



THE FEASTS OF MERIT: THE NAGA CONCEPT OF SURPLUS DISTRIBUTION AND PROMOTER OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS.

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Abstract: Agriculture forms the dominant economy of the Nagas since time immemorial. This paper brings to light about ideas of wealth and the nature of its utilization in the early Naga society. While highlighting the non-accumulative nature of wealth, the present work focus on the nature of surplus distribution as manifested in community feast given by rich men in the form of the Feasts of Merit. The paper also shows how the surplus distribution was also a means to gain recognition, a prestige and status in society. Generally, society and social structure is largely determined by how surplus is accumulated or distributed. For the emergence of a complex political structure or a dominant class of people in a society, it is determined by its control over surplus production. The paper brings to light a departure from the general trend where the idea appears to be more communal and non-accumulative in the nature. The present work also intends to shows how the prestige and status acquired carried no political implications. While attempting to project on the egalitarian nature of social formation, this very study also traces the development of some fundamental identity markers of the Naga cultural tradition associated with the Feasts of Merit.

Index Terms: Surplus, social status, egalitarianism, culture.

I.INTRODUCTION:

Nagaland is is bounded by Assam in the west and north, and in the north-east by the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. The southern boundary is shared with the state of Manipur, while the eastern limits of the state are on the international boundary between India and Myanmar. The terrain is hilly, rugged and mountainous. *Jhum* forms the predominant type of cultivation. It pictures a type of agricultural society having strong kinship ties with family as the basis of social organization. In fact each Naga tribe is a homogenous unit and there are ample variations between each tribe and the organization of the village community differs from tribe to tribe.

II. IDEAS OF WEALTH:

The economy of the Nagas being overwhelmingly agrarian, possession of surplus rice was the sign of richness. Rice was not only an article of consumption. It was also considered as the most important possession to gain recognition in the society. A person's status in society was determined by the amount of rice he stored. It has been the determining factor to consider whether one is rich or poor. It is rice which could obtain *jabile*, (a form of currency used during the pre-colonial days) slaves, cattles, *mithun/mithan* (*Bos frontalis*) and hold the feasts of merit for the community.

In *jhum* economy, the extent of area brought under cultivation by a family in the particular year primarily depended upon its size i.e. the number of available working hands. The bigger the family size, the larger the area it could manage to cultivate. Bountiful harvests are generally linked to the efforts and sweat of labor that an individual or family invested. However, not everyone or all large families are blessed and become rich; not everyone prospers enough to give feast to the whole community. Here, the idea of blessing or luck maybe discerned while analyzing the circumstances for prosperity. Acquired material riches were conceived of in connection with the fertility principle, a person having more *aren* (Ao Naga dialect meaning to multiply or increase in wealth, offspring, etc.). It was believed that there are some who are more blessed (*temoatsii/moamoj* in Ao Naga dialect) and it is these people through hard work and with blessings could acquire more than others. By distributing his wealth, he again channelizes prosperity to the community which in turn earned him a status and honor in society. For rich people, status among fellow villagers increases only when they share their wealth. This idea projects the non-accumulative nature of the wealth. The idea of accumulation of wealth and monopoly over one's fellow men was not in the mind of the rich but distribution and sharing by feeding the whole village community was every rich man's dream or desire. This was observed by giving the feasts of merit through various stages of rituals and celebration in which the slaughter of a *mithun* was the ultimate symbol of riches and honor. By giving feasts to the villagers, it raised the man's position. These feasts of merit may be taken as a means of social mobility towards a dignified status.

III. THE FEASTS OF MERIT:

There are a series of feasts, each one costlier and more lavish than the preceding one. The sequence of the feasts does not happen at a stretch but it takes years to complete the series of three times or even more, the completion of which becomes an earned achievement. Every feast entitles the host to social distinction and increases progressively his standing and position in the community. It also entitles him to wear special dress and ornaments and decorate his house in a particular manner, marking him out from others in the village. Every feast gives the person an additional identity marker like a pattern in his shawl or a design or motif in the frontal façade of his house.

The Sema Naga performed a series of feasts starting from *Shikusho* followed by *Apisa*, *Akikyeghe* and *Inami Kusa*. The final performance of the series *Inami Kusa* is such a huge feast that even people from neighboring villages were invited. In such a way, the person's richness and generosity was made known. The Angami Naga first performs the *Thesa*, which is done twice followed by *Zhachu* and *Leishu*. Once a man did the *Leishu*, he was entitled to do the stone-pulling. A huge monolith is dragged with such festivity and erected to signify the feast given. It is this occasion where the holder of the feast displays his maximum wealth and the whole village get the chance to partake in the feast lavishly.

Among the Ao Naga people, series of feasts preceded the *mithun* sacrifice, which is the final performance to make the person with distinction and honor not only for himself but for his generation. The Ao people speak *Chongli* and *Mongsen* dialects and this reflects the variations in the socio-political organization, also in the details in the nature of ritual observances. In performing the feasts of merit, the *Chongli* series begins with the bull sacrifice (*Nashi achi*). Mills writes, 'for this a red bull and three pigs are required, the latter being used as extra provision for the guests. The actual ceremonies last for five days...this little

ceremony is repeated every harvest in order to ensure good crops'¹. In fact, a man had to perform many intermediate feasts which took years, each more lavish before the actual *mithun* sacrifice (*Süchi*). The Mongsen series begins with a pig sacrifice and then proceeded to bull sacrifice. Mills further writes, ' a man must wait for three years after performing the bull sacrifice before he can proceed to the mithan sacrifice which last for seven days...three years later another enormous feast is given, at which not less than one cow and thirty pigs are killed and eaten. The dancing and feasting go on for days. After another interval of three years a man may give another mithan sacrifice. This completes the series.'²

IV. CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT:

Distinctive Dresses and Ornaments: Dress and ornaments represents the aesthetic aspects of Naga culture. Most prominent item of Naga dress is the shawl. Every community has its distinctive shawl where the patterns of the shawl indicate the wearer's identity. The shawl of a man who had performed the feasts of merit is different from that of an ordinary villager. Likewise, a warrior's shawl is different from which is commonly worn. For the Nagas, dress and ornaments are the things that represent the identity of individual, his or her clan, social status and the tribe to which he or she belongs. Naga way of ornamentation has great significance in that it gives a person's identity in society. Also, every pattern and ornaments speaks about certain achievements. Successes in warfare or feasting exploits are displayed in ornaments and dress patterns.

There developed some distinctive attires and ornaments associated with surplus distribution. Feasts givers were given a distinction by investing a status in society. It also entitles him to wear special distinctive dress and ornaments to adorn their body. Also, they become entitled to decorate their houses with motifs and designs signifying their wealth. In fact, these are the earned items that others cannot imitate. Jamir,L writes, '*Rong-sü*, is the most expensive and decorative Ao shawl. It is the most difficult shawl to earn, for it could only be worn by a man whose family has done a series of *mithun* sacrifice for three generations, by his grandfather, his father and himself ...*Yongmirem-sü* could be worn if he and his father had done the *Mithun* sacrifice.'³

Among the Chakhesang Naga, Marak writes, the feasts of merit are intricately connected to their worldview, whereby the feast-givers distribute their wealth in terms of sacrificing mithun, buffalo, and/or other livestock, in consecutive feasts, and receiving in return a higher social rank and the right to wear a special shawl ("Feasts of Merit" shawl), variously known as *hapidasa*, *elicüra*, and *thüipikhü* and the right to adorn the house with special architecture (mithun and buffalo wood carvings on the wall, and to put up a horn at the pinnacle of the house front⁴.

Bodily ornamentation relating to the feasts of merit is very prominent. Among the Aos, a mithun sacrificer wears two strings of necklace made of long conch shell beads (*Lakup Molung*), while ordinary men wears only one string. *Tsüingta* (leggings) is another body ornament worn by those who have performed the full series of the feasts of merit. For the wives and daughters of the feasts giver, the hornbill feather (*ozüimi*) was of great significance. To adorn with this feather was reserved only for this category of women. Different from the usual conch –shell spikes necklace, *Mechongsangshi* made of lead alloy, *Birem* made of cornelian beads and *Kisen* a type of bracelet made of brass were worn only by the daughters and wives of the *mithun* sacrificer. During festive occasions, a Naga man or woman becomes impatient to put on the ornaments which brings out the beauty of the wearer, shows his or her status and made the occasion more colorful. More importantly, it shows the richness of their material culture. It is not only a physical adornment but more symbolic in nature.

¹ Mills,J.P.1973:257-258

² Ibid.:261

³ Jamir,L.Sosang, 2012:116-117

⁴ Elicüra: The "Feasts of Merit" Shawl of the Chakhesang Naga of Northeast India. Yekha-ü, Queenbala Marak, March 11,2021 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X2199079>

Megalithic Culture: Many of the identity markers find its basis in the surplus distribution associated with the feasts of merit. Megalithic culture is a very striking tradition of the Nagas associated with surplus distribution. A feasts giver performs series of feasts, culminating in the *mithun* sacrifice among community like the Aos, stone pulling among the Angami and the Chakhesang Nagas. For every feast given, a monolith or some wooden structure (Y-shaped or forked shaped) was erected to commemorate the event. In fact, the megalithic culture and the rituals involved are richest among the Angamis and the Chakhesang Nagas which are associated with surplus distribution.

Songs: Feast of Merit is an occasion of great festivity. Singing and dancing blended with eating and revelry marks the occasion. Feast giver gets the privilege to have songs composed in his honor. Meaningful songs signifying his wealth and generosity were composed and those songs were preserved as a reminder of his richness and his status for generations to come. In fact, the younger generations takes immense pride in reminiscence of the achievements of their forefathers.

V.SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FEASTS OF MERIT:

The idea of surplus generation and utilization adopted by the Nagas is communal and hence there followed no changes in the social structure by way of dividing the society into separate compartments. Speaking about the ideas behind the feasts of merit, Friedman⁵ opines that community feasts are religious feast whose dual functions is the distribution of surplus or accumulation of prestige and the propitiation of higher spirits in order to increase the wealth and prosperity of the entire group...surplus is represented not as the product of surplus labor, but as the work of gods. Feast becomes a redistributive system and also treated as part of the cycle of conversion of surplus into prestige. In the same line, to Herskovits⁶ (1955: 164), the prestige economy is a system in which gain comes through expenditure rather than through saving, and the higher position is reserved for those who most conspicuously spend the contributions of the less privileged, for the vicarious enjoyment of the contributor. The concept of conspicuous consumption gives profound insight into the psychology that underlies prestige economies. Conspicuous consumption speaks about the elaborate expenditure of food stuffs that marks the rise of man from common status to that of a leader in his community. For the Nagas, this conversion of surplus into prestige progressively increases his standing and position in the community, however, this status did not affect the relations of production. They did not constitute a class in itself, nor enjoyed any political power because of the prestige and status acquired or earned by giving the feast.

Among the Nagas, the conversion of surplus into prestige lies in giving the Feast of Merit. The ideas behind the feast of merit prevented individual from hoarding or accumulating wealth, thereby, the chances to become all powerful to rule over other tribesmen was checked. On one hand the feasts of merit could be seen as an agent of change, yet on the other hand, it was also a leveling mechanism in society which assured that accumulated resources are for social ends and thereby prevent the accumulation of capital and growth of economic inequality. Holding the Feast of Merit earns a social status, the term 'Big Man' may be relevant. 'The term 'Big Man' derives from 'the literal translation of the appellation given to such persons in some Melanesian societies. A distinctive feature of big-man ship is that the status is achieved rather than ascribed. It also carries no political authority or power'⁷. Also, status and recognition was not reserved for any particular clan or family. Anybody who has the capacity to perform the feasts may do so in order to get social recognition. Therefore, we find that the nature of surplus distribution was such that it allowed egalitarianism prevails over a class-based society. It should be however noted that the possibilities for attaining high social status varied with the different political forms of organization of the individual tribes like those of the Konyaks where powerful chiefdom prevailed.

⁵ Friedman, J., 1975:172

⁶ Herskovit, 1955:164

⁷ Jamir, Tiatoshi, 2005:226

VI. CONCLUSION:

Nagas economy has been overwhelmingly agrarian. The use of land underlies all other aspects of Naga society, economy and polity formation. The nature of the traditional land ownership system was such that no particular person or clan could command control over the land, the chief means of production and livelihood. Thus there was no centralization of polity and no mechanism as such to extract surplus. Republican nature of polity formation is most common where the power of the village resides with the people. This supports the community ownership over the territory. This also holds the rationale to Naga communal living. Surplus was not accumulated but was distributed in the form of the Feasts of Merit. This non-accumulative nature of wealth may have prevented any person or group of persons to become dominant and this maybe also the reason why there was no state formation in the Naga hills.

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