



# Social Strata Of The Ethnic Aimol Tribe Of Manipur , India

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**Abstract:** Aimol is an indigenous tribe of the Indian State of Manipur that has its own culture, tradition, legends, folklore, folktales, dialect, religion and beliefs. The Aimols are one of the smaller tribes of Manipur and are also one of the earliest settlers of Manipur.<sup>1</sup> The Aimols have affinity with other kindred tribes of Manipur viz. Kom, Chiru, Koirang, Kharam and Purum.<sup>2</sup> This paper is an attempt to shine light on the history and traditional customs of the tribe. Knowing and understanding the history of one's own tribe is a must as it replicates the identity of the people itself. With the advent of Christianity the Aimol people have abandoned many of their old tribal practices and customs.<sup>3</sup> Thus this paper is an attempt to throw light on a piece of Aimol history and tradition i.e. the administration system of the Aimol tribe both at community and societal level. Hopefully this paper will facilitate further research and study.<sup>4</sup>

**Key Words :-** Aimol, social, tribe, ethnic

## Introduction

The Aimol tribe is a native of Manipur and one of the 34th scheduled tribes of the state. In 1956, the Aimol tribe was recognised as a scheduled tribe of Manipur. They are one of the indigenous tribes of Manipur, India. The social institution of the Aimol tribe is not practice to the fullest today due to the tribe's conversion to Christianity. However, it is important to document and keep record of the past practices of the Aimol people. Each and every Aimol village has a social institution that dictates the

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Mullan, Census of India, 1931, vol. 3: Assam, Part II-Tables, Shillong.

<sup>2</sup> G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India: Tibeto-Burman Family Vol. III.*, Published by Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1904, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gangmumei Kamei, *History of Manipur*, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Major W. McCulloch, *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and other Languages*, Calcutta, 1859, p. 41.

social life of every person in the village. This social institution plays a very important role in the village especially in times of social and cultural events. This institution is a platform to impart informal education to children especially to young boys regarding society, culture and tradition of the tribe. Here they learn a sense of unity, brotherhood, discipline, manners and principles. They learn social protocols and rules and also learn to address a person accordingly. The local traditional social institution of the Aimol tribe is known as *Siar/Siarrui*.

### Social Governance Institution

The social institution of the Aimol community is known as *Siar/Siarrui*. In the past when social institution (*Siar*) existed in the Aimol community there was a house called *Siarinn*. *Siarinn* is a dormitory where the unmarried boys stayed. It is here in this *Siarinn* that the unmarried boys learnt about the tribal life, crafts, culture, tradition and religion of the Aimol tribe. This social institution that existed in the Aimol community was crucial and integral to the socio-economic life of the Aimol people.<sup>5</sup>

The social institution (*Siar*) that existed was rigid, rigorous and stringent. It was primarily imposed on the male members of the village. It was an obligatory and compulsory assignment imposed on the boys as a service to the village and society. This obligatory social service imposed on unmarried boys was categorised into two groups according to their age:-

- Adolescent boys called *Beibak*
- Teenagers boys called *Riather*

### Siarinn

*Siarinn* is a house or dormitory or a quarter build for adolescent boys (*Beibak*) and teenage boys (*Riather*). It is here that they learn social protocols and principles. The parents of the boys also encourage their son and sent their sons to *Siarinn*. A number of tribes with close affinity to the Aimols also have similar Bachelor's House like the tribes of Kom, Chiru and Kharam.<sup>6</sup>

### Siarulian

The social institution of the Aimol community is headed by two individuals. These two persons looking over the social institutions of the Aimol village are called *Siarulian*. The head of the social institution is called *Siarulian* and his assistant is called *Siarulian Naipang*. They are elected from the members of the village council for a period of six years. In times of socio-cultural and socio-economic events, these two heads are responsible and in charge. They are in charge of assigning different tasks to each of the villagers for the smooth functioning and success of the social event. Every member of the village is required and expected to give their utmost cooperation and respect to the authority.<sup>7</sup>

### Downngaak

<sup>5</sup> Alangbam Taruni Devi, Differential Fertility of the Aimols of Manipur, Ph.D Thesis, Manipur University, 2013, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> T.C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1911, p. 70

<sup>7</sup> Wakambam Dhiren Singh, *The Kharams in Manipur: An Ethnographic study*, Ph.D. Thesis, Manipur University, 2007, p. 63.

In the hierarchy of the Aimol Social institution, two person sit below *Siarulian* as successor. The position of these two successor is known as *Downngaak*. When *Siarulian* have completed serving their term, the *Downngaak* takes the place of *Siarulian* and perform all the duties of *Siarulian*. In the meantime these two person sits as *Downngaak*, they have to perform certain duties and responsibility. They are given certain assignment and obligation that they have to manage. They are assign certain tasks like serving the public drinks during socio-cultural events or any customary functions. They are expected to show utmost hospitality and efficient work ethics is expected of them.

### **Siarcep**

There are also two people waiting as a successor to the position of *Downngaak*. The position of these two people is known as *Siarcep*. When the present *Downngaak* have served their term, these two members of *Siarcep* take their place and takes over all the functions and duties of the *Downngaak*. The main function and duties of *Siarcep* is to supervise the *Riather* (Bachelors) and *Beibak* (adolescent boys). They supervise them of their duties and social protocol and maintain the social equilibrium.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mirolak**

*Mirolak* are members who are below the rank of **Siarcep**. They are also an active member of the village council. When a male member has already served and performs the duties of a bachelor (*Riather*), he becomes a member of **Mirolak**. Whenever a bachelor (*Riather*) has completed his duty and service as *Riather* towards the village, he instantly becomes a *Mirolak*. Therefore, his main service and duties is to look after and supervise the new batch of *Riather* and current *Riather* (bachelors). *Mirolak* is expected to pass on the experience and wisdom to his juniors. He is also expected to be an example and a role model to his juniors.

### **Raither (Bachelor)**

In the Aimol Social Institution, *Riather* are known as bachelors or older male teenagers who have served six years as *Beibak* (adolescent boys). One cannot become a *Riather* unless he as an adolescent boy has performed social services towards the village as a *Beibak*. A male member who have entered the stage of *Riather* is allowed to be married. *Riather* along with *Beibak* live together in *Siarinn* (Dormitory). *Riather* are expected to be a good example to *Beibak*. They are to supervise their juniors and teach them of all the tribal rules, traditions, culture, arts and crafts, etc. and are also expected to earn their juniors respect.

When a *Riather* ask of a favour from a *Beibak*, the *Beibak* is expected to follow the instruction given to him. In times of social events, *Riather* leads the way in supervision and the *Beibak* are expected to follow them. In times of death in the village, *Riather* and *Beibak* have a certain duties and responsibilities to perform. In *Siarrui* (Aimol Social Institution), *Riather* undertakes many duties and perform many task in social events like festivals, religious events, customary practices, etc. When a boy is born into the Aimol

Community, he cannot escape the stage of *Riather* and all the obligatory duties and responsibilities and also all the obligatory social services expected of him that comes with being a *Riather*.<sup>9</sup>

### Beibak

In the Aimol community, *Beibak* represents a group of boys aged between 11-14 years. Boys aged between these age group are known as *Beibak*. They have not yet attain the age of *Riathar* but are older than children. While in *Siarrinn* they are expected to learn about the Aimol history and culture, customs, traditions, social protocols and crafts and every skills and knowledge that would be necessary to fit into the Aimol society. They also learn traditional songs and dances. They are also given education on manners, discipline and social etiquette of the Aimol community.

*Beibak* are not allowed to marry or court a girl. If a *Beibak* is found to be breaking this rule he is punished according to the Aimol law. While staying in *Siarrinn* are to live under the authority of *Riathar*. They are expected to follow the commands and instructions of their seniors. In times of social events like festivals and customary functions, they are expected to perform certain social duties under the supervision of *Riathar*.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the duties of *Beibak* is difficult and every adolescent Aimol boy must perform in order to become a respected man in the Aimol society. It is an obligatory social process of every male individual of the Aimol community. It is also the first mandatory duty of every Aimol man. Without performing the duties of *Beibak*, an Aimol man cannot claim rights as an individual in the Aimol community.<sup>11</sup>

### Chavaaiphur

Aimol boys aged below the *Beibak* group are known as *Chavaaiphur*. The boys under this age group are below the age of eleven. The boys under this age group does not have any obligatory or mandatory duties to perform. They also does not have to undertake or bear any responsibilities. They also does not owe the village and society any services. However, certain task are expected of them. In times of social events they are expected to help in cleaning the waste generated during the communal feast. They are also expected to address their elders according to the Aimol culture.<sup>12</sup>

### Ringkhua Phadan (Stages of life)

According to Aimol Society, a man social life can be divided into different stages according to his age. The different stages of life in ascending order are given below:-

- Naaite (infant)
- Chavaaiphur (children)
- Beibak (adolescent)

<sup>9</sup> Kinthuijinang Maremmei, *The Ethno-History of the Chiru Tribe of Manipur*, Ph.D. Thesis, Manipur University, 2007, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Kh. Okhup Aimol, op.cit. p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Manilei Serto, *Education and Social Change of the Kom Tribe of Manipur*, Ph.D Thesis, Manipur University, 2004, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 80.



- Riather (teenager or Bachelor)
- Mirolak (adult)
- Siarcep (middle man)
- Downngaak (elders)
- Siarulian (leaders/cabinet)

These seven stages of social hierarchy and stages are compulsory for an Aimol man to pass through. He cannot escape the social structure which is a base of the Aimol tribal life. Therefore, an Aimol man must fulfil every stages of the social structure in order to integrate fully into the Aimol society.

## Conclusion

The more I know and reflect upon our rich tribal tradition and culture, the more I feel strongly that we have been guilty of gross neglect. Before it becomes too late, we have to do whatever we can to make our rich cultural heritage occupy its rightful place in our lives and society. The Aimol tribal community have rich diverse resources in the pre Christian traditions that may become disguised, mutilated or degraded. The important project we must undertake is to rediscover the meanings in them and place them to dialogue with the contemporary Christianity. The society of Aimol tribal community have undergone tremendous changes since the coming of the British colonialists and the western Christian missionaries in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The colonial rule brought about remarkable changes in the political and social life of the Aimol people. Christianity made rapid progress among the Aimol tribal people that today the entire tribe have been fully Christianised. Also given their conversion to Christianity, their customs, traditions and tribal way of life have become submerged, buried and eroded. In the view of this, the objective of the study is to preserve the rich traditions, customs and culture of the tribe and in doing so draw the attention to the literacy world of their historical importance in the annals of the history of Manipur.

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