

## **THE INDIGENOUS FESTIVALS OF THE TANGKHUL NAGAS OF MANIPUR (NORTH-EAST INDIA)**

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### *Abstract*

*The land of Tangkhul is the abode of the world fame lonely mystic beauty ‘Shirui Lily’. It is the land of colourful dances and festivals endowed with rich flora and fauna. The festivals of the Tangkhuls are agricultural oriented. There are more than 12 festivals which are observed in a year round. Celebration of different festival is a part and parcel of every Naga society. Luir festival (seed sowing festival) is one of the biggest and most elaborately observed festivals. Laa Khaganui (beauty contest) is the main feature of this festival. . Yarra festival is the festival of youths. It is the month of jubilation and many songs are composed in praise of nature, love etc. Mangkhap Phanit is observed after the completion of rice transplantation and seeding in the jhum. Others are Manei Phanit (festival of tools and equipments), Chumphu (harvest festival), Thisam festival (parting festival to the spirit of dead) and many more. In the present day, there is gradual decline in the observation of traditional festivals. We need to revive and rediscover the dying culture of the Tangkhuls and thus sustain it. The government of India should give equal importance to preserve the diverse and myriad cultures of India.*

### *Objective:*

- 1. To showcase the different festivals for sustainability.*
- 2. To make documentations and facilitate for its continuity.*
- 3. To discover oral history recorded in songs, as singing and festivals in the Naga culture goes hand in hand.*

*Keywords: Tangkhul festival, observation, singing, cultivation, oral history.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Manipur and North East India as a whole is a land of colourful dances and festivals. The Tangkhuls are one of the indigenous tribes of Manipur. They are settled in the Ukhrul District of Manipur and the Somra tract in the Sagaing division of Myanmar. It is a land of natural beauty endowed with rare flora and fauna. The world famed 'Shirui Lily' which is grown only in the Shirui Mountain is located in the centre of the district. It is land of the colourful Tangkhul Naga tribe with a rich culture and tradition which are in the form of songs, legends, myths, folklores, religious beliefs, superstitions, etc. They are deeply religious and observes gennas and taboos strictly. Their beautiful arts and crafts speaks volumes of their cultural heritage which stands the test of time and reflects the cultures and lives of the people. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people.

The mystic blue mountain ranges, hills and dales adorned with lush green forests and spotted with several flowers throughout the seasons vibrates and echoes with the sound of music, songs, dances, festivals and agricultural activities thus harmonising with the tune of nature and making the land vibrant and lively. From the beginning of the year till December, they are engaged in various field works and festivals. Tangkhul Naga festivals and songs are mostly agricultural oriented. Music and dance are the two main features and events of every festival. It is the time of singing and composing songs of various themes and notes. The festivals were also the time of telling folktales to the children and youngsters as it was the only time available amidst their hectic agricultural oriented lives. Folk songs are one of the most reliable sources of oral history and literature of the Tangkhul Nagas, e.g. the story narrates that after their long sojourns from China they took their last migration from "Thuangdut" Samsok (Burma) is supported by a popular Tangkhul folk songs which runs thus

"Oh! Milung kathui kaleida thuithoilo? (Oh! Whence cometh thou originally?)

Oh! Samsok marok luda thuithoi (Oh! We originate from Samsok in Myanmar)"

Celebration of different festivals is a part and parcel of the Naga lives. There are more than 12 festivals which are observed in a year. In this paper, an attempt is made to present some of the common festivals of the Tangkhuls. The Tangkhuls have their own Lunar calendar and four seasons and twelve months in a year.

### **LUIRA FESTIVAL (SEED SOWING FESTIVAL)**

Luirra festival is observed in the month of Marun (Feb) and is one of the biggest festival of the year. Before the festival, the housewife of every household prepares rice beer, sticky rice and other delicacies for the festival. This festival opens the beginning of the year. On the eve of the

festival, all the village wells are cleaned up thoroughly by draining out water from the well. The water that has been purified over the night is considered pure and a lady of high moral character and status should first draw out the water and thereafter the whole locality can start using the water. In the evening, the shredded bamboos which are to be used for the performance of bamboo divination and for striking out fire would be thrown up on the roof top of the house. Signifying the new year, the fire of the past year would be extinguished and a new fire would be lighted up to mark the new year by striking two halves of dried bamboo stripes which are broken in the middle and pulled by a string repeatedly till the fire ignites. Any widow of the village is allowed to light the fire from any family that has already ignited fire and have started burning in the family hearth. The male members of the family gets up only early in the morning and kills the pig, buffalo etc. for the festival. It is to be noted that these animals are domesticated in almost every Naga household. After having done this, a big mat will be spread out on the courtyard and the rituals of bamboo and cock's divination for prosperity and bumper harvest in the year are performed. In case the divination indicates any kind of misfortune on any members of the family, 'mangla hokasang' (invocation of the spirit) is done. Then a live chicken will be let loose on the outskirts of the village as a symbol of sending away the evil spirit for evading any danger that may befall on the family during the ensuing year.

The second day is called 'vamkashok' which means taking out. This is the day of cooking the biggest size of pork meat. On this day, pork is cooked in a very special way. The size of the meat is that of a grown man's fist. It will be cooked in a very big 'Lungpi ham' (Lungpi pot). Red hot chilly powder is used to redden the meat and then cooked until the meat is softened. The meat is then placed on a big Tangkhul wooden plate which is to be taken outside the house along with the rice beer. Guests and friends would be invited and on this day, the family who can invite many friends as guests is considered fortunate and this signifies his position in the society. With meat, they enjoy drinking rice beer as 'zam' (filtered wine). Till date, the festival is observed elaborately. It is customary to kill at least one pig by every family of the village. The significance of eating at the outdoor called 'vamkashok' is to solicit God's blessings abundantly through the seeds to be sown.

From the third day of the festival, travellers and traders are not allowed to enter the village for fear of bringing in evil spirit and any ill luck. This taboo is known as 'khasit'. This restriction is made known to outside people by burning bonfire around the fields and gardens. The village gates are locked and flagged with branches of twigs over the gate. Seeing the smoke from a distance, the other villagers will understand that the village is going to celebrate 'Luirai' and that nobody could go to that village until 'khasho'.

On the fourth day, the village 'Awunga' (king) goes to his paddy field along with his wife and perform the first seed sowing sacrifice by killing a chicken. A handful of cleaned paddy is placed on a leaf and warm chicken's blood would be sprinkled over the paddy and the seed is sown in one corner of the paddy field. The chief will then pronounce as 'Oh! Kameo mawon, theila chukmilo' (Oh! Goddess of wealth, bless the seeds for bumper harvest). Then chicken feather would be protruded around the place where the seeds are sown. This is the declaration of the beginning of seed sowing of the year. This is called 'Awungshi kharuk'. It is followed by 'Shangrei kharuk' on the next day. On this day, every household of the village will perform chicken sacrifice as done by the village chief for bountiful blessings and bumper crops to the goddess of wealth 'Phunghui Philava'. According to Tangkhul tradition, no villager can start sowing seeds before it is done by the village king. If anyone violates this practice, it is believed that the crop production of the year would be very low.

**Laa khangnui** (Virgin beauty contest as virginity test) of Luiria Phanit is one of the most outstanding features of the festival where the virgin dance is performed. In this particular dance, only virgins can participate. On that auspicious day, women of different age groups, after taking a good bath, oiled their hair and body and finally get dressed and adorns themselves with the best traditional dance costumes and ornaments. The girls put on 'Phangyai kashan' (wrap around) which is a combination in red and black with colourful designs, a pair of brass bangles, one set of 'kongsang' (Naga broad necklace) over her breast and other set of 'kongsang' over the head dangling at the ends over the ears. To bring the adornment to perfection, a long chain in golden colour is fastened to the neck and two bells dangles at the end of the two extremes. The bells tinkle as they move in circular motion turning their backs on the spectators. Moving like the rock bees (Shireng) over beehives when disturbed, the girls with thier most graceful movements beacons the spectators. Young and old alike gathers around the place much before the competition starts. Like 'Pahuwon' (type of flower found along the river banks), the girls in uniformity, moved their hands, legs and figures gracefully according to the tune of the song sung by themselves and young people then starts judging the figures, the curves and bosoms (R. R. Shimray).

If a virgin refuses to join the dance, her character is questioned and suspected. She is no more considered as a virgin and after investigating and interrogating, a penalty is paid by her in the form of one live pig, if found guilty. But one discriminatory attitude is that such a kind of treatment was never imposed on men. On the other hand, if she joins the dance for fear of punishment and to conceal her immorality from the public, it is believed that some insects would disturb her while dancing and it did happen according to their beliefs. Such an unfaithful

girl is fined according to the customary laws and in case of her denial, physical check up would be conducted and if it is proved to be true, twice the penalty has to be paid by her. Thus 'laa khangnui' or virgin dance is "the secret declaration of virginity". Among the dancers, the most beautiful girl is made the hostess of the ensuing feast called 'Yarra' (youth festival) which would be shortly followed after Luira festival.

### **YARRA (YOUTH FESTIVAL)**

Yarra as youth festival is a special festival for young people. It is celebrated in April, when the month is adorned with colourful flowers and fresh green leaves. Usually, the festival is celebrated in groups and young folks organise a grand feast in the house of their respective 'beauty queen' selected during the festival. It is the month of merry making and jubilation, many songs are sung during this festival by the youths in praise of the beauty of nature and many impromptu songs are composed by sighing lovers, and as such this is a season of poetry, song and dance. As Prof. M. Horam wrote, "For every Naga, singing comes as breathing". A Yarra Laa (song) runs thus,

" O katang kara kumlo (O, when shall the season change?)

Kapaiwon sahar won wonaya (Pink flowers, cherry flowers bloom)

Iyar, maosei jikei, (In order to pluck)

Iya semiya semvaya (I run hither and thither)"

The song above indicates that man and woman longed for the arrival of Yarra Phanit (festival) for its many pleasures and merry making. Even the married person and children join in the feasting. First of all, they will search for a house to host the feast. After finding the house for feasting, they would collect rice for brewing rice beer in advance for the ensuing festival.

When the festival arrives, animals are killed for meat and vegetables are collected from the field. Fish, crabs etc are caught and collected for the festival. During the festival, each group would make sticky rice cake. This special boiled rice cake is called 'khamui dalu'. Even now, the festival is observed with great festive mood and gaiety.

### **MANGKHAP PHANIT (FESTIVAL OF THE COMPLETION OF RICE TRANSPLANTATION)**

Mangkhap festival is observed after the completion of heavy ploughing, rice transplantation, with much eating, drinking, feasting and merry making. This festival falls during the month of July which is more or less the beginning of the lean months. Since Mangkhap festival is a festival of rest after the completion of heavy cultivation, heavy feasts are arranged to replenish the lost energy. On the first day, chicken sacrifice is done. The roasted dressed chicken is cut

and boiled in water without salt and spices. The soup of the chicken is drained out in a bowl and is used for cooking rice which is to be used in the chicken sacrifice. When all the cooking is done and necessary items are collected and ready, they go to their respective fields and performs the chicken sacrifice. After the rituals, the feathers of the chicken would be planted around the sacrificial alter and a particular leaf of a plant called 'khanangna' are planted around the altar. This sacrifice is done to propitiate and invoke the spirits of the field to protect the crops from inundation, storm and other natural calamities. After this the real festive activities starts. The best part of the festival is marked by invitation of relatives from other villages and from the local village itself. In this festival, married women are invited by their brothers and are presented with a kilogram to three kilogram at the least, of cooked pork and other food items. This particular gesture holds an important significance int the family and also the society. This is the time of paying a visit to the parental house. This festival is observed in the same old ways even now, but with some modifications and by adding certain Christian norms.

#### **MANEI PHANIT (FESTIVALS OF TOOLS AND EQUIPMENTS)**

Manei Phanit is observed in the month of April for two days. It is a festival similar to the Vishakarma of the Hindus. On this day, hunting weapons, agricultural implements are oiled with lard and wine and meat is offered to the creator 'varivara' (god) to give more games (animals) in hunting, better progress in cultivation and to protect themselves from the enemies.

#### **CHUMPHA FESTIVAL (FESTIVAL OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE NEW HARVEST)**

This festival is meant for the first opening and taking out grain of the new harvest from the granaries. On the eve of Chumpha festival, all the village ponds are cleaned and water from the ponds is drained out thoroughly. The next day i.e. early in the morning, a woman of high moral standing is let to draw water from the well that has been refilled with spring water over the night. One unique tradition of the Tangkhul is that since their known history, they take special care for drinking water and drinks only pure and boiled water. Water from the ponds and streams are cleaned and drained out from time to time. They keep their ponds fenced from animals and no one is allowed to wash clothes in it.

It is taboo to start eating new rice till Chumpha festival is observed and necessary rites and rituals are performed to the goddess of wealth by the women. On this day male members usually stay out of home for two consecutive nights as it is considered as a bad omen to witness her performance of rituals. If her husband happens to see the performance accidentally, it is believed that the person in the ensuing year will find no success in hunting, fishing or war.

A family that has a new bride will kill animals and make special prayers for her prosperity. They call this 'chumsinsa'. For the young woman as a bride, this would be the first time in her life to enter into the barn as a housewife. After the rituals are performed, with her mother-in-law at the barn, the whole family will sit around the family hearth and her mother-in-law would vacate her stool and let her sit on it. The significance of vacating the stool is that the young bride has been given the charge of every household work and she has become the mistress of the house. With the opening of the granaries, one could start blowing the bugles until the end of the soul separation ceremony after which the use of bugles was strictly forbidden. Having filled the granaries, the most touching duty was to bid farewell to the spirit of the dead.

### **THISAM PHANIT (FAREWELL FESTIVAL TO THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD)**

Thisam festival is observed for twelve days. It takes place during the end of January each year. There is a strong belief that the souls of the dead do not leave the world until a farewell ceremony is performed. From the day of their death till the farewell ceremony, it is believed that the dead soul joins the family at every meal. For that purpose 'Thikhong', meaning plate for the dead is placed with a clean sheet of cloth on the Naga stool as on raised wooden platform. The food that is offered to the dead is then collected and given to children as it is taboo for the elders to taste any portion of it for fear of following their souls with the soul of the dead.

Thisam is marked by killing buffaloes, pigs and other animals which the family can kill according to their economic capacity in the name of their dead family members. The animals that will be killed in their name will become the animal of the dead in the other world according to their beliefs. Some old people get ready with articles, tools, shawls or anything that will be needed in the next world during their lifetime. From the first day of Thisam festival till the seventh day, the preparation for the last rites goes on which includes collecting robes for killing buffaloes, pine resins for using as torch for the rites, making rice cakes, brewing rice beer and hanging of clothes etc.

On the tenth day, all the effigies are brought to a particular place and are arranged in order according to seniority on a big mat. The younger ones and the children are placed in the middle and the stronger ones in front and at the back so that they can protect and lead their way till they reach the land of the dead called 'kazeiram' (land of the dead). The dead persons are believed to reach kazeiram on the same line as arranged on the mat by the living people. Food prepared for them are also displayed and arranged in the same manner. At this function, men and women of the same age personify the dead and acted as the dead person. He is treated as a person who is going to take eternal leave from the family. 'Thikhang kaphunga' (who personify

the dead) then takes their seats by the side of their food and effigies which has already been arranged in line. In case of a rich man's death, the Thikhang Kaphunga in full death ceremony attire, dances around the vicinity with the dancing party. With the setting of the sun, Thikhang Kaphunga will once again dance around the courtyard and would pronounce, "Ara zatugei, mawung lui marakho" (Now I'm going away, never to come back home). As he pronounces his farewell words, he would go dancing towards the village gate and put down his 'vakui' (head gear) and hand it over to his wife.

When all these formalities are performed, the dead are seen off known as 'kazei kata' which means down to hades. Thikhang Kaphunga who personifies the dead would go down to a particular place called 'zeiphar', a little way down the village in a group. They would carry with them pine resins torches (meila) to light their way and make a bonfire with all the pine resins torches and come back home. The Tangkhuls in general, believe that the dead souls holding their respective torches move towards the west in groups in a procession. It is seen by people who watch late at night.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are still many more festivals other than the above mentioned. After Christianization, many festivals are abandoned and only some few festivals with certain changes which do not contradict the Christian faith are still observed. In the present day, we can observe the gradual decline in the charm of traditional festivals as traditional games, folk songs and dances are no longer given the same importance as in the past. We need to revive and establish good relations between the traditional and modern aspects of society so that the ancient culture is not only preserved but renewed and enriched. A nation is known by its culture and it is her identity. Observance of cultural festivals will take us back to the old humble and peaceful village lives and let us walk down the memory lanes. It enables us to rediscover the beauty, joy and purity of age old traditional lives.

To record the oral history and revive the age old traditional values, we need to revitalise and revive the traditional festivals as it will enable the community to continue to preserve their beautiful rich cultures which will enrich the rich cultural store house of India. The festival should also be made sustainable by promoting tourism festival. This will serve as an income generating source and many youths will start taking interest in cultural activities and reduce anti-social activities as many frustrated unemployed youths of the region will find a way out for living. This will also facilitate to preserve and develop the age old cultures. The government of India should also give equal importance in rediscovering and preserving the diverse cultures of India irrespective of caste and creed and the distance of location. It is noteworthy that

DONER Minister, Jitendra Singh is planning to make calendar on the theme of North-East festivals.

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