill etc. (Doungel 2024: 63). Birds and animals that are small and insignificant are not taken into account. The hunter in order to perform the ritual must first inform his *Tucha* and *Becha* along with the village chief and the priest. On the fixed day, the performer or the hunter offers *zu* to the young boys and girls, his *tucha* and *becha* with a request to help him in preparing all the necessary arrangements.

The performer of the *Sa-ai* ritual were first dressed in the clothes of women with a spinning spindle made from elephant knee or wood in his hand and strikes with its wheel on the skull of a tiger. The reason for dressing the performer in women dresses is that, once upon a time, a man who went for hunting came across a tiger cub and tame it. One day, his child of about two years met the tiger in the threshold of the door and cried in fear. The mother of the child who was spinning inside rush out immediately and killed the tiger cub by hitting its skull with her spinning spindle. Thus, according to the Kuki belief, she was the first to kill a tiger. In this way, the *Sa-Ai* rituals begin with the dressing of the performer with women dress. After this, the performer gets dressed into his own male attire with bows and arrows.

The *Mithun* for the feast is killed by the *mi upa* or clan head of the performer. The slaughtered animal was divided into portions and distributed which has significance and reflect the socio-cultural practices in the Kuki society. The *Sakin* or the compulsory distribution of meat among the Kuki is not for hunger but rather to express their social obligations to their relative in-law, their chiefs and to show their hospitality based on the principle of reciprocity. The heart and the liver was partake by the performer along with the village chief, priest and his *bepa* as a witness to the ceremony. The neck portion or *sangong* is given to the maternal uncle called *pute* or *sunggao*. The *asung-ting* or inner portion flesh of the topmost ridge is taken into two pieces and is given to the *nulam* or brother-in-law by marriage of two sisters, or anyone he feels close to him. The right side of the *apo-ting* or outer portion flesh of the topmost ridge is given to *upa* or the eldest in the family while the left side is given to the village chief. The waist portion is given to the performer's *tucha* or the aunt's or sister's or daughter's husband. The rib or *anah* portion is given to the performer's *bepa*. The right hind leg is given to the village youths.

CHANG-AI

The main sources of livelihood for the Kuki is Jhum or slash and burn cultivation since time immemorial. McCulloch (1859: 58) was assured that they (Kukis) were originally not migratory but have assumed this character latterly. Since their expulsion from their own hills, the different tribes have become mixed up together in villages situated in positions selected with reference to convenience of cultivation.

With the approach of annual cultivation for a particular year, every household were allocated each site with the assist of the village head and his council of minister which is called *Loumun-chan*. In this cultivation, they used to clear large area of forest and burned it and dibbling in the seed among the ashes. Therefore, they do not require many or modern implements. The tool they used were mainly of simple tools like dao, axe, and hoe which are the primary tools for cultivation and sickle is the only tool used when harvesting paddy.

After clearing the forest, the leaves were left for some days to dry up. When it is dried up, it is burned down in the cultivation portion while the ashes served as a manure to the soil. The next day, it is customary for all to remain inside the house which is known as *Vamnit*. This was done as a symbolic expression of condolences for all the animals and insects that were perished in the jungle fire. This is followed by a ceremonial rite called *Daiphu* in which the priest and the man who select the land goes to the cultivation site. The priest visits every cultivator's plot and perform this ritual, and it was after performing this ritual that the cultivator can start sowing seeds. This is done to please and pacify the unseen evil spirits that may reside in and around the cultivated sites. Besides paddy, they cultivated maize (*kolbu*), job's tears (*mim*), ginger (*thieng*), turmeric (*ai-eng*) banana (*mot*), beans (*be*), sesame (*si*), chili and so on.

In the Kuki society, men is primarily concerned with hunting wild games or to go to war etc. while agricultural work is thus mainly done by the women. The housewife is therefore considered as the owner of paddy. So, when the harvest is good and more than sufficient, a ritual called *Chang-Ai* (victory over paddy) was celebrated. Literally, *chang* means paddy and *ai* means subjugation thus meaning victory over paddy. This ritual is connected with harvesting of paddy and spiritual well-being of the housewife after death. To perform this ritual, Goswami (1985: 157) asserted that the minimum quantity of paddy required is approximately fifty mauds which is equal to three lam size basket or about fifteen feet in circumference and above five feet in depth.

In the traditional Thadou-Kuki society, women who have performed *Chang-ai* feast are permitted to wear the *Thangnangpuon* which is dark blue cloth with the embroidery at the two ends in red and white cotton of a special design (Shaw 1929: 75). The performer and the priest are adorned with the feature of eagle or *muvanlai lhaving*, the longest eagle feature. *Chang-ai* or victory over paddy is the only ritual lead by women in the Thadou-Kuki society and was done in connection with the spiritual well-being for the housewife after death. If she performed the ritual, she would be then blessed and honored in the land of *mithikhuo* or the land of the dead. The woman performing *Chang-ai* ritual has to feed the whole village for one day.

The performer in order to perform the ritual must first inform his *Tucha* and *Becha* along with the village chief and the priest. On the fixed day, the performer of the *chang-ai* offers *zu* to the young boys and girls, his *tucha* and *becha* with a request to help him in preparing all the necessary arrangements. But, *Chang-ai* ritual can be performed by women when her husband is alive and widow cannot perform it (Goswami 1985: 172).

The Thadou-Kuki have different types of death and funeral services in case of natural and unnatural death. Some additional rites are observed to those who performed *Chang-ai*, *Sa-ai* and *Chon* during his/her lifetime. The dead body of a women who perform *Chang-ai* during her lifetime is placed on a wooden plank and is carried to and fro between the house and the graveyard for three times (Goswami 1985: 103).

CHON

Chon, the most highly prized feast can only be performed by those who have done the *Sa-Ai* ritual three times. Seven *mithuns* are to be killed and everything else must be in multiples of seven. The songs and genealogical trees had to be repeated seven times. Even after the death of such persons, the corpse had to be carried round seven times and everything pertaining to burial rites had to be done seven times so that they resorted to smoking the bodies of such persons to avoid decomposition before the entire rites were completed. The performance of the *Chon* gave the soul of that person a paramount seat in *Mithikho* and ensured eternal happiness (Shaw 1929: 76).

This ritual has not been done for a very long time and so the exact rites are not clearly known. It was believed that this ritual was first performed by the *Noimangpa* when he did it over his son *Chonkim*. Another tradition is that it begins from Dapa, a legendary Kuki hero, who perform the *chon* ritual. According to Shaw (1929:25), it was originally done by Thadou himself and only three or four persons are supposed to have ever done it since, but even then it was not done properly as the *Chontul* which was the only weapon by which the *mithuns* or other animals could be killed on such occasions, was buried and lost owing to a quarrel between the Donggel and Thadou families at a very early date.

III. Conclusion

There are many significant changes in the Kuki society with the coming of the British and the accepting of Christianity. The Christian missionaries condemned and discouraged them from following their old aged practices. The new religion threatened the social fabric of the Kuki society and was responsible for the loss of many customs and traditions. The traditional feast of merit rituals and festivals etc. were abandoned and replaced with Christian festivals like Good Friday and Christmas. Similarly, the practices of decorating house with animal head were replaced with the pasting of Holy image and Bible verse. The traditional drinking of rice beer or *Zu* were now replaced by tea in several occasions and the role of priest or *Thiempu* replaced by the Pastor or Deacon. Besides, certain shawls and ornaments which were socially restricted to only some privileged individuals in the traditional society has been abandoned and have lost its cultural significances. In short, Christianity brought modernity and education and also contributed to cultural erosion and loss of the traditional practices.

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