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Morung As The Cultural Memory: A Study On The Significance Of Khangchiu Of The Zeliangrong Tribe

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Abstract

The Morung refers to a traditional youth dormitory or a tribal club serving as a centre for social life, education and cultural transmission for unmarried male members. The system has been the central point of all varied activities of a Naga Village. It has been rightly called as the fulcrum of village democracies. It is the centre for social, religious and political activities. It is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and the meeting centre for village elders. It served as an institution to transmit the tradition, customs and laws from generation to generation and also served as the centre for defense and training in the art of warfare. Its proximity to the working of a village council is significant in the polity of the village. Despite the dwindling of this traditional institution, its relevance to the culture of the Nagas cannot be underestimated. The spirit of Morung can still be imbibed to the present context which can contribute towards harmony, welfare and peace. Thus this paper will revisit this unique and significant institution of Morung of Nagaland in general and focus on the Khangchiu (Morung) institution for a better understanding of this unique and powerful institution in Naga culture and society.

Keywords: Nagas, Culture, Morung, Khangchiu, Zeliangrong

Introduction

The state of Nagaland, nestled in Northeast India, is often referred to as the land of vibrant tribes due to its rich cultural diversity and the presence of multi-indigenous communities. The state is a home of 16 recognized tribes comprising of Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Sema, Chang, Khiamungan, Kuki, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchunger and Zeliang (latest updated March 27, 2025). Each Naga tribe has its own legend that explains how they migrated, while certain Naga tribes such as Khiamniungan, Ponchury, Sangtam and Chang considered themselves to be the original inhabitants of these regions. It is also believed that the group of Angami, Chakesang, Lotha, Rengma, and Sumi tribes also shared their identical customs and origin myths, suggesting that they started from the same lineage before diverging and developing separate individual identities as they inhabited across distinct hill ranges. Furthermore, the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei tribes, collectively referred to as the “Zeliangrong” identify and present themselves as a singular ethno-cultural entity.

Among the Nagas, one of the common practices found in the Nagas society is a Morung, a traditional institution. The “Morung” is the generic term for a communal dormitory and also an education centre for young boys and girls.. The term ‘Morung’ a Assamese word means ‘a big tree drum’, and the earliest definition of ‘Morung’ is said to have been given by Edward Winter Clark, an American missionary. It was mandatory for Nagas to keep a gigantic drum carved out of trunks of big trees beside the bachelor's dormitory in ancient times, and the Assamese dubbed the institution morung (Goswami, 2022). Every tribes has a unique colloquial term for youth dorms, such as Champo among the Lotha, Arichu among the Ao Naga, Longshim among the kichuki among the Angami, Apuki among Sema, Rehangki/Hangseiki among the Zeme, Paan among the Konyak, etc. The Morung holds immense importance in Naga society, serving as the cornerstone in imparting traditional education, social structure and cultural preservation.

Methodology

This study is based on a Descriptive Method. So, a Qualitative Analysis of the various secondary sources in the form of books, journals, articles and other websites were carried out.

Origins of Zeliangrong

The three related groups of Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei, are encompassed by the Zeliangrong Nagas. According to the legend, the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei were frontier people who lived in Makuilongdi, their ancient home in modern day Manipur. It is reported that the Nagas are assembled at the location known as Makhel before travelling to Makuilongdi. The tribes closest to them in terms of language, customs, culture, religious beliefs and social customs are the Angami, Chakesang, Mao, Paumai and

Rengma. The people of Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei departed the region and searched for land until they arrived at Makuilongdi (Zeliang, 2015).

The three brothers who represented the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei decided to split up. Liangmai the eldest, made the decision to remain in Makuilongdi. The Rongmei moved far to the South to Manipur and Cachar, while the Zeme moved even more to the West, towards the Barak River, Peren. By establishing a collective memory after themselves in different regions, they were able to envision a community built on shared history and culture. This led to the adoption of the term 'Zeliangrong' (Zeliang, 2015).

Gangmuimei Kabui, the renowned Rongmei historian notes that the term 'Zeliangrong, which combines the three prefixes of these tribes-Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei as Ze-Liang-Rong was coined in 1947.

Origins of Morung in the Zeliangrong Community

The Morung institution of Zeliangrong society emerged in the early stage of communal life for various reasons. Firstly, raiding or head hunting over other tribe members was common and a traditional practice in the past. As a result, the peaceful existence of the ordinary people was threatened by the inter-tribal conflicts. In fact the head hunting became the hubris for the early Nagas since the enemy's head was used as a trophy to demonstrate superiority and win the admiration of the locals. Therefore fighting over the two villages became a prevalent practice during those times. In the face of these potential threats and attacks from neighboring villages and enemies, the need for collective defense and vigilance becomes paramount. As a result, it became imperative for all the young men in the village to sleep together in a shared communal space. In the words of Haimendorf, "the Morung served as a stronghold, where the young warriors could retreat in case of attack and from which they could launch counter-attacks."

Secondly, historically Zeliangrong villages, typically situated on hilltops, faced a shortage of the flat land for building houses. As a result, the entire village would reside together in a single large house, functioning as an extended family unit. This communal living arrangement served as a dual purpose: it optimized land use and provided protection from external threats, such as attacks from neighboring villages and wild animals. Elwin Verrier highlighted that "the Morung was a sanctuary, a place of refuge, where the young men could take shelter in times of danger." Thus it could be such reasons that the Morung must have emerged in Zeliangrong society (Kamei, 2016).

Khangchiu (Male Dormitory) of the Zeliangrong Nagas

Khangchiu, the traditional Zeliangrong bachelors dormitory, played a vital role in shaping the societal fabric. It served as a transformative space where young boys were molded into responsive adults, embracing a pure and uncorrupted lifestyle. It is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys, the meeting centre for village elders. It also served as an institution to transmit the tradition, customs

and laws from generation to generation and also served as a centre for defense and training in the art of warfare. Its proximity to the working of the village council is significant in the polity of the village. Thus it is rightly called as the fulcrum of village democracies. On account of this, it is mandatory for all the boys who attained the age of puberty to become the members of Khangchiu. Additionally, it is also believed that as the boys reached the age of understanding, it was deemed shameful to sleep with parents, thus making it essential for them to join the dormitory. Elwin also put forward by saying that the dormitory was instituted to save the children from witnessing the primal scene and from being embarrassed of their parents. Therefore, it became important for the boys and male to join the dormitory (Kamei, 2016).

According to Zeliangrong mythology, the male dormitory originated from a mythical past where men and gods dwell from the house of Tingpurengsonnang, the patriarch of the dormitory. This divine influence led men to adopt the dormitory institution, emulating the god's tradition.

The Three Tier System of the Khangchiu Institution

The Khangchiu Institution is categorised into three tiers namely- Gaana, Gaanpi and Khangbon.

1. Gaana:

The Gaana is the entry-level category in the traditional social hierarchy, consisting of unmarried young males. It is the first step where young men begin their journey, learning responsibilities and social norms before progressing to higher levels.

2. Gaanpi:

The Gaanpi forms the next tier, comprising two categories- Junior and Senior. The junior Gaanpi Chaphongmei comprises unmarried youths, while the senior Gaanpi Kaijipmei consists solely of married men, marking a distinction between young, unmarried individuals and married adults.

3. Khangbuan:

The Khangbuan is the highest level in the Khangchiu system, typically consisting of married, middle-age men. These individuals hold a position of great responsibilities, serving as leaders and overseeing the Khangchiu dormitory well-being, ensuring peace and prosperity through their guidance, efficiency and leadership abilities, making them pivotal to the overall success and well-being of the community.

Importance of Khangchiu

1. A learning centre:

In the traditional Zeliangrong dormitory, both Khangchiu and Luchu (girls dormitory) acquire essential skills and knowledge. Asoso Yonuo notes that individuals living in the dormitory learn discipline, arts, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary and ceremonies. The dormitory serves as a hub for teaching and learning handicrafts, such as basket-making, carpentry, and other embroidery works. The Khangchiu and Luchu dormitories have played a vital role in preserving the Zeliangrong cultural traditions, including various forms of folk songs, music, and dance, which have been passed down through generations. It also found that the married women would teach young Luchu girls the arts of weaving, spinning and dyeing clothes. Both Khangchiu and Luchu dormitories provide training to become responsible citizens, fostering a sense of community and social responsibility.

2. Security of the village:

One of Khangchiu dormitory responsibilities is to protect the entire village from any force. It was required since in the past, conflicts and wars between the village and with neighboring tribes were frequent occurrences. So for this purpose it was deemed necessary for the Khangchiu or boys dormitory to provide a communal sleeping hall, enabling swift response to unprecedented attacks and safeguarding the village from fighting and feuds. The Khangchiu role extends beyond village defense, providing protection during accidents, natural disasters and crises. This act of defense by the Khangchiu is Known as Rigaan Dingmai. The sound of the drum was intended to alert the villagers to any danger and it was only because of the guard at night and during wartime that all the villagers could live in peace without fear. The welfare and safety of the entire village community are thus intimately tied to the role and responsibilities of the Khangchiu members and this act is respected by the villagers.

3. A village level institution:

The dormitory serves as an integral institution within the village unit, rather than a separate administrative entity. A morung may be appropriately described as a microcosm of the village, with its own council. Unlike some other Naga and Kuki tribes, Khangchiu is housed in a specific house, typically owned by a wealthy and powerful individual with a large home. Offering his house as the Khangchiu is considered a public-spirited act. In Naga villages, all unmarried young men reside together in a large bachelor hall or barrack-hut known as Morung, which is separate from the married quarters and is normally located at the gate of the stockade village, which they are responsible for defending. Favoritism and discrimination are not applicable in the Khangchiu, every person is treated equally, regardless of wealth or poverty. This major goal of such organizations is to create a classless society that values unity and brotherhood (Kamei, 2016).

4. Center of promotion of discipline:

The Khangchiu members sharpen their culture, correct their behaviour, alter their mindset, polish their code of conduct, and cultivate their conscience. This has become a significant component of their success in the society. The Khangchiu institution exemplifies the saying “Strike while the iron is hot.” At a very young age, a boy became a member of Khangchiu where he underwent various disciplines and molded everything that a man must perform during his lifetime. V.K Anand believes that morung played an important role in preparing younger generations for positions on the village council. The morung serves as a club, public school, boy’s hostel and gathering place for the elders. It is also a hub for social, religious, and political activity. In a nutshell, it serves as the focal point for village democracies.

5. Role of Khangchiu in the traditional festival:

Among the traditional festivals of the Zeliangrong, Gaan Ngai, a post harvest festival, is the most important in all respects. This festival is called Hega festival among the Zeme and Chaga Gadi among the Liangmai. The Gaan Ngai festival of Rongmei is commonly celebrated for five days. During this festival boys play an important role and perform various tasks. The Khangchiu along with the elders, march from the Northern Gate called Lang to the Southern Gate of the village announcing the commencement of sport competition (Gonmei, 2017). The youth participate in the events like long jump and stone-throwing accompanied by folk songs and folk dances such as the Tuna Gaan Laam performed jointly by boys and girls.

This festival also involves gatherings at the boy dormitory, where the village elders and youth assemble. A sacrificial offering, typically a Mithun or Pig is made supreme to their God, Tingkao Ragwang. Additionally, the dormitory performs Thai-aam, a ritual ceremonial, at the homes of the families who have experienced a death in the previous year, and particularly if the deceased was a dormitory member (Gonmei, 2017).

6. Indigenous Games and Sports:

Promotion of the indigenous games and sports become an integral part of the culture and religion. Looking at the structure and functions of khangchiu or dormitory helps in the development and promotion of indigenous sports. It is a place where young boys are taught about the sporting pasts where ancient heroes are glorified and patronized. The elders or Khangboan carried out the task of integrating the youth and the zeal for sports in the Khangchiu. The young boys were taught of the way in which their ancestors play and complete and also how they think about the games and what they purported to gain by playing those games and sports. Some of the games and sports often carry with them a specific set of social and cultural traditions derived from its ancient roots. For instance in case of the Khangchiu boys of the Rongmei tribe, the splashing of the soil or mud during the long jump is believed as the distribution of paddy or rice, and so,

the more the volume of the soil or mud is splashed it is believed that the year ahead will be a year of prosperity with no starvation (Kabinai, n.d.).

Impact of Khangchiu

However the Khangchiu institution, despite its vitality, succumbed due to the assimilation of influence of Christianity in North East India, which permeated the core of Naga social institutions. While Conservative Zelianrong blamed the decline of this traditional institution to Christian missionaries, on the other hand the missionaries denied the fact that there are some villages that remained ineffective. However the western influence reached those uncovered villages and abandoned the dormitory tradition. One of the reasons was that the Morung, which was the foundation of Zelianrong society, was gradually losing its significance as a result of the conversion to Christianity where the majority of the Zelianrong tribes had given up their traditional practices such as head hunting, rituals and ceremonial practices and slowly they were successful in converting from animism to Christianity. Additionally, with the introduction of formal education emerged as a significant factor in the Khangchiu demise, particularly in non-Christian villages. Parents preferred formal education, seeking better opportunities and greater control over their children. As a result, the Khangchiu institution disintegrated. The introduction of formal education and shifting parental priorities ultimately led to the decline of this traditional institution, marking a significant cultural shift in Zelianrong society. J.P Mills writes: "Decaying 'morungs' means a decaying village and well-used, well-kept 'morungs' a vigorous community. It is in the 'morung' that the old men tell of the great deeds of the past, and the coming generation is taught to carry on the old traditions in future. When the past is no longer gloried in and the future seems dark and uncertain, the 'morungs' fall into decay."

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the Khangchiu serve as a cornerstone institution in the Zelianrong society, deeply intertwined with the community's cultural, social, moral, economic and religious fabric. It is the social and cultural hub of Zelianrong society. It has an impact on the village's well-being, either directly or indirectly. The traditional dormitory is advantageous and relevant for the Zelianrong because it gives a form of education to all its members, especially the youth. In the absence of written records and documentation, the Khangchiu has traditionally served as a repository of the community's cultural heritage, including folk songs, tales and dances. This conveys valuable lessons, myths and legends that have been passed down through generations. As the symbol of community rich cultural heritage, the Khangchiu continues to play an important role in the lives of the Zelianrong people

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