

“Lui- Ngai- Ni: The Seed Sowing Festival of Nagas”

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Abstract

“Lui- Ngai- Ni” consist of three wards of the three Naga sub-tribes of Manipur. The ward “Lui” comes from the original ward “Luiraphanit” of the Langkhul Naga tribe, which is the seed sowing festival of the Tangkhul tribe. The second ward “Ngai” is taken from Rongmei dialect to their seed sowing festival. Finally, the ward “Ni” which is the extract of the Mao tribe is also for their seed sowing festival. Thus, as per this nomenclature, the ward “Lui- Ngai- Ni” has become the common name of the seed sowing festival of Naga tribes of Manipur. Traditionally, this festival was celebrated just before they actually started their annual seed sowing activities. Now it has been elevated to the state level of festival in Manipur. It celebrates every year on 15th February, at any one of the hill districts in Manipur on rotation basis. The festival has been a great significance in the Naga’s life since their forefathers’ time for agriculture was their only means of livelihood. The celebration of “Lui- Ngai- Ni” festival meant asking to their god for good plantation and blessing for good harvest. This traditional festival is popularly celebrating even today at every village of the Nagas of Manipur in order to preserve their culture.

Introduction: The people of Manipur can be classified into two broad classes. One is the Meitei who live in the Valley areas of Manipur and the other one is the tribals who live in the hill areas of Manipur. There are two tribes in the hills of Manipur. They are the Naga and the Kuki. The Tangkhul is one of the major Naga tribes of Manipur. Tangkhuls live mainly in Ukhrul District of Manipur. However, they are scattered in all the hill districts such as Chandel, Sanapati, Tamenglong, Churachanpur apart from their main home district Ukhrul. They also live in Thoubal, Imphal West and East districts of Manipur. There are large numbers of Tangkhul in the Somra Tract of Myanmar. The Tangkhuls are marked for their love of festivities and development of strong village institution.

Etymologically speaking, the ward “Lui- Ngai- Ni” is a concoction of three wards of the three Naga tribes of Manipur. The ward “Lui” comes from the ward “Luiraphanit” of the Langkhul Naga, which is the seed sowing festival of the Tangkhul tribe. The second ward “Ngai” is taken from Rongmei from dialect to seed sowing festival. Finally, the ward “Ni” is the extract of the Mao tribe for their seed sowing festival. Thus, as per this nomenclature, the ward “Lui- Ngai- Ni” has become the common name of the seed sowing festival of the Naga tribes of Manipur. Traditionally, this festival was celebrated just before they actually started their annual seed sowing activities. Now the festival has been elevated to the state level in Manipur. It celebrates every year on 15th February, at any one of the hill districts in Manipur on rotation basis. The festival has a great significance in the Nagas life during their forefathers’ time for agriculture was their only means of livelihood. The celebration of “Lui- Ngai- Ni” festival meant asking to their god for good plantation and blessing for good harvest. This traditional festival is popularly celebrating today at every village of the Nagas in order to preserve their culture.

It is obvious that the Lui- Ngai- Ni festival is a joyful celebration, in which feasting, song, music, dance, games and sports are common to the people all over the world. But among the Tangkhul Naga tribe, it implies much more meanings than usual. For the Tangkhul Nagas, festival means indication of agricultural season through feasting with meat and rice-beer, accompanied by songs, dances, display of ceremonial dresses and ornaments, community works, games and ritual for fertility of crops and good harvest, observation of certain genna, remembering of the beloved departed soul and transmission of cultural heritage to the young generation. Today, the scale of feasting has gone down substantially. In this article, I shall be dealing on the “Lui- Ngai- Ni” festival which is the “*luiraphanit*” festival of the Tangkhuls.

The Seed Sowing Festival, “Lui- Ngai- Ni” or “Luiraphanit” is the most important cultural festival of the Tangkhul Nagas and the significance of this festival remains unchanged

even today. As the festival commences not far-off from the harvest every household, high or low, rich or poor used to kill pigs “*hok*” in Tangkhul for their consumption besides additional meat Buffaloes, cows, hens etc. to offered their friends, guests and strangers. Before the festival commences, fermented rice –beer, ‘*zam*’ and a stronger drinks known as ‘*Leiyu*’ also made of the fermented rice-beer are served in abundant throughout their festival. The time of festival varies from village to village according to the suitability of each village in relation to their agricultural calendar of their annual seed sowing. *Luir*a is also called ‘*Luita*’ by the North Tangkhuls and ‘*Lulu*’ by the Western Tangkhuls like Ringui. However, all the names, *Luir*a, *Luita* and *Lulu* connote the same meaning. The ward (Lui=field, Ra=dig and Ta=go). Both refer to the beginning of a new agriculture year. In olden days, the *Luir*a festival had no fixed day or date. However, today it has a fixed date for every year. It celebrates under the common banner of the United Naga Council (UNC) Manipur. Thus, the seed sowing festival for all the Naga tribes in Manipur has been fixed on 15th febraury every year as a state festival. The state has declared this day as state holiday of Manipur and the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) a unit of UNC has to approve the date. In Manipur, the Naga communities as a whole celebrate Lui-Ngai-Ni on 15th February every year. Lui-Ngai-Ni consists of three words, *Lui* extracts from Tangkhul dialect, *Ngai* extracts from Kabui dialect and *Ni* extracts from Mao tribes. *Luir*a is one of the most important cultural festivals of the Tangkhuls. Apart from its agricultural significance, it shows the unity and oneness of the people. The lavishness, the jolly and convivial nature of the Tangkhuls is seen especially during this festival. In the past each family took out food in the open court-yard and shared the same among friends, neighbors and strangers. This practice is still existing in some villages of Northern Tangkhuls. Any visitors is made to eat a big piece of pork and taste all the rice beer (*Zam*) as far as one can go. Off course, it is not a compulsion. *Luir*a is the joyous festival among the Tangkhuls as such none dares to miss the festival.

In this festival, offerings were made to the Goddess of crops (*phunghui kameo*) in Tangkhul to ensure excellent harvest of the crops. If the festival is not performed with all the necessary rites and offerings which are sacrosanct, the people would have bad harvest and there would not be enough food and drinks for the feast of merit. *Luita*/ is also the time of games and sports: womenfolk play ‘*saotheila*’ which is a circular shaped jungle beans, they also play a game called ‘*Lungkotla*’ which are stones slightly larger than glass marbles. *Luir*a was a festival of competition of all items of games and sports such as Tug-of-war, wrestling, stone throw, long jump, Javeline throw, *saokhangatak* (top play of spinning for longest duration and throwing the top for hitting and dislodging other tops in line about 18-20 feet away). In the ancient times, there

were stiff competitions with price tags of a pig or a cock or a wine or beer pot to be awarded to the champions of wrestling, Javeline throw and stone throw, all connected with strength and stamina. Both male and female performed traditional dances surrounded by a huge throng around them. The dance performed by men is known as '*pheichak*' and that performed by women is called '*Laakhanganui*' yet there is another dance known as war dance performed by elderly men displaying their feet movement and spear tricks.

Traditionally this festival celebrated for about 12 days. The programme order for 12 days of festival is given below;

i). From the first day to the third day, it was not permissible for the outsiders to enter into the villages. In order to indicate this taboo, the concerned village will set fire around the village site and to prevent any fire accident at the village.

ii). The fourth day marked the real beginning of the festival which was initiated with killing of the cattles and pigs. On that day the village chief went to the paddy field with his wife and performed the first seed sowing activities. They sacrificed a chicken, sprinkling its hot blood on a handful of cleaned paddy. At the time of offering, a prayer is said to Goddess of crops to protect the crops and give them the good harvest. If someone violates this practice by sowing ahead of the village chief, the return would be very much less and village as a whole might face famine. Therefore, the observance of the taboo was associated with every festival and particularly the sowing festival. Any breaker of the customary practice was punished and was looked upon as the enemy of the society.

iii). On the fifth day of the festival, the village as a whole performs the offerings with the blood of the chicken at their respective family altars in the paddy fields. Having pleased with the Goddess of crops (*phunghui kameo*) with animal sacrifices, the people then turned to singing competitions and festive activities such as drinking and eating up to the eight day. At this stage of the festival that the young people in the particular age group could be the jury and the judge of the beauty contest performed by the virgin girls by exhibiting their best through singing and dancing competition (*Laakhanganui* in Tangkhul). This was a kind of beauty competition.

Beauty competition: Having oiled themselves with animal fats, for the Tangkhuls had no body creams those days the girls, then dressed themselves with the best of their dresses like skirts (*kashan* in Tangkhul), fat armllets, bangles, head dresses, necklace and most of all the huge beads necklace called *Kongsang*. Girls in the most graceful manner moved like the rock bees (*Shireng*) over beehives when disturbed. All those spectators- young and old, use to gathered the place much before the competition started witnessing like *Pahuwon* (*type of flower found along the river*

bank). The girls in uniform moved the hands, legs and figures gracefully according to the tune of music sung by themselves and the young people started judging the figures, the cuttings, the bosoms and the dresses and passed on their impression to others individually. The one who refused to join the singing competition with the solitary skirt on her body was expected to be pregnant. If some girl refused without giving any reason, she was liable to be fined by the village council. It was also believed that if she joined the competition while pregnant she would be disturbed by insects in her sleep or at work. In fact, that competition was a sort of the “beauty contest” or the “virginity test” of the Tangkhul Naga society.

In modern beauty contest, there are judges and the results are announced and the winners are crowned. But in olden days the beauty contest had no judge or judges because the whole population and particularly the men folk were the active judges of the contest. Everyone was free to give his own comment on the beauty and short comings of the participants. This topic had been discussed publicly in group and in individuals for months together. Thus, the talk and gossiping about one’s beauty lasted for several months. The best ones are talked about even in the next year. In such a case, the same dormitory or khel were so proud of it and wished to produce such beauties in the year to come too. The festival days used to be the days for rejoicing day for them and singing competitions was for evoking the Goddess of wealth (phunghuikameo) to bring excellent harvest.

The singing and dancing competition of the girls and boys continued till the eight days with plenty of rice beer and meats mostly pork. On the eleventh day when all the relatives and friends from the neighbouring villages were allowed to come in order to witness the last and the biggest show of the festival on the 12th day. Thus from childhood, the Tangkhul boys and girls had to learn their cultural dance as a social necessity and compulsion.

Rope pulling: The most distinct feature of this festival was rope pulling, something like Tug-of-war. But it was much more than this, for only a long wild rope found in thick mountains was brought from the jungles by selected young boys. They played the game in various age groups, male and female combine or separately, khel-wise and so on and finally the whole population joined the pulling. They must cut it by pulling it apart in opposite direction with all the strenghts available in the village so that they might have good harvest in that year and when they could not cut or pull apart the rope, some clever man would cut the rope with dao without being noticed by the players. In that case, all the participants would fall down on the ground like soldiers during the air-raid exercise. People would burst out into their faces and garments full of dust. In such a way they believed a good harvest in the year.

IV). On the ninth day, the ritual day- they would go to the paddy field for offering chicken head to *Phunghui kameo*. On the tenth day, the final burning of the jhum was done indicating to the neighbouring villages that the greatest and final day of the seed sowing festival had come to an end and they were allowed to come and participate in the great fair of the next day. On that day, many things from consumer goods like salt, pulses, handlooms and handcraft products would also be brought from different villages and exchanged with other articles.

V). On arrival of 11th day, the outsiders enjoyed not only eating and drinking but also the final show of the singing competitions of the girls and also the dancing competition of the boys.

Vi). On the 12th and final day, the visitors and the villagers went round the fair and made many exchanges on barter basis. On the last two days relatives and friends from other villages were invited for drinking and eating the whole days. For these processes one must to be clever enough to taste at least something of each drink and each item lest the host would be disappointed. One of these special items was the big piece of a portion of pork which is full of fat weighing about half a kilogram was served to every guest. It was considered to be unkind if someone refused to taste the big piece of pork with drinking, singing and dancing.

Thus, “lui- ngai- ni” for the Naga and more specially to the Tangkhul society had been a great cultural and social implications. People learn all the folk teles, folk songsis and traditions from this festival.

Some of the changing natures of the festival and Suggestive measures; Today, this festival is celebrating in order to preserve, protect, revive, and enrich the traditional Tangkhul cultural values. However, modern form of celebration of “Lui- Ngai- Ni”, *Luiraphanit* incurred heavy expenditures which have affected the economic condition of every Tangkhul families. We should inculcate the habit of cutting down heavy expenditures we spent in celebrating our festival as these have negative impact on our economic life. Not only “Lui- Ngai- Ni” the Lulu phanit but many other festivals like Christmas festival, and others festival also falls in the beginning and the end of the year. During this season the families have to arrange money for the children education like admission and clearing of their school fees. As for those families who have spent out their annual income, they are bound to borrow money from the money lenders and are indebted. Today most of the traditions and cultural heritage are no longer observed, maintained or valued as much as it was during their forefather’s days, and are almost vanishing year by year in many aspects.

Some of the factors responsible for vanishing their traditional festival; There are two major factors which are considered as the factors responsible for vanishing of their traditional festival. One of them is the impact of Christianity and the other one is the modern education. It is

true that culture could never be static, rather evolve keeping in peace with time and space. In the case of Tangkhul society, their culture is not evolving but revolutionizing or assimilating with the western culture. But it is high time for the Tangkhuls to get rid of the notion that ‘anything that is folk is against Christianity. Such a conception was once strongly propagated by the foreign missionaries to the newly converts Christians. It is also a time for the Christian communities to change the folk lyrics into religion. They practice using their own folk music not completely discarding it and following the western music, which using in the church or other religious gathering, rites and rituals. Tangkhul culture is not of that kind which is incompatible with Christian faith. Christian God is not a western God or of other developed countries or western culture as Christian way of life. The change that had taken place in the field of festivals are beyond expectation. They continue to be lovers of festivities but they are celebrating in different way, not following the way their yesterday’s pattern. Western music, games and sports have been replaced to their traditional one. In relation to the promotion of performing folk arts, the contributions rendered by village youth during the various zonal sports cum cultural Meet organized annually or bi-annually or tri-annually by student and regional bodies like the Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong (TKS), Raphei Katamnao Long (RKL), Zingtun Katamnao Long (ZTKL) Zingtun Longphang, Aze Katamnao Long, Kathur Long etc. are plausible and remarkable. Outside Tangkhul hills, for the promotion of their culture some student bodies like Tangkhul Katamnao Long Shillong (TKLS) and Tangkhul Katamnao Long Delhi (TKLD) Tangkhul Katamnao Long Imphal etc. are continuously organizing cultural meet every year. The traditional and cultural festivals need to be explored and preserved for posterity before they vanish completely. This requires intensive and extensive research work in order to revive this “Lui- Ngai- Ni” or what we call Tangkhul traditional life and culture. Further, some kinds of financial assistance from any agency for the revival and preservation of their traditional institutions is need. Establishment of film and music industries, learning, teaching and employment of traditional music teacher, building of symbolic traditional Tangkhul house to show and preserve their architecture are suggested in order to solving above mention challenges.

Conclusion: Thus, the festival call “Lui- Ngai- Ni” “Luir” or “Lulu” had been one of the most important festivals of the Tangkhul communities. It has many traditional and cultural implications. Every village of the Tangkhul society is still observing not for better sowing or harvesting but to preserve their rich cultural heritage. The young people of the villages are educating their old aged culture at the village through this festival. It also celebrates with the objective to indicate their identity. However, no organization or government agencies pay due

regards for the promotion of the traditional practices or festival. In fact, “Lui- Ngai- Ni” is considered to be everlasting festival even in this globalized world.

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