



THE PRACTICE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCE AMONGST LIANGMAI

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Author with his informants

ABSTRACT

The study of any cultural practice must always recognized by its changing historical circumstances. Performance and rituals are linked undoubtedly in human culture since primordial times. The Liangmais are an indigenous tribal group inhabited mainly in Manipur and Nagaland. Liangmais have rich oral literature depicting the cultural traditions and socio-religious practices of the community. This was passed down orally from generation to generation and remained undocumented due to lack of script. Their rich traditional culture distinguished them as separate community from other communities of the region. Since the time immemorial they perform some rituals to propitiate their Gods and Goddess. This paper throws light on the rites and rituals performed by the Liangmais in their life cycle and also unfold the method followed and food items used for the performing in the rituals. They had their own traditional beliefs in the existence of spirits. The ritual performs to appease two types of spirits- *charakawi* (benevolent) and *charasa*(malevolent) are also discussed. It also categorized the sacred performances as individual, family and community. Further, the paper also emphasises the collective responsibility of every member of the community in preserving and safe guarding the traditional cultural heritage.

keywords: *Liangmais traditional belief and ritual performance.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Every individual, whether primitive or modern begin his life sojourn in this world the moment he is born and continues till his death. This sojourn is accompanied by various indoctrinated ceremonial rites and rituals as a member of society. The variation in the rites of passage and other ceremonial rites and rituals of a cultural group is seen to be because all religious beliefs are constructed upon their distinctive myth, legend and experiences. Where the symbolic elements are manifested and reflected in their socio-cultural and religious practices like observances, doctrines, ceremonies, rites and rituals, taboos, norms, mores and even folkways. The variation may range from simple to complex forms from one cultural group to another. In the Liangmais context, we see that the ceremonial rites, rituals, offerings and sacrifices are various formal methods of appeasing or showing gratitude to their God by invoking with gifts. They worship different deities, and many more living and non-living objects like sun, moon, sky, stars, rocks, mountains, river, tree etc. which they believe of having both benevolent and malevolent power. They have very strong cultural practices of offering efficacious things like egg, chicken, pig, goat, dog, mithun, etc., in case of sickness, mania, ill luck, and variety of other calamities for which they are sometimes called devil worshipers. There are also other ritual ceremonies, prayers, incantations, taboos, gennas performed by the priest to have a religious moral and philosophical wish to prolong life, to ward off evil, to obtain children and to destroy or harass sworn enemies. The basic objective of appeasement rites depends from the person or society's condition like:

- (a) to seek blessing of fortune or luck,
- (b) to seek help for certain personal, family, community's protection,
- (c) to ward off the ill-fated problem from certain external forces or evil spirits,
- (d) to overcome the emotional depression and strengthen their faith and
- (e) to improved one's poor health by sacrifice of animal

When a priest performed the same or similar appeasement rite or other ceremonial rituals for a person, family or village over and again using the same formulae and the value it adhere become repetitive in its action. The priest performed ceremonial rites or rituals over and again from time to time in the treatment of same sickness or the causes are identical, which becomes recessive repetitive in its action of offerings and sacrifices. The sacrificial offerings are of different nature and types, which depends upon the motive and objective of the doer. On the basis of Liangmais belief, the sacrificial offerings are performed at a selected spot on any auspicious or inauspicious day depending upon the type of ritual required.

LIANGMAI INDIGENOUS RELIGION

The Liangmais tribe inhabit in Manipur and Nagaland in the North-Eastern region of India with a population of about 75,000 and literacy rate of 73.79% (LNC 2011). Despite its settled in different states and geographical region population they still practice many of their indigenous religious customs and traditions (although by just a handful of them) on the basis of their myths, legends and experiences.

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. 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.



They also believed and practices totemism, talismanism, magic, witchcraft, divination too. They believed that these lower gods also play their own part in the interrelationship between man and nature in this world. The Liangmais believes that certain areas like dense forest, ponds, lakes, springs, huge rocks, giant trees, etc. are inhabited and controlled by certain spirits. They consider these spirits as the protector of nature and one should not provoke and challenge them rather be polite and avoid such dangerous places when contacted. Example, they believed that if a man trespasses certain territory of the spirits or disturbed or deconsecrated by urinating, the person would suffer infliction and fall sick. So, when a person is troubled or suffers from certain sickness or diseases an appeasement rite become essential to safeguard one from further being troubled or killed. Hence, the priest or local medicine man consults divination to identify the type of spirit encountered and the cause of the sickness or trouble inflicted too. The priest interprets the causes as he senses and observed the signs through divination. So, the rite and ritual may be performed to pacify the troubled person or the family members or the village as a whole accordingly.

With the change of time and the arrival of Christianity in the North-East India in the later 19th century, religious syncretism has been occurring side by side with the indigenous tribal religious belief systems. Therefore, majority of the Liangmai people i.e. more than 95% are now Christians under different denominations since the conversion first began in 1919. The Liangmai indigenous religious belief and practice system though still prevails even today it is fast disappearing like many other cultural groups of the world. For example, particularly the kindred community of Liangmai like Zeme, Rongmei and Poumai are declining in their traditional beliefs due to the process of Christian evangelisation and proselytization accompanied by modernisation. These diverse cultural groups from the underdeveloped and developing regions are severely affected. Their age-old indigenous custom and tradition is rapidly deteriorating from the phenomenal forces of change impacted by Christianity, modernisation, globalisation,

liberalisation policies who have become victims of negligence.

With the coming of the Christian missionaries, Liangmais have embrace 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 Liangmais faith.

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.

**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. Therefore, all these cultural groups are passing through a transitional period of cultural conflict, threatening the very survival of their indigenous socio-religion and culture to irreparable damage.

CLASSIFICATION OF RITUALS PERFORMANCE

Most of the ceremonial rites and rituals focuses especially on the rites of passage as prescribed by each society, since it concern the person obligated to fulfil the various stages of life on this earth starting with: child birth, child naming, youth initiation, marriage and death. But the important aspect here is that besides these formal ceremonial *rites of passage* there are also different significant types of rites and rituals practiced by a person, family and the village or community like divinations, magic, festive ceremonies, anniversary celebration, exorcism and various other sacrificial offerings and rituals, yet most scholars in their study usually ignores and neglects to present to which category such rituals come under.

Therefore, the basic objective of this paper is to classify these various types of ceremonial rites and rituals prevalent in society. The reason being, in the religious study we tend to see all types and forms of ceremonial rites and rituals as one aspect of the rites of passage only, ignoring and neglecting the other important elements of rituals involved in the various religious performances in the society. Most

people despite acknowledging the existence of it failed to see the differences in the usage and distinguish the variation, implication, purpose, meaning and value uphold. It means every religious group big or small perform certain kinds of ceremonial rites and rituals that differs from one cultural group to another on the basis of its nature, observance, prayer, objective, method of offering or sacrifice, needs, obligation, items required, simple or complex, open or secret, small group or large groups, inside or outside the house, etc. Hence, we feel that depending on the above factors any type of rites and rituals practiced by a society falls within one of the three categories, viz.:

1. Personal (Individual) Ritual,
2. Family Ritual and,
3. Village or Community Ritual.

PERSONAL (INDIVIDUAL) RITUAL

The personal ritual is concern more with the personal redemption and spirituality. In Liangmais, the rites of passage begin with the *alammbaibo* i.e. burying of the child's placenta along with the navel cord inside the house under the bed. It is usually done by the father of the child. Traditionally, the child naming ceremony was carried out on the fifth or seven day in the Liangmais society. It has been a belief among the Liangmais that in case of delay in naming the child, the god or evil spirit gives a name first to the child and that brings miseries and death of the child. This traditional naming ceremony is locally called *Tazanmathakbo*. Any members could give new names to the new born child and get it confirmed by priest or elders as per customary practice. Marriage *magiangbow* which is contract for Liangmaiof three types involves one main blessing ceremony called *magiangthoi*.

Death ritual is subsequently performed by the village priest on the same day. All villagers take part in the funeral. Under this obligation, a formal announcement is made by an elder *Singkuto* make it known to all the villagers. As soon as the news reaches everyone stop their works as a mark of condolence. The villagers will bring gifts such as wine, rice money to the bereaved family as a sign of sympathy. There are certain rituals still performed even after the burial ceremony. No marriage,



festivals, or any public worship can be performed within the village until the funeral is over. It is taboo because the dead is unclean or impurity and it polluted in the village.

However, other personal ceremonial rites and rituals performed by various religious and cultural groups are often connected and related with personal only. For example when a person suffers from certain misfortune or sudden sickness or from prolonged illness or unknown disease or anxiety or fever or hallucination or hypertension, etc., in such cases, the priest or local medicine man treats such sick patient with herbal medicines often by using their magical charms and spells. In olden days, the indigenous tribal often believes that such kind of illness or sickness results with contact of forest spirits or evil spirits or the act of a magic or witchcraft. So, Liangmais personal ritual ranges from simple to complex, depending on the nature of the sickness, which even includes magic and divination performances. *Phaimiu* 'the Priest' performs rituals and sacrifices with an egg or hen or goat with the chanting of hymns as remedial measures for sickness or forgive him for the trespasses or release his captive soul or strengthen his weak health. Sacrifices were also offered by either shedding blood of domestic animals or by setting free in the jungle to propitiate the sickness.

FAMILY RITUAL

The family rituals concerns with the purification, protection and goodwill in the family's welfare. The Liangmai family rituals are performed in cases, if a person or head of the family suffers from misfortune, prolong illness from unknown sickness or the family members experiences certain chaotic problems among themselves and even posed a death threat, then the village priest or local medicine man consult a divination, and according to the oracle an appropriate ceremonial ritual may be perform. Depending upon the nature and type, sacrificial offerings may also be performed on any auspicious day like Sunday and Monday. The Family 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, sickness, epidemics, wedding, death and celebration of a child's birth.

There are different types of Liangmais family rituals like; *kikhunrathoi* (purification of the head of the family) *sanwiborathoi* (rite for ward off the bad omen), *kikhunkammasanbo* (purification of the house), *lungwisingkhiurathoi* (rite for the blessing of wealth and health) *atekwi* (blessing of plenty harvest) In most of the family rituals all the family members are inclusive and compulsory to participate in the ceremonial rituals.

VILLAGE OR COMMUNITY RITUAL

The village or community ritual often manifest the foundation of a religious zest and group cohesion amongst the people, as they show their respect and gratitude to their gods for the blessing bestowed upon them for that particular year and also strengthens their faith collectively.

We also know that there are certain village ceremonial rituals and festive celebrations usually observed annually in accordance to one's own cultural beliefs and practices in the society. The Liangmai village ceremonial rituals are observable and identifiable by the type and nature of its elaborateness, complexity, sacrificial offerings, strict socio-religious observances, taboos, prohibitions and other social custom practice by the villagers on such specific day/s. These rituals are performed on any inauspicious day of the week, especially on or after the full moon. Preparation involves various steps and stages much ahead of the day like festive ceremonies, or *genna* a socio-religious village observant or feast. It is conducted annually and every villager participates by observing the taboos and other obligations as prescribed and regulated by their customary norms. Cows, buffaloes and other domesticated animals like dog, chicken were sacrificed at the demise of a wealthy man in the village.

Besides, the village rituals of *genna* types there are also other village ceremonial festive celebration like *chagafestival*. The occasion is also a day to sanctify the men folks for the next assignment. However, in the modern context the prime reason of observing this occasion is to keep alive the rich culture and tradition of the tribe. Colourful cultural



programs are the main features of the festival. Old and young of the Liangmai community in traditional attire come out in large number to participate in the Chaga Ngee in every year. Besides, organizing numerous traditional sport items on the occasion, traditional menu is an important theme of the Liangmai Chaga Ngee. On this day killing of animals for the festival are done in every household. The grandsons and daughters have to wear traditional shawls for the occasion.

Most festive ritualistic celebrations are performed openly in exultation to their God by showing their gratitude for the blessings, fortunes and protection rendered to them from external evil forces. Such festive celebration also latently implies the thanks giving act where it re-instil the collective consciousness or coheres the religious faith of the community since all participates and involved in different manners. It also signifies a kind of religious zest to show their respect and honour in reverence by praising their Almighty Supreme God for the abundant blessings and protection shown.

The Liangmai ceremonial ritual of *rathoi*. The term *rathoi* means the ritual at the village gate. It is one of the most important Liangmai village rituals annually observed by the entire village like *genna*. There involves several steps and stages of rituals which began from morning and last before the sunset. At the beginning of each year, the priest (*Phaimiu*) of the village performs a community offering to the spirit asking for abundant harvest. The main sacrificial offering of this ritual is a dog and a fowl besides other items like rice, eggs, cotton, ginger, turmeric, *chagumnui* etc. On this day, men are not allowed to go out from the village and the priest is to abstain from sexual relation.

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.

DIVINATION

Divination is an art, practice in foreseeing the future events or discovering hidden knowledge of the past and future, by invoking and taking help of supernatural powers. The Liangmais practice divination *madukhaibo* since early days to know their unknown future, fate, destiny and the cause of their misfortune. They also adopt various types and methods of divination like some ancient people of the world by sacrificing a fowl, a dog, pig or an egg, etc. Depending on the nature of ritual these divinations are performed either by the village priest or the local medicine man to their Guardian God or other spirits often communicated in spirit's language or ancestor/ ancient language.

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 equipment. 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.

WESTERN EDUCATION REPLACES INNATE SYSTEM OF LEARNING

On the one hand, Western education introduced by Christianity is one of the most powerful agencies for bringing transformation in the life of Liangmai society. The education imparted by the Christians lifted the people from ignorance, illiteracy and superstitions. It gave them greater mobility and it encouraged a great interaction with people not only of their own tribes. Thus education brought by Christianity transformed the minds and improved their way of living in and outside the community. On the other hand, we also need to critically reflect upon the western form of education and the mentality that accompanied it. It took it for granted that western form of education is the only one or the only true and universal form of education that the uncivilized world such as that of the tribal need. It thus belittled and condemned the traditional

pattern of education. In the past, Liangmais like many other Naga tribes maintained community-structured pattern of education especially through the *Khangchiu* (dormitory) system through which young men and women receive holistic education needed for their lifetime. Thus, the western form of education does not truly connect with the life situations, aspirations, experiences and needs of the people. There is no doubt that Christianity brought great changes in the socio-cultural life of the Liangmai Nagas.

CONCLUSION

The paper attempts to show in general that most of the ceremonial rites and rituals of any cultural groups or tribes may be classified broadly into three types based on its implication as personal, family and village rituals like the Liangmais as discussed. The significant of this distinction is expected that the readers would have better understanding while interpreting the various forms of any rites and rituals of communities. 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 importance and awareness of such rituals seems to be increasing as the people realized the uniqueness and importance of their culture. 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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