

An Anthropological Study of the Feast of Merit Among the Koireng Tribe, Manipur

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Abstract

The feast of merit formed a central feature of traditional Naga practice, which conferred social status to a person. The significance of the feast of merit is that it brings honour to the donor during his lifetime and after death. Such feasts, though remarkable in the past, have lost their significance and practice with the advent of modernization, westernization, Christianity, and education. The essence of sharing as a prime component of the feast of merit in today's context would be just a story of the past for the younger generations. Christianity brought tremendous change in the mental attitude of the Koireng, especially in their life and culture. This paper brings to light ideas and perceptions of the world view of wealth and the nature of its utilization in the early Koireng society. The present work focuses on the nature of surplus distribution as manifested in community feasts given by wealthy men as the feast of merit. This paper also tries to add to the existing debates revolving around how colonialism and its agents have misunderstood the indigenous practices of offering feasts and food sharing as an extravaganza or unnecessary expenditure. This paper intends to bring examples from the global south and contribute to debunking the above arguments from a decolonisation point of view. The paper also shows how the feast of merit served as food redistribution and was a means to gain recognition, prestige, and status in society, which can be construed as one of the main worldviews of the indigenous communities in South Asia.

Keywords: surplus, honoured, prestige, status, distribution.

Introduction

The term 'feast of merits' appears to be first used by J.P. Mills (1926) when referring to feasting traditions in Naga societies. Later, C.V. Furer-Haimendorf (1939a, 1939b) popularized the term while discussing the redistribution of resources of wealthy individuals in society through feasts to maintain an egalitarian social structure in Naga societies. For any Naga, the feast of merit is considered one of the most prestigious rituals he can perform in his lifetime to display his wealth and grandeur (Vero, 2024). J.P. Mills (1926), while observing this practice of the Nagas, quoted, "The essence of this system is that every male Naga if he is to acquire merit and status in this world and the next must give a series of feast, every detail of which is strictly prescribed. An immense amount of rice goes to buying the animals. The feasts, therefore, directly stimulate agriculture". Stevenson (1943), in his study of Chin communities, shows how agricultural surplus is carefully used to attain temporal power in society. As Nagas depend on agriculture, life revolves around the fields. C.V. Furer-Haimendorf (1933) describes how "A Naga is so occupied that ninth-tenths of his thought and life

are devoted to his field agriculture, being traditionally practised as subsistence farming." Most of this field's harvest was spent on this feast.

The philosophy behind the performance of the feast of merit is that the performer is honoured when alive and remembered after death. However, the more profound philosophy involved is the sense of generosity and warm-heartedness towards the poor people who fed on the occasion (Shimray, 1985). Julian Jacobs (2012) states that "this feast of merit is an optional feast performed by an individual. They are distinguished from life-cycle and the agriculture-cycle feast, though all of them share the notion of genna and sacrifice". A person gives the feast to the whole village. It is also attached to the people's religious, social, and economic life. The most important sacrifice is the Mithun, the chief domestic animal used as currency to settle a marriage or pay a fine; the feast brings the donor honour both now and after death (Verrier, 1969). The Feast of Merit comprises a series of feasts ranked in the importance of merit and scale. The cost of each feast stage surpasses the previous one, and only wealthy people sponsor such undertakings. Sponsors of these endure increasing expenses for animal slaughter and rice beer for each higher-ranked feast. Sponsoring such feasts serves as a means to attain higher social status in society (Jacobs et al., 1990; Lotha, 2008). Even though the feast of merit was widely practiced among the various ethnic tribes of the Nagas, how they were performed varies among the different ethnic Naga tribes.

Among the Chakhesang tribe, the feast of merit follows rituals involving a yearlong preparation. Only those rich with consistent bountiful harvests could afford to perform feasts, with the condition that the man had to be married then. Usually undertaken after harvest, the feast of merit involved rituals such as giving two feasts, erecting a monolith, building two horned-shaped houses, and acquiring the right to wear the merit shawl (Vero, 2024). Yekha-u and Marak (2021) write of Chakhesang, the feast of merit intricately connected to their worldview. Whereby the feast-givers distribute their wealth in terms of sacrificing mithun, buffalo, and/ or other livestock in consecutive feasts and receiving in return a higher social rank and the right to wear a special shawl (Feast of Merit shawl), variously known as hapidasa, elicura and thupikhu and the right to adorn the house with special architecture mithun and buffalo wood carvings on the wall and to put a horn at the pinnacle of the house front. The Sema Naga performed a series of feasts starting from Shikusho, followed by Apisa, Akikyeghe, and InamiKusa. The final performance of the series InamiKusa is such an enormous feast that even people from the neighbouring villages were invited. In such a way, the person's richness and generosity was made known (Sanglir, 2021).

Like the rest of the Naga tribes, the Tangkhul's status was not conferred by wealth but by giving feasts and thus earning the right to certain clothes and carvings on the house (Ganguli, 1993). The Tangkhul, rich men, to establish their distinction from the rest of the people, would celebrate their status by giving a feast of honour for the entire villagers, killing buffaloes, cows, pigs, and giving many jars of local wine. Such a feast is known as the Maran Kasa Feast of Honour (Luikham, 2011). One of the deep desires of every married couple is to perform the feast of merit or the status ceremony, which is called Zhono Mozu among the Mao Naga tribe. They work hard, earn, and collect, and as a sign of wealth, they offer and share generously their wealth with the whole village and elevate their status. They also erect

memorial monuments to propagate their names and memories to future generations and descendants. When a person earns the right to wear the zhossa (shawl of the feast) he is respected, honoured and his words are taken seriously in public meetings. The rich person often shares their wealth with the village by giving such merit feasts and gaining their status from the public (Nepuni, 2010). Among the Poumai Nagas, the feast of merit comprised seven stages. The higher stages of the feast were more expensive and challenging to sponsor. They were expensive since many were slaughtered, and copious rice beer was prepared for feasts by sponsors for the villagers. Only wealthy couples sponsored such costly events, although sponsoring such events theoretically was open to all village couples. Each couple's dream was to sponsor the highest stage of the feast and earn the highest achievable status and recognition in society. Only a few people could sponsor the higher or later stages of the feast of merit (Singh, 2024).

With the above background, the present study highlights the feast of merit of the Koireng tribes of Manipur.

Material and Methods

This study was conducted in ten villages. The study is purely qualitative; employing both primary and secondary sources of data collection was adopted. Interviews were conducted with males and females aged between sixty and eighty. The village chief and village leaders were formally interviewed to collect information about the feast of merits.

Area of Study

Presently, the Koirengs are sparsely distributed over ten villages of the adjoining three hill districts Senapati, Churachandpur, Chandel, and Imphal District of Manipur. The Koireng villages in the Kangpokpi sub-division of the Senapati district of Manipur are situated on the eastern side of the Koubru-Laimatol range that faces the Imphal valley. Some other villages in the Saikhul sub-division of the Senapati district are situated in the southeastern range of the Nongmaijing hills. Longa Koireng is the biggest village among the Koireng villages. The village is situated in the southwestern part of the Senapati district and is approximately 15 km west of Imphal town. Sadukoireng is located in the central part of the Senapati district; it is 27 Km away from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. Utonglok and Awang Longa Koireng are almost in the central part of the Senapati district. Kamu Koireng is located in the southeastern range of Nongmaijing Hill, Senapati district. The village is not far from Imphal city. Ekwan falls in the sub-division of Sapermeina, Senapati district. Two Koireng villages fall in Imphal. eSanakeithelThangmeiband and TarungKoireng colony. The Litan village is in the Chandel district, and Ngairong village is in the Churachandpur district.

Result

The jhumming activities of the Koirengs revolve around earning bread for survival without consideration for future growth and development in an agro-based economic system that has no place for saving because consumption is conspicuous and community-based. In such a routine life, daily life becomes naturally monotonous. Therefore, it must find expression in

various forms of social celebration to give vent to their longing for a life away from sacrosanct. In doing so, their structural functions of life are often made manifest in more than one way, as illustrated below:

Feast of Merits

The Koirengs are fun-loving people who perform feasts of merit with song, dance, music, food, and drinks. This is an expensive celebration where the rich man demonstrates his merits.

a. Khuongthak (inauguration of drum)

The khuong (drum) of the koirengs is two pairs. It is about four feet in length and two feet in diameter. For the Koirengs, Khuong is one of the most restricted instruments. Therefore, ordinary people are not allowed to own except kulakpa, Luklakpa, and elders of the clan, called Panchis. In the Koireng political system, the kulakpa is chief, the supreme authority in almost all the affairs of the Koireng villages. He is both the religious and temporal head of the village. Practically, the power of the kulakpa is almost unlimited because he is the head of the village council. He alone cannot finalize or settle any dispute or case. He is guided by the majority opinion of the village council, but he has the power to veto the decisions of other members. The democratic nature of the functioning of the village council also acts as a sobering influence on the village chief. Lulakpa is next to Kulakpa; he holds a crucial position in all the village affairs, especially in the judiciary. He is from the Zeite clan. In the absence of the kulakpa, he looks after the village's overall administration, especially its judicial affairs. Panchis is chosen among the oldest members of a lineage. If a panchi dies, his next younger brother will be chosen as the next panchi. If there are no brothers or the brothers are dead, the oldest son of the surviving brothers will be his successor. If a panchi dies without any son or brother, there will be no panchi in that lineage. Thus, a village with a maximum number of lineage or clan would have a maximum number of panchis. Khuongthak is a costly feast of merit that can be performed once in one's lifetime. The ceremony will enable the performer to enhance their status in society. When the drum owner dies, the drum is also buried along with his body. There will be dances at every ceremony stage accompanied by community feasting. The drum-making takes three days. On the first day, the owner declares he will make a drum. Then, villagers discuss the arrangement of how and where to make the drum. Usually, the drum is made in a relative's house who can share the expenditure. With the agreement, the villagers cut down wood to make the drum after the village elders picked the tree. After cutting down the log, it is brought to where the drum will be made. This is done on the first day.

On the second day, they made a hole in the drum. On the third day, they make the robe with proper measurements, and the face of the drum is tied to the robe. The face is usually made of deer's or goat's skin. The host supplies rice beer to those who make drums (Wanbe, 2003). After making the drum, the celebration continues for five days. On the first day, the drum is taken to the owner accompanied by four virgin girls known as Lomnu and four virgin boys known as Tangsa. Wearing an attractive dress and holding chimkol and pho, one man led the

party. He also leads in the dance known as Kalamchi. This dance is performed with chemkor and phao. He is followed by the drummer and the host of the newly made drum, who is carried in a palanquin accompanied by the four virgin boys and girls. The drum owner waits outside; he welcomes them with rice, beer, food, and meat. On reaching the owner of the drum residence, they start another dance by beating a drum. The drum beating is called kerkoikhung and is done thrice to call the people to join the celebration. In the meantime, men perform the kalamchi dance; the drum is usually beaten with the horn of male goats or mithun's horn.

The family welcomes them with cooked meat. The drum's owner is lifted in a palanquin, which is locally called keljomdam, meaning lifting a rich man. This lifting is done according to the drum beating. One lady from Lomnu, out of the four virgin girls, offers a smoking pipe called kanjub to the owner of the drum. The owner is locally known as khuongtungkung. While lifting the khuongtungkung, they will sing a song about the kelchomtagnala. On this second day, dance was performed outside a man's dance, namely chemkorlam (dao dance of men), mitheilam (flies dance), yonglam (monkey dance), and kellam (goat dance). This merry-making is celebrated with rice beer (lomyu). Before sunset, they perform all the dances outside the house of the drum owner, and after sunset, they enter the house and spend the night dancing, singing, and drinking.

On the third day, a mithun is killed, and half of the meat is given to Loma (they are a group of youths). It is from here that the four virgin girls and four virgin boys, lomnu and Tangsa, are chosen. From this day, the drinking of rice beer is stopped. The lady can also join in the dancing.

On the fourth day, the drum's owner distributes the shawls to relatives, mostly from his sister's and mother's sides. Usually, the shawls are not less than forty, but there is no hard and fast rule for the number of the shawls. It depends upon his ability. Men get thaite (head turban), and women get puonlang or koram. A person receiving the shawl will dance, coming out with one man and one lady, showing gratitude. The lomnu and tangsa are also given shawls. The drummer is paid with an iron spade. Each shawl receiver brought a pot of rice beer and drank together. The man who makes the drum receives rigajan (necklace), and layaipon (shawl), this is for composing a song for the drum's owner. The song remains the drum's owner's song because it has been presented to him.

On the fifth day, the people go to where the drum was made by taking half of the mithun, which was left for Loma. The drum owner is prohibited from going with them. They feasted on the meat at the drum-making place by singing mailamla the whole night and returned home the following day. While the people are away from the drum owner's residence, the purification of the drum is performed by killing a chicken, and the blood is sprinkled on the drum. The drum cannot be used until the owner kills a wild animal, which is to be eaten together with some elders. From this day onward, the drum can be used.

b. Sadel (Celebration of killing tiger)

For the Koirengs, the tiger is considered one of the most ferocious animals. Any Koireng hero who killed a tiger should be purified by sadel performance. Until the sadel performance, the tiger is kept at Palkung (beyond the village entrance). This sadel performance is because the other tiger will attack him, his family members, or the clan members. A day is fixed for this celebration. It takes thirty to forty days, during which all the villagers brew rice beer. The tiger is skinned without tearing or breaking the skin. The skin is filled with straw or hay, making it a complete tiger structure. The meat of the tiger is dried on fire. On the day of the celebration, the person who killed the tiger will dress up like a woman. The Koirengs say that the first person among the Koireng to kill a tiger was a woman. So a person who kills a tiger will dress up like a woman, wearing a shaipikhup pull-up to the chest and tied in place by a belt by puonlang. Hair is made with fine thread of different colours and put on the artificial hair, wear rikanongthreigi necklace, the arm bracelet har, bangles banriel and vikang. Carrying basket (buseat), axe inside the basket. When everything is ready, the drum is beaten to the tune of beating the killing animal.

With the drum beating along, the man and audience who killed went to the palkung. On reaching the village priest, jupal performs the mantra with aichal and cuts it into pieces. On the tiger's ear, place a leaf called phuoren. The jupal wears the puonthal; then the puonthal sees the winner by counting the strip of the pounthal and the stripe of the tiger. The jupal will say, "See, human being has more stripes, so I am the winner". Then the jupal takes the egg, which is placed beneath the tiger, by saying, "Why did you steal my egg?" he takes the egg and breaks it on the tiger's forehead. The tiger is put in a palanquin, and beating the drum, it is taken till the megaliths erected by the kulakpa. The palanquin, which carried the tiger, will go around the lamkir three times, moving anti-clockwise. The jupal and the others will also go around the lamkir three times, moving clockwise. The priest then takes the tiger's head and bury on the side of the hill.

The person who killed the tiger first goes home, keeps the things carried by him outside, and enters the house through the back door. He lies flat on the floor and counts the humdang (chang se chang se) and, at the end, stops at chang. While he is counting, the people who brought the tiger meat will come to the door and say,

“Innea long ro

Aangmonearon

Sarur le rarurleginron”

Translation

Open the door

What do you bring?

We bring an animal's head and a war's head.

Then the door is opened by saying, "If you are bringing an animal's head and war's head," enter the house. Then, the tiger killer will be seated in the house at the central pillar

(ukhong). Jupal will purify him with a chicken. For the feast, a pig is killed and celebrated together by singing, dancing, and beating the drum. The main dance performed on this day is khuongpichumn. They spend the whole day and night singing, dancing, feasting, and drinking rice and beer. On this day, the village administrator drinks seindei, which is passed on from kulakpa to lulakpa and so on. They start dancing and singing, led by Lapi (the female teacher of dances and songs; she teaches to girls), and sing the thangla song. While singing the song, they go round the compound along with phamnaipa, and the phamnaipa share their rice beer, siendei. On this day, a pig is killed, and the head is kept for the following day, and the rest of the meat is cooked. They sing semtela, Lapu teaches all the song (He is in charge of dance. He provides training in dancing to young boys and girls. He is an important person for the ritual dances performed during festival and feast of merit). The following day, they ate the head of the pig together and parted.

The community life of the Koireng is not only about their community people in their day-to-day lives but also about their attitude towards wealth. The Koireng offered a feast of merits with the belief that the giver gains honour in his lifetime, and hereafter, it would bring prosperity to him and his heirs. The feast is an act of charity, for it is a means of feeding the fellowmen and sharing wealth with the entire community. It is performed with great amusement, social, dancing, and singing, which lasts for several days; it is costly. During such a period, no productive work is performed. It is restricted even to go to the fields during such occasions. For this reason, it was regarded to be more costly and unproductive. This is now considered a waste of money, time, and energy. The Christian missionaries brought out revolutionary change and altered life in these hills. The monotonous way of life in the hills was relieved by organizing feasts, festivals, and observances of various Genna. A significant change has occurred in social, economic, and religious life. It has been undergoing significant changes in almost all interpersonal and social living spheres. Society moulds itself according to the pressure exerted on it by the requirements of the Church. It adopts the cultural and economic traits of the outsiders. A new lifestyle implies replacing the old ways of life. All practices that did not conform to the Christian faith were condemned as evil and thus abandoned gradually. After embracing Christianity, changes of a noticeably distinct character appeared in the motion in Koireng villages.

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