



Festivals of the Chakhesangs of Nagaland

Dr. Akhil Kumar Gogoi

Abstract: Chakhesangs are a prominent tribe of Nagaland. The Phek district of Nagaland is known as the home of the Chakhesang community. The word Chakhesang is an amalgamation of the names of three tribes, 'Cha' from Chokri, 'Khe' from 'Khezha' and 'Sang' from Sangtam. Throughout the year, they engage in different festivals celebrated at different times. Their festivals, various activities and rituals are mostly related to the agricultural sphere. All the people of the tribe, rich and poor, men and women engage in these festivals. Boys and girls celebrate by dancing and singing together. This paper studies the various festivals and rituals prevalent among the people of the Chakhesang tribe.

Keywords: Festival, Chakhesang, Agriculture.

Introduction :

Different tribes have different timings for different festivals owing to climatic conditions. Yet the motives and the modes of the festivals are basically same for all the Naga Communities. It is agricultural activities around which most of the festivals are woven as it is the main occupation of the Chakhesang Nagas. There are two different systems of cultivation. They are, (i) shifting and (ii) terraced cultivation.

Objectives of the Study : The present study is an attempt to understand the different festivals and their timings of celebration amongst Chakhesang community. This paper also focuses how they involve in cultivation or agriculture through the different festivals in different seasons. The present study helps to understand the various activities, various rituals and food and sanctification done by the Chakhesang men and women during the festivities.

Methodology : Both primary and secondary data have been used for preparing this paper. Primary data are collected from the field with the help of interview schedules. Secondary data have been taken from authentic secondary sources, viz. books, the internet, journals, souvenirs, etc.

Discussion : Traditionally the Chakhesangs (only the Chokri clan) have seven festivals in year all of which are based on the agricultural cycle-beginning or completion of highland paddy harvest. Chakhesang people do not like to do any work during the festival. Naga festivals have some characteristics like preparation of rice beer, gathering, feasting, killing of animals, singing, dancing and all kinds of merry-making, inviting and sharing things with relatives and friends.

Purpose of the Celebration : The common feature of all Naga festivals is that they are related to sowing, transplantation and harvesting, etc. That is why the main reason of celebrating different festivals is that there is always an appeal to the Supreme Spirit to let the crops grow abundantly and the to protect the crops from birds, pests, rats and natural calamities such as hailstorms etc. So the Chakehsang Nagas observe religious rites meticulously and these are considered sacrosanct. As a token of thanks to the Supreme Spirit, Chakhesang Nagas observe these festivals.

Types of Festivals :

They observe and perform the following festivals throughout the year.

- (i) Pre-harvesting (Preparation for Harvesting)
- (ii) Harvesting
- (iii) Post-harvesting
- (iv) Seasonal
- (v) Others

The major festivals of the Chakhesangs (Chokri) are as follows :

Pre-harvesting Festivals :

Sükrünye - 'Sükrünye' is the greatest and most significant festival of the year. It is celebrated in the month of January. A few of the villages also celebrate it in the month of February. For the convenience of all concerned, the days from 7th to 15th January have been reaffirmed and set aside for the entire Chakhesang Community for the celebration of Sükrünye. After completion of this pre-harvesting festival the people are to go for seed-sowing work (Jhuming) during February-April. Here it should be mentioned that, when a new house is constructed 'Sukhrü' is performed in order to get the house sanctified. This whole process is called 'Sükrüh' and 'Nye'.

Duration of the Festival :

Sükrünye covers 19 (nineteen) days starting from Nyede.

1. **Nyede** - The first day of Sükrünye is known as Nyede and from this day the Chakhesang people start their necessary preparation for the festival.
2. **Rhirha** - The second day of Sükrünye is known as 'Rhirha' and this day is utilized for preparing clotting / dresses.
3. **Süre** - The third day is utilized for the collection of firewood.
4. **Süre** - Nyelü (peak festival) covers six days which are called Cedü, Sükrü, Nüso, Jhünye, Zaküdi (Mühicelhu), Cedü, Zhonga and Jhünyemukra.
5. **Cedü** - The fifth day is known as 'Chedü'. On this day animals are sacrificed and every household smears the blood of the animals (killed ones) on the posts of the houses. They cook meat and prepare rice beer and these are offered to God for blessings.
6. **Sükrü** - The sixth day is known as 'Sükrü' and it is meant for the men folk. A father performs the whole process of this ritualistic ceremony with his son. On this day the entire men folk go for community bird-trapping. The birds are hung on the decorated tip of a tall bamboo as a symbol of 'SÜHKRÜHNYE'.
7. **Jhü No Nuso** - The seventh day is called 'JHUNO NUSO' which is meant for women only. 'Jhuno Nuso' is much simpler than Sükrü.
8. **Jhünye Zaküdi** - The eighth day is known as 'Jhünye Zaküdi. It has another name 'Muthicelhü' such as Mulekhu or feast of social age group. ZHOTHOMÜZA2 etc. begins.
9. **Cedü Zhongu** - The 'ninth day' is known as 'Cedü Zhongu' it is the last restricted day of SKRNYE. On this day the festival is accomplished.
10. **Jhünyemukra** - The tenth day is called Jhünyemukra. On this day religious pursuits are relaxed, they keep on feasting, dancing and singing through out the day and night till dawn. After the feast festival, on the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth days Rhirha and casual works are done.
11. **Jhünyezho** - The fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth days are known as JHÜNYEZHO. During these three days casual works can be done, while on the third day of Jhünyezho (Sixteenth day) the village elders go round the village and choose an unblemished cock and get it ready for the ceremony next day.
12. **Sükrünye** - The seventeenth day of Sükrünye is celebrated with the sacrificial offering of unblemished cock. At the break of dawn, the high priest leads the ceremonial procession with second oldest man carrying a cage followed by the elders of the village. In succession they go in the direction of the place, which would be used for Jhum cultivation. On this day the High priest observes the signs and actions of the cock.
13. **Vütasü** - The eighteenth day is called Vütasü. The word Vütasü suggests it as a restricted day of sacrificial cock. On this day strict genna is observed to please the deities and invoke blessings and good fortune.
14. **Vüta-Zhonger** - The last day (nineteenth day) is the closing sacrificial prayer day and it is known as 'Vüta-Zhonger'. A highly restricted genna is observed on this last day after giving thanks to the deities by seeking good fortunes and blessings. During these last three days setting with the village jurisdiction excepting at home is restricted.

Rites and Rituals : Every festival has some special rituals and the Naga people believe in them deeply. Some rituals are as follows : On sixth day the Sükhrenye a father performs the whole process of the ritualistic ceremony with his son / sons and 'Sükrü' signifies sanctification of young, innocent and unspoiled boys. On this day, every man is supposed to take a fresh water bath and is forbidden from using water fetched by women. To perform this ritualistic ceremony everything new is used. New utensils, a new fireplace and a new hearth with three logs of 11/2 ft. grid and 2 ft. in length are used.

The men folk go to the well early in the morning before any animal or bird take bath immediately after the first crow of the cock, which indicates the breaking of a new day, in order to sanctify themselves. Therefore, unpolluted water which is considered to be holy, is brought home, fire is made and the unblemished cock is killed and cooked with the holy water and is eaten to sanctify the boys for the rest of their lives.

Different kinds of birds and snares so caught are believed to foretell the fortune for the forthcoming days of the year of the concerned individuals.

Food and Drink : On the occasion of 'SÜKHRÜHNYE' Sukr wine and meat are forbidden to be offered to others including members of the household and they neither eat nor taste anything from others. The unfinished wine and food are thrown on the same night as an offer to the deities.

Games : The eighth day of 'Sükrünye' is mostly occupied by the traditional game of wrestling. On the second day of Tsükhényie, the young people conduct wrestling competition for all the boys. Young married men also participate in wrestling.

Ngunye : This festival is celebrated in the month of February. During this festival feasts for age wise working groups and friendship feasts with friendly villages are organized. The construction of typical Naga houses is an important event of this month. Ngunye is a festival of rejoicing, and traditional games and sports are played. There are amusements like singing indigenous songs, dancing and above all, there is the significant game of wrestling.

Harvesting Festivals:

Tsagrönye (TSARHUNYE): Traditionally Tsarhunye means a nominal festival and it takes place in the month of February and March to invoke blessings from the deities before the sowing of seeds. Here the deity mostly refers to 'Phükhwü Rappü'.

Rituals and Believe: While the High-priest and priestess are observing genna and certain rituals, the religious representative carries the seeds to the fields and performs the rituals of seed sowing for the entire village for the year. For all the Churches (with the advent of Christianity), they set the second Sunday of February to invoke blessings from God and proceed to sow the seeds.

Post Harvesting Festivals:

TÜKHANYE (Chokri) TSÜKHENYE (Khezha): Both the Chokris and Khezhas celebrate this festival on the 6th day of May. For the Chokris, TÜKHANYE means the last festival of the year.

Activities: The TÜKHANYE festival covers three to four days. On the first morning, the village priest offers a sacrifice with the first cock that crows early in the morning. On this morning all male members come to a designated well and purify themselves by bathing and after bathing they perform prayer and invoke the Almighty for strength, long life, good harvest and other blessings.

The Chakhesangs have another ritual concerned with this festival, that is, during this period unblemished male domestic animals are slaughtered for consumption. During this festival, married women go to their parents' house and prepare the best food for their husbands. People prepare and use new wine.

At the last moment of the festival all the traditional games and musical instruments are stored away (Kchale-Mokhi) and are not used till the necessary rites are performed for their after-harvest festival. After the closing of the festival, all leisure activities are forbidden.

Rituals: During the period of TÜKHANYE, the purification (by bathing) is an important duty for them. Any acts not conforming to the set rites and ceremonies are frowned at and are thought to bring bad luck to the person or the family. In this bathing or purification ceremony, the Chakhesang people use only new gourd dipper for hauling water, specially set aside for this day, and also put on new clothes.

Thürinye: This festival is known as the thanks giving festival and the process of THÜRINYE spreads over November and December. Especially this festival is celebrated after harvesting in December.

Activities: On the completion of the harvest, a genna of 'Me Mukuve' is observed so that the village can be saved from the fury of fire. On the next day 'Kuthuna' is observed and leisure works including repairing village gates and public wells are done. Similarly, 'Kuvakutu' is also performed on the following days.

Rituals: Usually during 'Thür i nye', Muza Zhotho fresh are performed, and Mülelhü / Muth i celhü takes place. All the church councils and villages are directed to include these specified dates in their respective calendars for compliance.

Other Festivals:

Tsükhenyie: Tsükhenyie is a festival, which celebrates the culmination of leisure or freedom from occupation, and a festival for welcoming a new fruitful life and year.

Khüthonye: Khüthonye is celebrated in July and it lasts for three days. This festival is celebrated right after the transplantation of rice seedlings. This period is also known as harvesting millet. Along with Khuthonye, there is the millet festival which is known as CHUNYE.

Activities: In Khüthonye transplantation of seedlings is one of the most tedious works among the different stages of cultivation. During terrace cultivation they work hard for a month. After completion of the field work every Chakhesang male or female, poor or rich eat and drink heartily to replenish the lost energy. This festival takes place as an occasion of relaxation and rest. Domestic animals are killed for regaining strength, which is commonly celebrated in July. Thus 15th of July is set for Khüthonye.

Seasonal Festivals:

Türhinye (Chodannye): This festival is celebrated as an autumn festival which precedes harvesting of paddy in the month of August. This festival lasts for three days and each day has different names like CEDU, THUPUSUKRE and THUNOSUKRE.

This is the low working period of the agricultural cycle. In this festival community work such a repairing, cleaning of roads and inter village paths are done by the people (Mulekhu) and during this festival with plenty of rice beer and meat are used.

Harvesting Festivals:

Festivals of Khezha: Khezhas have four festivals known as enyie in a year. The names of these festivals (Enyie) are - RUNYIE, TSUKHENYIE SELUNYIE and DZUNYIE.

During every festival they celebrate by killing a large number of animals and fowls. During the festive period they also prepare hazhu with menabe. Various festivals are celebrated according to the different seasons and each festival has its own significance. The major festivals accordingly to tradition are as follows:

Runyie: Runyie is the biggest festival of the Khezhas (Chakhesangs). It is a festival for harvesting, which falls during early December, just after harvesting of paddy. This festival lasts for 10 days. It is celebrated by feasting with harvested crops. During this festive period both the rich and poor equally enjoy the runyie.

'Ru' means paddy and 'nyie' means festival and it can be aptly titled as the rice festival or is appropriately called the harvest festival.

Activities: The first ceremony of Rünnyie is known as 'keledu'. On this day the animals meant for feast during the festival are killed. Those who lill the pig is given the 'Künü' and Komia, which are eaten during the pulhuominyi, i.e. towards the later part of the Rünnyie festival.

On the first day of Rünnyie (Keledu) a significant feature of the festival is Afu. Males, both young and old would go around their respective khel platform called 'nhou' for 'Afu'. There are five nhos viz. Lozapa and Lakhroahou of the Chisomi Khel, Phfutsepa and Zhipa of the Ziphfemi khel and a nhou of the komino khel. The second day of the festival is known as Sopy. On this day, friends meet up and feast together.

The third day is known as Nyielokochü. On the third day, fathers would invite their clan members and in-laws for feast while their guests would invite their friends an feast with Khazu and meat.

The 4th and 5th days of festival are together known as 'Mvütaminyi'. During this time the married boys and girls would give rice and meat to their parents or grandparents, uncles, and aunties, and 'hachi' would continue during the life time of both paternal and maternal uncles and grand-parents.

The 7th and 8th days were known as 'Neto Neru'. Boys give meat to girls of their khel. In return, the girls would make 'Topho Tori' and give to the boys. And boys of a khel would give meat to the girls of the 'Lüzhü' of another khel. They drink and sing late into the night. Everyone would bring his Chu and Khazu, sit together around the fire and eat together.

On the 10th day known as 'Pulhuominye', each of the males both young and old would clean his body, tools, arms, even his hunting dog at the Kolhüodzukhou well. during this festival, sacrifices are offered to Chükechi-o, their Creator. The most important part of the festival is the ceremonial killing of a fowl.

Other Festivals:

Tsükhenyie: 'Tsükhenyie' means fuel forest festival, celebrated for rich budding of fuel from forest trees. This festival falls in the last part of April and first part of May. The festival lasts for three-four days.

Activities: On the third day of TSÜKHENYIE, all the youth of three villages organize themselves and go out to the place where a kind of 'Beauty Contest' is held. On the fourth day a ceremony of 'Kerhu ketshü' is performed by elders. During this festival, only the best healthy male domestic animals are slaughtered for the feast. They kill Tshü and feast on it.

Rituals: The rituals in Tsükhenyie are performed only by males, as they protect the village from enemy and also for head hunting. The Khezha people believe that the cat is the oldest amongst the Khunu, therefore, as the oldest animals, the cat is sacrificed.

Games: The main highlight of the Tsükhenyie festival is mono. Some of the games and sports played are long jump (thechocho), throwing reed (Ashulade), Tholuotsu, Hapotanic, Torhionhi Ketshe etc.

Post Harvesting Festivals:

Selunyie: This festival is celebrated for two days in the later part of July and the early part of August. The Selunyie is celebrated after the completion of terraced cultivation. Their traditional month 'Seluwa-khrü' falls in July. This period compared to all seasons is the feast time and therefore, marriages are solemnized during this period. During this time, they go for hunting crabs.

Selunyie is celebrated for the purpose of relaxation and regaining the energy spent during cultivation.

Food and Drink : On the seventh day the Chakhesang males and females prepare an unblemished young hen and partake of it to sanctify themselves for the rest of their lives. During Rünyie festival they eat different food items and the men and women enjoy together. They exchange their food with each other. They drink rice-beer in their dormitories.

They kill animals like pigs, mathons, buffaloes etc., while their wives invite their friends and feast with Khazu and meat.

During this festival, meat is available in plenty and extra efforts are not required for procuring meat. Besides, the elders go to the jungle for collecting edible leaves. Cows and bufaloes are let loose in the jungle during this period. Everyone would bring his (chü) and rice beer (Khazu), sit together around the fire and eat together.

Games: Indigenous games and sports are performed as a pastime and also during certain festivals or occasions. The Naga wrestling is a popular game among them. Others are like 'Chethi' played with a Top. Another is the 'Thsuli', played with a round seed of a particular creeper.

There is another game locally known as 'Bemla'. This game is played by young boys of the community which involves no competition but only a pastime during recreations.

Findings and Conclusion: As an other Naga community, Chakhesangs also enjoy to the fullest while celebrating festivals and their participation is the most important feature. They participate in the festival with a sense of unity and equality. Chakhesangs make a good impact on the society through the celebration of their festivals. They enjoy with vigorous dances in colourful costumes. They are truly colourful in all their festivals. In Naga society everyone must know dancing. That is why all the Chakhesangs know how to dance. During festivals, all Chakhesang boys and girls spend time singing and dancing together. There are different types of

songs for different festivals and occasions. Apart from merry-making, a festival is also a time of prayer and thanks giving to the Creator for a bountiful harvest. Festivals are celebrated symbolizing the seasons for tilling, sowing and harvesting.

End Notes:

1. Social feast.
2. Fast of merit.
3. Vüta.
4. Where equivalent to Tabu, Kenna p. 196-212, Memi p 337, Penna and Nanu days, 193, "The Angami Nagas: with some notes on neighbouring tribes" by J.H. Hutton published by direction of the Government of Nagaland, 2003.
5. It means god-goddesses, the keepers of the village
6. Friendship with fire
7. Name sake genna
8. Storing of harvest
9. Feasts of merit
10. Feast of age groups / feasts of khel or clan-wise
11. Special rice beer
12. Special variety of rice
13. Lenyu
14. Ear
15. Tail
16. Crooning
17. Rice-beer
18. Boys carrying made of cotton and worn during singing and dancing
19. Girls dormitory
20. Meat
21. Rice beer
22. A small well near the village
23. Cursing wrongdoers
24. Dog
25. Animals
26. Wrestling
27. Rice beer
28. Meat

References:

- Hutton, J.H. (2003). The Angami Nagas: with Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes. Kohima; Director of the Government of Nagaland.
- Zhol, L. & Kevekha, K. (2009). The Legendary Naga Village - A Reader (Khezhakeno). Dimapur; Haritage Publishing House.
- Yepetso (ed). (1997). Wepe and Vapr Mu Dimapur; CSU.