



Gaan-Ngai: Exploring The Rituals Of Zeliangrong Post-Harvest Festival

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ABSTRACT

The Zeliangrong community is among the major Naga communities and has been widely known for its vibrant festivals and ritual practices that reflect their spiritual faith, social and cultural identity. The Zeliangrong people observe festivals almost every season which are highly associated with the cycle of agriculture. This article focuses on the various festivals and rituals practices devoted by the community such as "Gaan-Ngai", "Pok-phangai". The study also focuses on three Zeliangrong inhabited states of Northeast India - Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam. The paper will be examining the case of "Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak" (TRC) in particular. Some of the concern rituals include animal sacrifices, traditional dances, feast, and tribute that are crucial for strengthening the social bond and the relationship between the people and the divine or natural forces. The dormitory, which is a social institution also plays a fundamental role responsible for the smooth activities and success of the festivals. The paper also investigates the importance and meaning or beliefs of the existing practices of the community during the festivals. Within the context of Gaan-Ngai, the paper highlights, behind its colourful embellishments, the deeper meaning of the festival which is the expression of love, joy, and blessings.

Keywords: *Zeliangrong, Gaan Ngai, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, Festival, Rituals, Dormitory*

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper includes collecting information and data from various secondary sources such as newspaper, journal, websites, to study and gain deeper understanding of one of the indigenous festivals of the Zeliangrong community.

INTRODUCTION

The Zeliangrong community celebrates several festivals in a year such as Napkao-Ngai, Puakpat-Ngai, Lui Ngai Ni, and the most important and biggest festival among the multicolored festivals is Gaan-Ngai. All these festivals are related to the agricultural practice marking a specific type of activity and reflecting the various stages of farming. For instances, Napkao-Ngai - the seed-sowing festival, Puakpat-Ngai - the pre-harvest festival, etc. The literal meaning of Gaan-Ngai, in simple words, is called winter festival. The correct and appropriate nomenclature of the festival given or spoken by the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people is "Chakaan Gaan Ngai." Chakaan for winter or dry season, Gaan for moonshine or night with moonlight, and Ngai for festival. The festival is largely celebrated by the indigenous Zeliangrong community residing in three states of Northeast India; Manipur, Assam, and Nagaland. They do still follow

and practice the indigenous religion known as "Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak" (TRC) promoting and preserving the customs, old traditions, and religious beliefs of ancestors or predecessors. The three brothers of the community have different names of the festival namely: Hega Ngi by Zeme, Gin Ngi by Liangmei, and Gaan Ngai by Rongmei. Though the way of celebration may differ among them the festival is observed in similar aspects of themes and objectives.

GAAN-NGAI OF ZELIANGRONG COMMUNITY

In Tribal History of Eastern India, E.T. Dalton writes, "Ga'an-Ngai, a biggest festival of Zeliangrongs which falls in December/January." The Gaan-Ngai is also known as post-harvest festival because "When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works and people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of Tingkao Ragwang" (Kamei Budha, 2013). The festival is celebrated on 12 January, 2025 in Manipur and in Nagaland, it is celebrated on 7 January 2025. In general, it is celebrated for five days every year and it can be extended for another one or two days more. Today, the Zeliangrong community celebrates Gaan-Ngai in all inhabitant region of ZLR villages, towns, and cities. The social relationship between the spiritual leaders and different clans, as well as the bond shared among the family members, youth, and society were further cemented by the festival. The biggest festival is celebrated honoring god (Tingkao Ragwang) for the good and abundant agricultural harvest and to spread peace, goodwill, and prosperity among the people.

A colonial Britisher asserts, "The Gaan-Ngai festival is characterized by feasting, drinking, dancing and singing, and shouting of the Hoi, Hoi without which no entertainment of any kind would be complete." The howl of Hoi Hoi, in rhythm, plays a crucial part in the festival, which reflects the expression of happiness, joy, and faith of the indigenous people towards the Tingkao Ragwang (Kamei Budha, 2013). The dormitories of both the genders; boys' dormitory (Khangchhu) and the girls' dormitory (Luchiu) have a fundamental role to play during the activities of the whole festival.

EVE OF GAAN-NGAI

At the outset of the festival month, Gaan-Shaanmei is performed. One elder of the village makes an important announcement by blowing the horn of either bull or mithun promulgating about the coming of festival and informs the villagers to make essential preparation such as food, drinks, etc. for the same (Kamei Budha, 2013). The dormitories, both Khangchhu and Luchiu gather firewood and wisp or flaming torch (Mailam) which will be used on the festival day. (Kamson, 2012). This is called Thingtinmei, in local dialect. The leaders (Gaanthaimei) of each dormitory maintain discipline and order by giving instructions and guidance to the members for the smooth functioning of the festival. Some youth also blow horn inviting the god's presence in the festival asking for blessings. The leaders also make sure that the essential requirements of the festival are in place such as, firewood, local drums, bamboos, etc. which are very much necessary for the performance of the festival (Kamei J, 2012). At the end of the day, the members of the dormitory visit each household in the village and collect ginger (Guh, regarded as sacred and use in rites, sacrifices to fight off evils) and egg for ritual practices offering to the deities or natural forces, followed by the obligation of holy wine or rice-beer (Zoungao) to Tingkao Ragwang.

FIRST DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

In local dialect, the opening day of the festival is called 'Ngaigangmei' and a number of rituals are performed by the village priest or elder of village council (Pei). The priest offers ginger and egg to the northern (Kaipi) and southern (Kaiba) village deities (Bambu). This ceremony is called "Guhlim Dan Sanmei." Ginger is believed to represent the fingers of Tingkao Ragwang and it also addressed as golden finger, Kachak Guhbung (Kamei Budha, 2013). The meaning of this ritual is seeking mercy from the deities to protect and prevent from any violence, danger and illness but a blessing for the festival. Following this ritual, another ritual is carried out called "Gaukpaijaomei." For this the village elders and the members of both the dormitories sacrifice a pig offering to Tingkao Ragwang for health and prosperity of the whole village. Then,

the priest observes the pig spleen for the omen of the year and to determine the future of the villagers. Healthy spleen means good omen. In contrast, certain rituals are conducted to cleanse the bad omen in the future path (Kamei Boniface, 2022).

The flesh of the pig is distributed to all male dormitory. The spleen is either given to the examiner or the oldest man of the village followed by libation of holy wine to Tingkao Ragwang. The girls' dormitory also gets its share of the pig flesh. Then the festival feast is prepared and cooked, the pig flesh together with its blood. This name of the curry is 'Zeigan.' After this, a cry of Hoi Hoi known as Naplao-Hoi is performed for dinner followed by oblation of holy wine to Supreme God. The male dormitory first takes the taste of the curry which is believed as oath taking. Then the priest offers holy wine to Tingkao Ragwang, Bambu, and ancestors of the village for safety and prosperity of the village followed by beating of local drum by youth which signifies the commencement of the Gaan-Ngai festival.

The male dormitory produces a new fire at local ground (Danshanpung) by the friction of wood and bamboo known as "Mailapmei" in local translation. The fire is distributed to every villager or some youths visit the individual families to produce the fire which is sacred (Kamson, 2012). The Zeliangrong community believed that this fire is sacred and signifies ritual sanctification. It is believed that the blessed influence of the fresh fire will last throughout the whole year. With the new fire, every household cook their food for the festival. They believed that cooking and partaking of the foods cooked with the fire will grant them healthy, wealthy, and wise (Kamei Budha, 2013).

Now, the young boys make preparation for the competition of sports and games such as long jump, shot-put, etc. are to be performed in the local ground. In the afternoon, whole members for Khangchiu wearing best ceremonial attires, headgear and holding spears march the whole village usually starting from Khangchiu (after libation of holy wine to Supreme God) and come to a halt at the local ground in Hoi procession (Hoi Gammei). This Hoi reflects the strength and identity of the community. Following Hoi procession, the youths perform Taophai Danchammei, competition in sports and games at Danshanpung in the presence of the whole villagers (Kamei J, 2012).

These sports and activities are introduced or graced by the Chief (Nampou) of the village with a sort of religious hymns for wellbeing and prosperity of the village. The winners of the competition are blessed by the elders of the village and in turn the youths give gifts to the latter for declaring and acknowledging his or her ability and talent (Kamei Budha, 2017). The competition and sports activities come into halt.

Once the competition is over the youths return to Khangchiu and Luchiu in the Hoi procession. It is crucial for Zeliangrong that every event begin and end with Hoi (Kamei Budha, 2013). The "Napkaos Ceremony," as it is called in the local dialect, is performed in every household. Tingkao Ragwang is offered a healthy and matured fowl or cock as a thanks-giving for a good and abundant crop (Kamei Budha, 2017). On this day, the families of the lost souls who died in the previous year arrange a last farewell in the form of parting meal. The grave is beautified or decorated and adorned with drinks and vegetables as a way of sharing the meal with them (Kamson, 2017). According to local belief, the departed souls stay in the village until the final banquet is done. This ritual practice is known as "Ngidongmei." Bronislaw Malinowski asserts, "At the time for festival the spirits of dead ancestors return and receive offerings and sacrificial libations, mingle with the survivors and rejoice the feast."

In the evening, the village elders or members of the village council (Pei) visit each household around the village to offer council, encourage people to enjoy festival, and caution them not to indulge in any violence, quarrel during the whole festival. The village council may administer penalties or kind of punishment for noncomplinace. "Saopak Danmei" is the native dialect for it. The unmarried members of both the Khangchiu and Luchiu alternately visit each other's' house and enjoy together the family-prepared meals. The local called it "Napcha Tukaronmei." Some share the foods they brought from their home in a common place. The first day of the Gaan-Ngai festival ends with the youths of the dormitories organising a

"Pazeimei" program in the village after the evening super (Kamson, 2012). They would then go out in groups and sing the village guarding song (Kairong Lonlu) for some hours or throughout the night.

SECOND DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

The main festival (Ngaidai) takes place on the second day of the Gaan-Ngai festival. On this particular day, all members of both the Khangchiu and Luchiu bring Tamcha, which means gift to their respective dormitory (Kamei Budha, 2019). The gifts are in the form of various dishes such as drinks, chutney, meat, vegetable, rice beer and other foods. The parents of the departed souls who were the members of the dormitories also give Tamcha to the dormitories in commemoration. In return, the dormitories stand solidarity with the deceased families and the latter also receive small portion of gifts from the formers.

Following morning meal, dormitory boys and girls distribute fairly from their collection of Tamcha to other institutions such as Pei-village council, Karapei Kaibang-office of old women, Gaanchang Kaibang-elders office, and Napmu Kaibang-ritual house of paddy (Kamei J, 2012). In addition to giving gifts, they also sing and dance, which is called Tamcha Laam, though the dance is only performed by the girls. The meaning behind this Tamcha Laam is a prayer offered to the four traditional institutions so as not to cause any illness, tragedy or hardship to the members of the dormitories for the coming year (Kamei Gangmumei, n.d.). The Zeliangrong treat those institutions as holy places. Because of this Tamcha Laam, the festival's second day, is also known as Tamcha Ngai. The local believe that it is a bad omen if the youths eat the pieces of Tamcha before offering them to the four mentioned institutions (Kamei Budha, 2013).

During the festival, serving best rice beer (Joungao) to the visitors is mandatory. Hymns of Tamcha: "Au Apou Tingkao Ragwang, today, we are celebrating the Gaan-Ngai festival with a happy mood and offer dried fish, holy wine, salt-cake, etc. to you. We presented these to the four institutions, in honour of as sacred. So, we pray to you to give a long-lasting and successful institution in future" (Kamson, 2012).

At the end of the second day, the village is guarded by the Khangchiu and Luchiu (Kairong Lonmei). The males traverse the village singing songs and enchanting hymns in praise of the might and bravery of the villagers. The girls, on the other hand, have competition among themselves in singing songs.

THIRD DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

Tuna Gaan-ngai, or the festival of the youth, is the name given to the third day of the festival. In the morning, two heads of Khangchiu (Khangbon) and two heads of Luchiu (Tunapi) bring gifts or Tamcha such as rice beer, meat, vegetables, etc. in their respective dormitories (Kamson, 2017). The foods and drinks brought by them are enjoyed by the other members of both dormitories after the sacred offering of holy wine to Tingkao Ragwang. A priest blesses them with a traditional hymn for copious gifts and wine. In the evening, the male dorm invokes to Tingkao Ragwang offering prayer to grant both Khangbons and Tunapis strength and longevity. All boys and girls perform a farewell dance called "Khangbon Kadimei Laam," in honour of both Khangbons and Tunapis who have been promoted to a higher post "Gaanchang" and for their active participation and dedication to the dormitories (Kamson, 2012).

On the third day, the village laments for the dead of those who were members of the Khangchiu and Luchiu. The dormitories also give farewell dance named "Thei-Kadi-Laam" at the deceased's families who died in the previous year (Kamei Gangmumei, n.d.). The families offer wine, vegetables, and meat to the spirit of the deceased over their graves which symbolises the departure of souls of the dead. Emile Durkheim writes, "When an individual dies, his soul quits the body in which it dwelt, and after the mourning is accomplished, it goes to the land of souls, locally called Taroilam." In addition, the dorms pay respect and commemorate the girls who will get married in the coming season with a farewell dance.

In the afternoon, a ritual known as "Khunnumei" is observed in which the Nampou dig holes at the village entrance and offer Loidui-egg and Tanchu-iron pieces while chanting relevant hymns. This ceremony is to

confirm him that he is the descendant of the village's founder and prays for the affirmation of his position and strength of the village (Kamei Gangmumei, n.d.). When there is a silence in the hamlet, another rite named "Rangteng Pammei" which translates to embracing the village gate, takes place. During the day, the young boys assemble a wooden pole of Shiang tree, the gaa creepers, and canes and store them at the village gates (Kamei Budha, 2013).

Later in the middle of the night, one Rangteng Pammei clan elder uproots the wooden pole at the village gate while chanting proper hymns. This signifies the village's reaffirmation of its strength and unity against the malevolent evil forces and elements. Then, a Hoi procession is done to scare away the wild beast and evils spirits followed by a complete silence. The ritual ends by shouting 'Gaiye' which means good, for four times and in Hoi procession, they make their way back to the boys' dormitory.

FOURTH DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

The Gaan-Ngai festival's fourth day is known as "Longkumei," meaning hill climbing. On the fourth day, the delegates of both the dormitories organise a hill trekking for sightseeing led by one or two elders of the village. Both boys and girls of Khangchiu and Luchiu showcase their inborn talents, skills, and abilities that last a lifetime such as singing song, drum beating, etc. Among them the experts display the beating of drum (Khong Baimei) and is witnessed and enjoyed by the others. Those who are also expert and experienced in hunting tell their tales of killing wild animals such as tiger, bear, boar, etc. (Kamei Budha, 2019). In local dialect, they called this Kabaomei, which means warriors' talks.

On the hilltop, the youths sing traditional song named, Luchenlu (lamenting song). Generally, the song is sung for the girls by the boys. After such activities like singing, talent show "Gakting Tam" (Pork Chutney), rice beer, vegetables, etc. are shared among them.

Among the youths present there, two boys and girls are chosen to be kings and queens (Phakgwang) and they are crowned with a particular type of grass (Phak). After they are crowned as kings and queens, in Hoi procession the members of the dorms return to the village and perform a dance (Phakgwang Laam) in honour of the Phakgwangs (Kamei J, 2012). In respect, the families of the kings and queens offer Laam Baan to the youths in the form of drinks and eatables. The boys adorn and beautify their dao (big sword) with flowers and the girls make wreaths and wear them while dancing. Likewise, another dance called "Naptang Laam" is performed to greet and welcome new families dedicating to recognise them as part of the village (Gonmei L, 2017).

FIFTH DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

The last day or closing day of the Gaan-Ngai festival is called "Napchanmei." On the closing day, a traditional ceremony known as calling of paddy (Napkaomei) is performed by the participants of both Khangchiu and Luchiu. They offer a big and healthy cock to the goddess of food grains (Kangdailu) and Tingkao Ragwang (Kamson, 2012). The ritual meaning is to replenish the foods which have been wastage during the previous four days of festival owing to the lavish use of consumption as well as to ensure a bountiful plantation and prosperity in the coming year. The youths also offer prayer to Kambuipui and other goddesses such as Charaipui and Kairao (ancestors) to call back the wealth wasted. These goddesses are offered a fowl, rice beer, etc. and are placed on the hearth stones who were believed to take the form of hearth stones in the house (Kamei J, 2012). This ritual ceremony is named as Napchanmei, in native word.

Every household in the village is distributed a bamboo tube by the male dormitory which is hung in the front wall of the house. The local believed that by hanging the bamboo tube, all the epidemic diseases will be stored in it. Then it is to be disposed of outside the western side of the village. People believed that while the East brings life and fortune, the West brings death (Kamei J, 2012).

Every household in the village worship the goddesses of food grains and wealth namely; Kangdailu and Kambuipui respectively. The housewives offer foods like chicken liver, rice beer on the hearth stones, where both the goddess reside. Napsampantilai, grain jar, which is believed to be the core of wealth also placed a food on it to bring prosperity for the family. In most cases, the traditional rite is typically performed by housewife of the family for the goddesses of food grains and wealth are female (Kamei Budha, 2017).

Later in the evening, to formally recognised the entry for newly married women into the women group, married women of the village perform a dance at the houses of newly married women, which, in local dialect, "Meipui Laamgangmeli" (Kamei Budha, 2019). In return, the women were entertained with drinks and food by the newly wed family.

REOPENING OF THE VILLAGE (RAANGPATMEI)

The next day after the closing day of the festival is called "Raangpatmei" which means the reopening of the village gate. The village gates were closed at the start of the festival to protect the people from hostile attack or raid and to prevent any outside disturbances. On this date, a ritual practice termed as "Raren Loumei," meaning worship of seven Brothers Gods, is done and offering of fowls, wine, ginger, eggs, and other are invoked for the good health, safety, and prosperity of the entire village (Kamson, 2017).

On this particular day, appointments of vacant posts and retirements of person, as well as handing over of charges and important documents related to religious-cultural matters concerning the village are announced. Because the Zeliangrong believed that such announcements in front of the gods are considered to have strong customary sanctions behind them (Kamei Budha, 2019). Following, the village elders make their way back to Peikai and invoke Tingkao Ragwang through Buhkaomei, which is a calling of the soul. Such practice is to ensure the welfare of the villagers and also to extend protection to the people from death and danger (Kamei Budha, 2017). In this way, the biggest and most vibrant festival of the indigenous Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, Gaan- ngai, is properly concluded.

CONCLUSION

The five-day Gaan-Ngai festival of the Zeliangrong community is thus among the colourful festivals celebrated every year. The various traditional institutions such as Khangchui and Luchiu, Pei, Women folks, Gaanchang, and the people have significant roles to contribute in the multifaceted festival. Rituals practices are observed invoking to the Tingkao Ragwang, a Supreme God and other goddesses offering prayer to grant the villagers good health, protection, abundant harvest, and prosperous life. This festival is important for the deads as well for they were given a proper farewell with drinks and foods by both the members of the dormitories and deceased families. The TRC also strongly believed in the Hoi procession with which they start and end an important event. The festival with numerous ritual ceremonies reflecting the practicing traditions, customs of the indigenous community expressed the love, joy, and blessings during the whole festival.

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