

# An Economy of Visibility: Clan and Gender Hierarchies in the Chakhesang Feast of Merit

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## Abstract

This paper examines the practice of the feast of merit among the Chakhesang Naga as a socio-cultural institution that structures recognition, status, and participation. Existing scholarship has largely interpreted the practice through the lens of material display, economic capacity, and prestige, with limited attention to the roles of gender and clan in shaping access to symbolic value. Addressing this gap, the study argues that the practice operates through a structured economy of visibility, where recognition is mediated by differently structured participation. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork in Phek district, Nagaland, the study demonstrates that the feast is collectively performed, roles and forms of participation are unequally organised. Men occupy central and publicly visible ritual positions, whereas women's contributions, though indispensable, receive less public recognition and are mediated through male-centred forms of achievement. Simultaneously, clan-based distinctions shape differential pathways to status, producing a layered and relational system of hierarchy. By foregrounding the interplay between visibility, gender, and clan, the study challenges dominant interpretations of the feast of merit as primarily an expression of generosity or economic display. Instead, it argues that the institution operates as a mechanism through which social distinctions are actively produced and sustained. In doing so, the paper calls for a critical re-evaluation of the assumption of egalitarianism in Naga societies, as well as for a more inclusive representation of society that highlights the structured inequalities embedded in ritual life.

**Keywords:** feast of merit, Chakhesang Naga, gender, clan, hierarchy.

## Introduction

The feast of merit among Naga communities constitutes a socio-economic and cultural institution, embedded in labour and collective participation that confers symbolic value on its hosts. Among the Chakhesang, this practice, known as *Zhotho Mouza*, extends beyond the expression of individual prosperity to encompass the fertility and well-being of the village, thereby embodying a shared collective identity. Organised as a graded series, the feast distributes material and symbolic rewards across successive stages (Vasa, 2019). This recognition is made visible within the community. It is expressed through distinctive markers of status, including the adornment of houses with *Cika* (house horn) and engravings on the wall, the right to wear *Thipikhu* (prestige shawl), and differentiated seating or spatial

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arrangements during communal gatherings, which collectively distinguish hosts from others. This recognition extends beyond the lifetime of the host through the erection of monoliths, ensuring enduring social remembrance (Jamir, 2019).

Existing scholarship on the feast of merit has largely emphasized its material and economic dimensions, often framing it as a display of wealth and leveraging of status. While such approaches offer important insights, they systematically overlook how the institution is internally structured through social hierarchies like clan and gender. Within this paradigm, clan affiliation and gendered participation play a crucial role in shaping access to prestige and visibility, yet these dimensions remain insufficiently examined. As a result, existing studies inadequately explain how recognition is differentially produced, particularly in terms of who is publicly acknowledged, how values are distributed, and whose contributions remain less visible.

Building on insights into the ‘economies of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015) this paper reconceptualises the feast of merit as an economy of visibility. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital (1986) emphasises the accumulation of socially valued resources. This approach shifts attention to the condition under which recognition becomes publicly legible and differentially distributed. In this sense, visibility is not merely an outcome of participation but a structuring principle that shapes how value is perceived and validated. It argues that the feast is not merely a site of economic display, but a structured social practice through which visibility operates as a key mechanism for the production and distribution of symbolic value.

As a result, recognition is not uniformly accessible but is differently structured through gendered roles and clan-based hierarchies. The graded sequence seems to follow a uniform pattern of reward; however, variations persist. For instance, Sohemi clans attain comparable entitlement to that of Thuvomi with fewer stages, a pattern often regarded as a form of concession. Similarly, although the ritual is performed collaboratively by couples, authority and public visibility remain largely with men. Women’s contributions, though essential, receive less formal recognition both in practice and scholarship. These patterns demonstrate that recognition is not simply a function of participation, but is mediated through structured conditions of visibility, perception and valuation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this study examines how clan and gender intersect under the feast of merit to shape pathways to prestige. In doing so, it offers a more precise account of how social hierarchy is actively produced across ritual practices.

## **Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach, drawing on primary data from both open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork was conducted between December 2024 to April 2025 across twenty-two villages, involving sixty-seven interviews across Phek district of Nagaland. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, including village elders and former hosts with direct experience of the practice. It is followed by snowball sampling to broaden perspective and deepen insiders’ accounts. Given the focus on gender and clan, participants across multiple groups were involved. The Chakhesang community comprises three major linguistic groups, Poula, Khezha and Chokri, thereby, some interviews

required the assistance of interpreters. To address potential challenges in capturing linguistic nuances, data were cross-checked with participants and interpreted with attention to context.

All interviews were conducted with informed oral consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Ethical protocols were followed throughout, ensuring voluntary participation and maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. The researcher's positionality as an insider facilitated access and openness during interviews, enabling more nuanced conversation and critically engaging with what might otherwise be taken for granted. The analysis followed an iterative, interpretive approach grounded in close reading of the data. Furthermore, emerging themes were inductively examined in relation to the theoretical framework, moving beyond description towards an analytical interpretation.

### **Literature Review:**

Existing studies on the feast of merit among the Naga communities, particularly the Chakhesang, have largely interpreted the practice through the lens of material display, economic competence, and acquisition of social status (Jamir & Muller, 2022). In this context, architectural distinction is treated as a visible marker of prestige (Vasa, 2019). Simultaneously, megalithic construction constitutes materialization of social recognition (Wouters, 2019; Wunderlich et al., 2021). More broadly, the feast has been situated in the broader socio-economic structure, where the ability to mobilise resources translates into enhanced social standing (West, 1985). Comparative studies across other tribal communities similarly emphasize ritual expenditure in sustaining prestige, alongside its role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and its transformation under Christianity (Gachui, 2025; Kashena et al., 2026; Pao & Rajeev, 2023).

This body of scholarship provides important insights into the material and status-oriented dimensions of the feast of merit. It treats social differentiation largely as an outcome of economic capacity rather than as an internally structured process. In particular, the organisation of recognition through clan affiliation and gendered participation are insufficiently analyzed. Although some studies acknowledge women's participation (Dazo, 2020; Wunderlich, 2022) or note their presence without specifying their roles (Philip & ManiBabu, 2017), such reference remains peripheral and lacks sustained analytical engagement. As a result, existing literature privileges visible and male-centred forms of achievement, leaving the gendered structuring of labour, authority, and recognition systematically overlooked.

Similarly, clan-based differentiations despite being central to social organisation of the Chakhesang society and Nagas in general, remain largely implicit across the existing analysis. Variation in ritual progression, entitlement and symbolic value across clan groups are noted descriptively (Tunyi, 2019), but are not examined as element of hierarchy in context of the practice. Consequently, current interpretation overlooks how access to visibility is shaped not only by economic capacity but also through lineage and gender. Addressing this gap, the present study situates the feast of merit with the intersecting framework of clan structure and gendered practice. Here, clan affiliation shapes differentiated pathways to ritual achievement, gender regulates access to visibility and authority to the ritual space. Recognition, therefore, is not uniformly produced but emerges through structured forms of participation. Women's

contributions are channelled through male-centred arrangements, and clan position shapes the valuation of ritual achievement.

This study draws on Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986) concept of ‘symbolic capital’ to examine how recognition operates as socially validated value, accumulated through visible participation. Complementing this with Joan W. Scott’s (1986) formulation of gender as a category of analysis, which enables how access to authority and visibility is structured along gendered lines. Further, Herbert Blumer’s (1969) insights into meaning-making situate recognition as emerging through shared interpretation rather than being inherent to ritual participation. Together, these perspectives frame the feast of merit as a structured social field, where hierarchy is actively produced through differentiated forms of participation and interpretation. Beyond the immediate empirical context, the study speaks to wider debates on ritual hierarchy, and social inequality by demonstrating how collective practices simultaneously produce cohesion and differentiation (Turner, 1969).

## **Results:**

### **Ritual Process of Feast of Merit**

The feast of merit, observed in Chetho-khri (January), prior to the Sükrünyi festival, unfolds as a graded ritual sequence whose entry is conditioned by a preliminary stage known as *Thü mouza*. Although comparatively less elaborate, as it involves hosting a feast for members of the host’s clan, it acts as a prerequisite for progression into the series. At the same time, *Thü mouza* may also be undertaken as a distinct ritual sequence in its own right, with multiple levels conferring varying degrees of attribution. As one interviewee explained, ‘*for every feast of merit host, Thü mouza is compulsory, but not every Thü mouza necessarily leads to the performance of the feast of merit*’. The completion of *Thü mouza* at higher levels entitles hosts to specific forms of entitlement. For instance, those who complete it twice may decorate their houses with a straight wooden plank without curvature or central perforation and wear a distinctive shawl known as *Rüzakhu* (Chotso, 2021). Also, extending the feast to the entire male population enables the host to adorn the house with *Müdoka* (cow motif).

In the structure of the practice of the feast of merit, variation exists in the number of stages commonly ranging between seven to twelve. However, the practice of restarting from the beginning symbolically termed *nhatsi-sala* (young again), upon the achievement of highest level is uniformly practiced across the community. This transition is marked by the husband wearing *Negane* and the wife *mühyone*, garments associated with unmarried individuals during the performance of the first stage of re-feasting. The sequence of stages and their corresponding entitlements, as observed in Kikruma village, is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Level-wise entitlements across Thüvomi and Sohemi clans in a complete feast of merit series.**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Local Term</b>	<b>Thuvomi clan Entitlements</b>	<b>Sohemi Clan Entitlements</b>
1.	Küdahü	–	–

2.	Kühühü	Right to wear prestige shawl ( <i>Thipikhu</i> ); house adornment ( <i>Cika</i> )	Right to wear prestige shawl ( <i>Thipikhu</i> ); house adornment ( <i>Cika</i> ), erection of one monolith
3.	Tsüsuhü (I)	Erection of one monolith	Erection of one monolith
4.	Tsüsuhü (II)	Erection of one monolith	Erection of paired monoliths ( <i>Thüno-thipu Tsü</i> )
5.	Tsüsuhü (III)	Erection of paired monoliths ( <i>Thüno-thipu Tsü</i> )	Erection of paired monoliths ( <i>Thüno-thipu Tsü</i> )
6.	Tsüsuhü (IV)	Erection of paired monoliths ( <i>Thüno-thipu Tsü</i> )	Erection of three monoliths ( <i>Sacomeci</i> )
7.	Sacomeci / Mühohü	Erection of three monoliths ( <i>Sacomeci</i> )	—

The intention to perform the feast is not publicly announced, as such disclosure is associated with boasting and risk of losing favour from fertility spirits. Instead, the couple first informs the *Thivo-o* (village priest), who performs the ritual of ‘calling the crops’ in the host field. He invokes their return, marking the formal initiation of the process. Preparation begins well in advance and involves extensive collective labour. These activities include the cutting and transport of firewood (*Sürhedo-o*), drying and pounding of rice, and fetching water for the fermentation of rice beer. Participation is broadly collective, with individuals across age and gender contributing labour, provided that the hosts supply food on each working day. As one participant noted, ‘*everyone collectively participates, ranging from children to elders, because of a sense of shame in not contributing while partaking in the feast*’.

From the commencement of rice-beer fermentation, the couple enter a period of restriction during which they do not leave the village, host visitors, engage in physical intimacy, or bathe until the ritual is completed. Five days prior to the feast, they observe a period of abstinence from food and subsisting primarily on rice beer. On the eve of the feast, cattle are slaughtered and distributed to each household in the village, a portion known as *Cherhe*. As one participant explained, ‘*in case of multiple hosts, the one who provides a larger share is praised, and so the givers also try to distribute larger portions.*’ The feasting ritual begins early morning with the host couple fetching water from the community well (*dzüpfü*) to wash the fodder intended for the cattle designated for sacrifice. Among these, an unblemished cow known as *Thosa* or *Cidü-tho* is selected and slaughtered first, marking the formal commencement of the ritual. According to customary practice, the *Thosa* is not killed using any tools but is instead beaten to death.

The slaughtering of cattle serves not only the immediate consumption but also a structured distribution. Under such arrangement, a quantity of meat known as *Ehiphe* is distributed among former *Thüvomi* clan feasters who have erected commemorative stones in their name, along

with each stone receiving a share equivalent to that of an individual. In contrast, Thüvomi individuals who have hosted the feast but have not erected stones, along with general Sohemi feasters, are excluded from this share. The distribution extends beyond to multiple categories of recognition. *Tükhri-mou* or *Mhaku* is allocated to those who contributed resources towards the feast, marking material support as a basis of value. *Thüre-za* is given to the *Thüvo-o*, an additional share is presented to the household nearest the *kharü* (village gate), commemorating its role in safeguarding the village.

Additionally, individuals who have declared their intention to host feast in the future receive a portion of meat. A similar share is extended to those considered economically capable of hosting, in a practice known as *Rühetü*. Receiving this portion signifies a commitment to undertake the feast in the future. However, refusal of the share, is believed to invite misfortune, including a shortened lifespan. A participant, Vekudu, noted, '*some individuals are forced to host and thus, express dissatisfaction upon receiving the meat. As hosting the feast once does not yield benefits, as undertaking it a second time entails considerable financial burden.*' In rare cases of refusal, individuals are required to slaughter cattle and return an equivalent quantity of meat to the host. Thereafter, the couple enter a period of restricted communication, responding only after a second call, as immediate response is believed to cause deafness.

The *Thüvo-o* assumes the role of officiant and performs the initial ceremony known as *Cidü*. As part of this ritual, he collects branches of no fewer than fifteen varieties of plants and places them on the roof of the host's house, signifying the invocation of fertility spirits and the preparation of the house for the feast. Subsequently, the *Thüvo-o* along with the heads of different clans, traditionally male, are invited to partake in the first portion of ritual meat and rice beer. Under this consumption, it is customary to leave behind a small portion of food, to symbolise that the household will not encounter scarcity in the future, reflecting a culturally embedded belief in abundance and continuity. The consumption is followed by the former feast of merit hosts with participation remains exclusive for male host.

Thereafter, the male members of the village assemble at a designated location, dressed in their best attire, and proceed towards the host's house chanting the traditional refrain "Ho... Ho...". Women are excluded from this procession as one participant noted, '*women either observe from a distance or gather in another household's courtyard, where they engage in singing folk songs and performing dances.*' Upon arrival, the men circle the yard, and the collective sound produces a visible vibration in the grass bundled at the apex of the host's roof. Such movements carry symbolic meaning, marking the entry of the protective village spirit (*Rarü*) into the household, thereby signifying prosperity and fertility. Conversely, the absence of such movement is interpreted as an indication of impending misfortune or scarcity.

Throughout the day, the host couple remain restricted and confines of their house and observe the proceedings from the corridor known as *Eda* or *Udalü*. During this period, they refrain from any form of engagement. Thus, a designated individual, known as the *Daje*, is appointed to prepare food exclusively for the couple and himself using a separate hearth and cooking pot, thereby maintaining ritual segregation. Among the Chakhesang, the duration in communal feasting varies, where some participants indicated a single day, others associated its feasting

period up to five days. Accordingly, for the entire duration of the communal feasting, the couple and the *Daje* consume only the food prepared under this restricted arrangement.

The communal feasting is marked by an abundance of rice beer and food, with the entire village participating in collective consumption. A group of women, referred to as *Zohepvu*, draw the rice beer from the drum and pass it to designated male volunteers. Before its distribution to the wider community, the first mug drawn from the fermentation drum (*Sü-tü*) is presented to the eldest man (*Rüna-pethi*) in the village, a practice known as *Cehüzo*. During the feast, communal consumption is accompanied by collective singing and folk dances, collectively termed *Chetho Chele*. As one participant observed, *'this is the most joyous time of the year, as other days people remain engaged in agricultural work.'*

In addition to the communal feast, a series of supplementary feasts must be undertaken by the hosts to complete a particular level of feasting sequence. These include *Rüyi-hü*, organised specifically for those who contributed labour during the preparatory stage. Significantly, during the *Thürinyi* festival, on *Nyide* day, the host provides an additional feast for the villagers. At a later stage, the host conducts *Thiku-ti*, involving the provision of food and rice beer, followed by *Sathro-sanyi*, during which only rice beer is served. Collectively, these successive events comprise a single level under the broader feasting sequence, rendering the process highly resource-intensive (Vasa, 2019). The period of ritual restriction for the host couple is confined to the phase of communal feasting. As a participant noted, *'the couple are noticeably darkened, as they refrain from bathing, starting from the commencement of rice beer preparation until the completion of feasting.'* The culmination of the ritual sequence is marked by resumption of bathing, alongside the announcement of seed sowing by the *Traskri-o*, transitioning to everyday agricultural life.

### **Organisation and Social Differentiation in Feast of Merit**

The Chakhesang society reveals a complex functioning of the clan system, wherein multiple clans come together to form the constituent unit of the village. Clans are primarily divided into two major groups across every village, *Sohemi* and *Thüvomi*. This division is derived in the historical formation of the village. The *Thüvomi* representing the initial settler clans and the *Sohemi* comprising the later settlers. This distinction becomes particularly evident in key social events, including death rituals like distribution of *Thümouza* (funerary meat), marriage rituals and in the series of feast of merit. Notably, the position of the village head, known as the *Thüvo-o*, is hereditary and confined to the *Thüvomi* clan, although it does not necessarily pass directly from father to son but remains confined to the clan lineage.

Consequently, as illustrated in Table 1, differences in the number and progression of stages are apparent, with *Sohemi* participants able to attain the highest level earlier than their *Thüvomi* counterparts. However, this does not necessarily translate into a perceived advantage. As one *Thüvomi* participant noted, *'Sohemi are able to achieve certain stages with fewer requirements as a customary concession, but we complete the process without such concessions and so performed wholly.'* Likewise, differences in granting rewards and entitlements are also observed. As shown in Table 1, *Sohemi* participants are permitted to pull a monolith as early as the second stage and can attain the highest level, *Sacomeci*, by the sixth stage. These

variations indicate that clan affiliation shapes differences in stage progression and ritual entitlements within the feast of merit.

The feast of merit recognition also varies significantly across genders. These distinctions are evident in both symbolic markers of social acknowledgement and allocations of ritual entitlements. Men are permitted to wear the *Thipikhu* (shawl of prestige) upon the completion of the second stage, women are required to wear only in a modified form (*Bashii*) until the stage at which a paired monolith is pulled and formally attributed to her. This uneven distribution is reflected in the process of monolith pulling as stones are also gendered (Wouters, 2019). The initial stones erected during the early stages are attributed exclusively to the husband, and it is only upon the completion of a paired arrangement that a smaller stone is designated in the wife's name. Such practices indicate that women's recognition is often mediated through the progression and achievements of their husbands, rather than being independently conferred. Despite the shared nature of labour and ritual observance, this asymmetry remains pronounced. As one former female host observed, *'though my husband and I worked hard and observed the ritual together, people recognise and honour my husband more than me.'* These patterns demonstrate that, participation in the feast of merit involves both spouses, the forms of social valuation and visibility associated with ritual achievement are differentiated along gendered lines.

### **Monolith Pulling and the Organisation of Ritual Labour**

The inspection of the stone to be erected is undertaken by the male host, who first identifies it physically and then evaluates its suitability through dreams. On the day of pulling, the *Thivo-o* initiates the ritual by symbolically 'calling the stone', pronouncing, *'come, it is not good to remain in the forest for long; let us go to our predestined place.'* Subsequently, the *Rüna-pethi* places an egg enclosed with a bamboo-woven cover beneath the stone. This is to signify that although the stone is removed, a substitute is kept so that the spirit of nature is not disturbed. Once secured, a stalk of *Thüli* (*Cortaderia*) is cast over the stone toward the village, symbolically rendering it light accompanied by an invocation for collective safety. This is followed by the *Mücu* (war cry), and the pulling commences.

Under the process, roles are clearly defined and assigned. The *Thürimavie* (head-hunting warriors) stand atop the stone and directs other participants, with the *Naseo* (announcer) remains in continuous motion and is prohibited from looking back. Meanwhile, on the day of the pulling, the villagers are prohibited from locking their doors, as this is interpreted as rejecting stone spirit to the community. women are excluded from direct participation, and their roles are structured in indirect and supportive forms, indicating a differentiated organisation of ritual labour. The female host remains under the household premises, keeping her legs in continuous motion until the stone reaches its destination, a practice believed to ensure its timely arrival. Other women contribute by carrying drink supplies and providing refreshments along the route. However, their participation is regulated by customary restrictions, including the prohibition against crossing over or standing above the rope used for pulling the stone. As one interviewee noted, *'women menstruate, and therefore their bodies are considered ritually inappropriate in this context.'* In contrast, male participation is regarded obligatory across age

groups, with young boys symbolically incorporated through paternal guidance, as their hands are made to touch the rope as a mark of inclusion to the male fraternity.

Upon the placement of the stone, the event is followed by a communal feast commissioned by the host, a separate day is designated for its erection. On this occasion, members of the host's clan, along with friends and relatives, collectively contribute labour in raising the monolith, reflecting the central role of clan affiliation in organising participation and reinforcing lineage solidarity. The host is required to offer feast to all those involved. These stones are installed at designated sites along common pathways, ensuring visibility and continued recognition in the society (Jamir & Muller, 2022). Collectively, these practices demonstrate a highly structured organisation of ritual labour, in which participation is carefully regulated and differentiated along gendered lines.

## **Discussion**

The practice of Zhotho Mouza reveals a stratified yet relational system of social organisation. Recognition is not uniformly distributed but structured through historically embedded distinctions of clan affiliation and gender, enacted in ritual performance. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986), the feast is a social field where recognition operates as symbolic capital, accumulated and legitimised through publicly visible participation. Visibility is thus constitutive; it is the medium through which value is produced, recognised, and sustained. Recognition, therefore, is not simply accumulated but becomes effective only when rendered visible in socially structured fields of perception.

Through this economy, clan classification structures the distribution of recognition, demonstrating that hierarchy is reproduced through practice rather than fixed in form (Bourdieu, 1986). Although participation is broadly accessible, the sequencing of ritual stages imposes unequal expectations. The Thüvomi participants must undertake extended performance to secure comparable entitlement, in contrast, Sohemi achievements, though reached more quickly, are symbolically qualified as lacking equivalent effort or completeness. Recognition emerges not from attainment alone, but from how participation is socially evaluated, demonstrating that symbolic capital is differentially legitimised in the field (Bourdieu, 1986).

Such differentiation rests on interpretive processes through which visibility acquires meaning. As Herbert Blumer (1969) argues, social value is constituted through interaction and shared interpretation, rendering recognition contingent upon collective perception. A dual dynamic follows: Thüvomi status is reinforced through heightened obligation, while Sohemi recognition remains vulnerable to interpretive diminishment. These asymmetries are not incidental but institutionalised, embedding hierarchies in everyday practice (Wouters, 2015). Even ritual acts such as the interpretation of dreams in stone selection underscore that legitimacy is symbolically constituted under culturally shared frameworks of meaning rather than determined solely by material accomplishment.

These hierarchies are moreover stabilised through ritual redistribution. The circulation of resources reflects communality, the selective allocation of Ehiphe privileges Thüvomi feasters who have erected monoliths, converting ritual achievement into durable material and symbolic

advantage. Redistribution thus consolidates rather than neutralises hierarchy, sustaining lineage-based differentiation and the accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Additionally, practices such as Rūhetü reveal the coercive dimension of participation, where compliance is shaped by collective expectation and cosmological belief. Ritual obligation thereby operates as both integrative and regulatory, binding the community and enforcing conformity to a shared moral order (Turner, 1969).

Similarly, the structuring of visibility extends into gender. Despite the indispensable participation of both men and women, symbolic recognition remains unevenly distributed. Men occupy publicly authoritative roles officiation, distribution, and monolith pulling positioning them as primary bearers of prestige. Whereas, women's contributions, though essential, remain less visibly valorised. Recognition is thus organised not by participation alone but by differential access to visibility, reflecting gender as a constitutive axis of power (Scott, 1986). This pattern aligns with broader feminist insights that women's labour sustains ritual systems while remaining marginal to formal acknowledgment (Ortner, 1972). Such marginality is reinforced by cultural notions of ritual purity that regulate access to authoritative roles (Douglas, 1966).

Gendered recognition, moreover, is mediated through clan hierarchy. Women's access to prestige is contingent upon the ritual progression of their husbands' clans, rendering their legitimacy relational and conditional. Practices such as the delayed attribution of monoliths in women's names and the regulated use of Thipikhu underscore this derivative status. As such reflects the broader dynamic in which women's social identities are constituted through relational frameworks (De Beauvoir, 2011). The intersection of clan and gender produces a layered system of stratification, in which visibility is governed by both lineage and patriarchal norms. This has broader implications for women's social position in the community. The limited access to visible recognition constrains their authority in both the ritual and public domains, which shape how their contributions are remembered across generations. Consequently, women's labour sustains the ritual system without translating into equivalent symbolic or social power (Ortner, 1972).

Taken together, the feast reveals a fundamental tension between collective participation and differentiated recognition. Labour is shared, yet visibility is selective; participation is inclusive, yet legitimacy remains asymmetrically distributed. Thus, the feast of merit operates as an economy of visibility in which recognition is not a direct outcome of contribution. Rather it functions as a structured conditions under which participation is recognised and legitimised through visibility. It functions simultaneously as a mechanism of cohesion and a site of stratification, consolidating social hierarchy through the differential allocation of recognition.

### **Conclusion:**

The feast of merit among the Chakhesang is not merely an act of feasting or a means of acquiring honour, but an institutional process through which social hierarchy is actively produced and sustained. Rather than functioning solely as a marker of economic differentiation, the feast organises distinction through clan differentiation, particularly the unequal structuring of ritual progression between Thüvomi and Sohemi. It also reflects gendered expectations that

regulate access to visibility. Under this structure, prestige is concentrated in the figure of the male host, whose proximity to the ritual space ensures heightened visibility. Women's comparatively peripheral positioning reflects a gendered regulation of access to recognition. Furthermore, the structuring of ritual series through differentiated clan-based pathways governs both progression and valuation of ritual achievement. The feast thus operates as an economy of visibility in which recognition is mediated through the combined effects of clan and gendered structures of participation and visibility.

By foregrounding the interplay of clan and gender, this study challenges existing dominant interpretations that frame feast of merit primarily as an expression of generosity or material display. Instead, it demonstrates that ritual practice functions as a critical site for the reproduction of social hierarchy, where differentiation is not incidental but constitutive of the system itself. Ultimately, the feast of merit demonstrates that social hierarchy is not merely possessed but produced through the structured visibility of participation, where recognition depends not only on contribution, but on the conditions under which it is seen, interpreted, and valued. This calls for the re-evaluation of the widely held assumption of egalitarianism in Naga societies, highlighting how ritual life is embedded in structured inequalities that organise and sustain social relations.

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