



THE PERFORMANCE OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE LIANGMAI NAGA IN NORTH EAST INDIA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT



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This paper discusses the performance of religion and nature of its continuity and change among the Liangmais in North-East India. The Liangmais are an indigenous group inhabited in Manipur and Nagaland. They practice Christianity as their religion. However, prior to conversion to Christianity, they had their own traditional religion, which was belief in the existence of spirits. During British rule in India, Christianity swept over the entire region and this community had since then embraced Christianity yet the tradition, beliefs system, symbols etc. continued to be major part of their culture. After their conversion to Christianity, there have been many changes in their society and culture. At the same time, many of their traditional practices have penetrated into their practice of Christianity. The paper looks into the nature of change and continuity in their belief system, religious performances, traditions and culture practices.

Keywords: Religion, Animism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Liangmais are one of the ethnic and indigeneous communities living in the North eastern part of India, particularly Nagaland and Manipur. The Liangmai Nagas ethnically belonged to the Mongoloid group of race and their languages belonged to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Etymologically, the term Liangmai is composed of two words: *LIANG* and *MAI*, *LIANG* 'Support' or 'grouped as one' and *MAI* 'people'. Thus, *Liangmai* means 'the people who have grouped themselves in support of each other to live together as one community or tribe'. Liangmai and Zeme are referred to collectively as Zeliang in Nagaland whereas in Manipur, they are recognised separately as Zeme and Liangmai.

In Manipur, Liangmais are mainly found in Tamenglong, Senapati and Imphal west districts. In Nagaland, they are mainly settled in Tening Sub-division of Peren district including Jalukie, Peren. They are also found in Dimapur and Kohima. According to Liangmai Naga Council (LNC), the total population of Liangmais is 65,000. Liangmai population in Manipur state is higher than that of Nagaland.

2. TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE LIANGMAIS

Liangmais had their own traditional religion before their conversion to Christianity. With the coming of the Christian missionaries, they have embraced as their main Christianity. However, in Nagaland, a small section of the people at Tening town, still uphold the traditional religion by affiliating a cult with Heraka which was founded by Mr. Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu. Prior to the coming of Christianity, the Liangmais had their own traditional religious belief in the form of worshipping natural objects such as tree, stone, sun and other objects. They believed in the supreme God who is known as 'Charawang' perceived to be omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. The Liangmais believed that the Supreme God is the creator God who reigned with limitless power in heaven and earth. They also have explicit ideas about gods, goddesses and spiritual beings and believed that their deities control their lives.

Besides the Supreme Being, belief in the existence of the spirits occupies the core of Liangmai

faith. The spirit world is real for them and they believed in a variety of spirits. The Liangmais believed that the spirits guard them from disease, pestilence and natural devastations like failure of crops, storm and floods. The Liangmais believed in the existence of many spirits. Therefore, they are treated at different levels as they are feared, worshipped, appeased, etc. They can be categorized as the benevolent and the malevolent spirits. Christian missionary writers Liangmai projected religion to be animistic and misunderstood that all the spirits are malevolent, mischievous and dangerous.

2.1 MALEVOLENT SPIRIT

The Liangmais believed in the existence of malevolent spirits known as *Charakasabo* who manifest themselves in the hills, forest, big rocks, rivers; big trees by howling and screaming even at noon. The *Charakasabo*, the Malevolent Spirits were always thought to be dangerous and destructive to human affairs. Natural phenomenon like hailstorm, landslide, thunder, lightning, earthquake, and hurricane were assumed to be the action of these malevolent spirits. These are the spirits of people who die in accidents or unnatural death; for instance, persons who die in childbirth or in pregnancy and children who die in their mother's womb or before the cleaning ceremony are completed or those who die of accidents such as drowning, falling from tree etc. These spirits are believed to live outside the village, on road sides, in the fields, rivers, ponds, trees and stones. It is believed that all kinds of human sufferings such as damage of properties, disease, accidents of various kinds and madness are all caused by these spirits.

2.2 THE BENEVOLENT SPIRIT

The benevolent spirits are believed to help some people in different situations such as hunting, prevent accident during journey and the like. It is generally thought to be the spirit responsible for the welfare and prosperity of humans. This spirit not only creates but also sustains and controls the earth. Thus, benevolent spirit is worshiped and people offer sacrifices not out of fear, but it is worshiped out of reverence and love. In return, this spirit needs to be worshipped through proper sacrifices lest the spirit might not guard the people and consequently,



disease, epidemics and failure of crops might take place in the village.

It is generally believed that benevolent spirits are gracious to a few individuals. This spirit has the power to heal the sick, shower good harvest, and bestow prosperity to people.

3. RITUALS AND SACRIFICES

At the beginning of each year, the priest of the village performs a community offering to the spirit asking for abundant harvest. On this day, men are prohibited from going out of the village and the priest is required to abstain from sexual relationship with his wife.

The Liangmais sacrifice animals to *Charawang* 'the supreme God' to seek blessings for their lives, family members, crops, fields, and domestic animals. Rituals and sacrifices were more prominent at the time of planting paddy seeds, harvest, natural calamities, sickness, festivals, epidemics, wedding, death and celebration of a child's birth.

On seed sowing festival, an animal, either a pig or a mithun, is sacrificed as an offering to *Charawang* 'the Supreme God', for good harvest and prosperity followed by the feast of the villagers. Everyone comes and joins in this community feast. The spleen of the sacrificed pig is examined as an omen to see and predict the success of the harvest and prosperity of the people in that coming year.

Phaimiu 'the Priest' performs rituals and sacrifices with an egg or hen or goat with the chanting of hymns as remedial measures for sickness, natural calamities, and epidemics. Sacrifices were also offered by either shedding blood of domestic animals or by setting free in the jungle to propitiate the sickness.

Cows, buffaloes and other domesticated animals like dog, chicken were sacrificed at the demise of a wealthy man in the village. When an ordinary person dies, the family members would offer sacrifices with cooked rice, rice beer, vegetarian and non vegetarian foods wrapped in plantains or banana leaves called *Chagumnui* near the tomb.

4. WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC

The Liangmais practised witchcraft and magic depending on the required situations. The individuals who practise witchcraft and magic were

known as *Karapui* for female and *karapiu* for male. Witchcraft and magic practices were more prevalent particularly in the pre-Christian period. Magic would be thrown on individuals if there is covetousness, jealousy, and antagonism. Romantic magic were cast on girls by the man in love to win her. Even a girl could cast a romantic magic on a boy in similar situation. They can also kill or harm anyone by causing severe stomach pain, headache, vomiting, backache and the alike. They indirectly assault even cooked rice and meat in which food can no longer be consumed as it is defiled by contaminated by them. In other instances, *karapui* or *karapiu* could be motion in the form of pig, snake, lion and cat.

5. TABOO

Taboo is a prohibition and religious sanction including the social disapproval laid down by society on incest, morality, ethics, and other issues. Taboo is practised within gender, religion, cultivation, journey, marriage, birth, death etc. Traditionally, Liangmai Naga men are prohibited to involve in weaving. They abstain from touching any weaving equipments. Men are not allowed to walk beneath hangers where women's clothes are hanged. The taboo restricted the behaviour of individuals in the society and dealt with their moral life. It is linked to the supreme God who would punish or render reward to individuals based on his/her moral character.

In Liangmai Naga society, there are many taboos pertaining to women. They are prohibited to blow a whistle and to climb on the roof of house. They are also not permitted to participate in *magubo*, 'traditional howl'. There are also many taboos and restriction for women during pregnancy and conception, When a woman conceives, she is required to undertake various precautions e.g. avoid meeting strangers, abstain from heavy works and eating meats of wild animals. Later on, she is to confine herself to household works. She is forbidden to consume certain foods such as crab, cat, bear and brain of any animals. The Liangmais assumed that consumption of these food items would lead to a miscarriage. The husband is also supposed to restrain himself from hunting. There is also a prohibition of marriage within the same clan and those who marry within the same clan are socially outcast from the



village. There is a belief that if one breaks the rules of marriage; it will lead to abnormal births.

There are also many beliefs and taboos regarding natural phenomenon. For example, when *kathi* 'earthquake' occurs, they believed that *Charawang* 'God' wish to validate the existence of humanity by shaking the ground. That is why till today when an earthquake occurs people scream relentlessly as *Chamai ring bam kha ye* which means 'human beings are still alive on earth'. They believed that God ceased to shake the earth after hearing the voices of the people. If one is cooking food at the time of earthquake, it should not be consumed as it is believed to be contaminated and not healthy for consumption. They also believed that it is bad to sleep in south-north position rather the head should be facing towards the north.

6. CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

Liangmai religion was traditionally animism; however, they have converted to Christianity due to the influence of the Christian missionaries. After the conversion of Liangmai Naga into Christianity, there have been many changes in different aspects of their social and cultural life. The traditional dances and music are at risk after being converted into Christianity. People sing Christian hymns and contemporary gospel songs in the churches. Singing of folk songs was not encouraged except during the festival and cultural celebrations. However, they have assimilated the Christian way of life but retained some of their traditions to a certain extent.

There were several reasons for the Liangmai Naga to be converted into Christianity. They have knowledge of rites and rituals practices handed down to them from one generation to another. But they have no traditional structure of worship and they do not construct a place in honour of their deities. Therefore, they could easily absorb Christianity because missionaries teach them to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They were taught that Christianity is an only way of life. Christian missionaries point out that any non-Christian societies were under darkness and they have to be empowered to come into the light of the world through Jesus Christ. From this perspective, the Naga in general and the Liangmai in particular were under the darkness. They were considered as

people who have been possessed by the evil spirits. However, Liangmai Nagas converted to Christianity rather late as compared to other Naga tribes.

Rev. William Pettigrew was the first man to bring the gospel to the Liangmai soil in 1919 A.D. This paved the way for Liangmais to come into contact with the Christian missionaries. In 1920, Mr. Mateibo Pamei from LongdiPabram of Tamenglong district in Manipur became the first convert among the Liangmai Naga in 1920 and Mr. Maisi Newmai from Taningiam village of Tamenglong district in Manipur converted to Christianity in 1923.

The Liangmai Nagas built their first Liangmai Christian church in LongdiPabram village, Tamenglong district of Manipur. The conversion of Liangmai Nagas into Christianity began to proliferate in the 1950s and 1960s. Although majority of the Liangmai have converted to Christianity but a small section of people at Tening town, Nagaland still uphold traditional religion by affiliating a cult with Heraka which was founded by Mr. Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu. In spite of their conversion to Christianity, they have been preserving their traditional tribal customs, norms, and laws that govern the people with changed mode of Christian principle and values.

The Christian missionaries urged the people to abandon sacrifices to the deities, drink rice beer, and sleep in *marung*. These proscriptions were the very anti thesis of their traditional life. They convinced to cease from practicing head hunting. They were taught to love their enemies and refrain from killing each others. The most significant impact of Christianity among the Naga was in the field of education and literature. A change so drastic that missionary often called 'darkness to dawn'. With the untiring work of William Pettigrew in the process to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ the people were also taught about reading and writing and it was him who decided to use roman script for this people. As far as religion is concerned it is Christianity that gave them peace, a new hope and Christianity is so deeply rooted that reviving their traditional religion is not something the present generation can foresee. Today, the people of Liangmai are almost Christians in total and it would not be long before the whole population becomes Christians when all the elders who hold on to their traditional religion passed away.



But with the coming of Baptist missionary, it also open the way for other Christian denominations to come and the total population of Liangmai in the present generation is divided into Baptist (90%) Catholics (4%) Seven Day Adventist (2 %) and non-Christians and others (4%).

7. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

With the coming of Christianity and education, the people began to have exposure to the outside world which brought a massive change in their culture including the dress pattern, speech and behaviour but underneath they are the same people with some attached goals recognizable from within their traditional culture. It is within this culture that people hold on to their traditional values giving them a sense of unity and belongingness which makes them realizes the importance of their unique culture. What we see today is the strong continuity in culture which is even increasing but on religious account such continuity is diminishing. With the advent of Christianity, traditional religious practices and modified to suit the teachings of Christianity. Some of the most important changes and continuity are discussed in the following sections.

7.1. CHANGE IN BELIEF SYSTEM

The witchcraft and magic is not something to be followed after converting to Christianity. Except for those who are very religious, the prominent continuity was seen in the belief system. It is a struggle for many individuals with the belief system of the traditional life, in the way they think, the symbols and meaning they conceived are very much influenced by the way of traditional thoughts that signifies the meaning of everything around them which is strictly against the Christian faith. The beliefs and commitments never run dry, remembering and praying to the converted faith of Christianity in everything they do has now become part of their existence. Thus, the people as god fearing or spirits fearing continue, but to a new God, the God Christianity has given them. The Liangmai tribal community is now living a converted Christian life, a belief in one god.

7.2. CONTINUITY IN THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIEST

The priest in the days of yore was called *Phaimiu* who played an important role among the people in the Liangmai society. The priest was feared and

respected for the fact that it was the priest who propitiate, who in other sense communicates. Conversion to Christianity has not changed the role of the priest. Infact, the role of the priest has increased and they are now known as *Kalenmai 'Prophet/Visioner'*

7.3. CONTINUITY IN OFFERING

Prior to their conversion to Christianity, they had to pay the best portion of their harvest to the *Charawang 'God'*. This giving continued after converting to Christianity. They pay ten percent of their income. Paying of tithe to the Church is made mandatory. In addition, offering in the form of cash or kind still continues in the church. If any family or individual avoid or pay less than what they ought to, they became the talk of the village. Even if the people had not seen such breaches they believe that the one who is omnipresent can see everything.

7.4. CONTINUITY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Although they have embrace christiniaty and have given up many social and cultural practices, the traditional judicial system still persist. When the magnitude of the conflict is high, it is the traditional judgment system that they still invoke. One such example is called *Apaimai*, which is very powerful village council. They are the highest authority in the village. In case of conflict or dispute, it is resolved by this body. If any crimes like theft, murder, adultery etc. occur, it is this village council these cases and their decision is final.

7.5. CONTINUITY IN BURIAL

The Liangmai people bury the dead since time immemorial by performing different rituals for the deceased. This burial system still continues with the rituals performed according to the Christian faith.

7.6. CONTINUITY IN LIFE AFTER DEATH

The Liangmais believe in the existence of soul which is a part of human body but if anybody die the soul separates from the human body. In the days of yore, the soul goes to *chariuram* but after converting to Christianity they believed the soul goes to paradise until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

7.7. CONTINUITY IN FESTIVALS AND RITUALS

The Liangmai Naga today has come a long way from purely agriculturist to embarking modern education system. It was said that during the era of conversion when strong movement of Christianity



was sweeping across the Liangmai hills, some traditional cultures got swept away too as they broke and threw away all that has to do with the tradition. Yet there is a huge continuity blended with the Christian faith to suit the religious framework of the Christianity today. One strong area of continuity is seen in the festivals which are still celebrated even after converting to Christianity. The whole spirit and concept of festival remains the same with the change in the way religion play its part. Some of the continuity in festivals are as follows:

- 1) *Chaga ngee*- The seed sowing festival
- 2) *Hentak ngee*- This is a post-trans-plantation festival
- 3) *Miusan ngee*- Pre-harvest festival where they plucked the best fruits and brought to the Church for offering
- 4) *Miukenkeebo*- This is harvest festival.
- 5) *Makaiphik ngee*- This is a festival of thanksgiving.
- 6) *Karinggen keebo*- Blessing Pre-memorial ceremony

In the days of yore, all these festivals and rituals would have been associated with propitiation to spirit and drinking of rice beer but this propitiation and offering along with drinking of rice beer is strictly prohibited after converting to Christianity. Some festivals could not be brought forward after converting to Christianity as it has to do with propitiating the spirit and some of such festivals which retains only in the memory of the people are: Chakengngee (festival of dead), Pungchangngee (festival celebrating long life) etc, Zou hubo (Festival of a person who has accomplished many achievements). This is the highest status of a man could achieve in his lifetime.

All these animistic rituals were supplemented by addition of new Christian festivals which is now playing an important part of their life such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, etc. Apart from all these continuity, there are many areas of continuity such as, village administration, shawl presentation on the occasion of marriage or death, giving the meat share to the in-laws etc.

Christianity has also brought about other changes in their belief system. The Liangmai Nagas have ceased to practise magic and witchcraft after

being converted into Christianity in the 20th century. They believe in the biblical doctrine that their intense problems would be solved with the divine intervention of Jesus Christ and they do not require any kind of magical assistance like before. It is assumed that their problems in any circumstances would be solved through the power of Jesus Christ.

8. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that with the coming of Christianity there has been many changes in almost every aspects of life including their social, political and world view with the people having more or less continuous contact to the outside world. They are no more immune from dynamic changes of their surroundings.

For the Liangmais, the change is in the God they worship, which is the vital force of religion but the spirit, the commitment continues to run and religion continues to have the major influence in every sphere of their life. In spite of changing their faith and embracing new religion, one cannot deny the continuity that persists in the area which is permitted by the new religion. The traditional festivals, symbols and meanings of the nature continue to have an important place in the present Liangmai Naga tribal community. The importance and awareness of such festivals seems to be increasing as the people realized the uniqueness and importance of their culture. This can be seen from the fact that in almost every occasions and functions people are asked to wear their traditional dress, perform traditional dances called *Charilen* and traditional song called *pui pi tu ping sangnu*. This is a conscious effort from the young learned ones to revive and preserve their culture and in the near future their culture and tradition will be revived only to be preserved for future references.

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