



Change and Continuity in the Lotha Naga Marriage System

¹Jandeno Ezung, ² Elonbeni Ngullie

¹Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology,

St. Joseph University, Dimapur, Nagaland, India

Abstract: Marriage system differs from community to community and from place to place. Likewise, even in Naga society every tribe has a unique way of celebrating this event. The institution of marriage is recognized in all cultures and societies as the core pillar of society. This paper examines the traditional and contemporary marriage system of the Lotha Nagas. This paper also studies the changes of the marriage system and rituals in the Christian era. The Lothas are also known as Kyongs, they traditionally inhabit in the district of Wokha in Nagaland. The marriage in the olden days had several rituals to be followed before they were officially declared as marriage. But, with the coming of Christianity and modernity the old customs and rituals that were practiced are been discarded and a new system based on Christian value has been adopted.

Keywords: Marriage, Traditional, Christianity, customs, rituals

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Gillin and Gillin, "Marriage is a socially approved way of establishing a family of procreation." (Rao, 2018:327). Marriage is a union of two individuals. It is not only between two individuals but it is a union between families, clan, villages and communities. Marriage differs from community to community, religion to religion and place to place. The institution of marriage is recognised in all cultures and communities and this institution has many rituals and customs attached to it. (Chandra,2005)

Marriage in Nagaland is centred around many interesting beliefs, values and facts that are deeply rooted within the tribal values. Nagas follows a strictly traditional morals of values. In Nagaland different tribes follow different beliefs and morals, which they maintain with dedication and obligations. The importance of marriage as an institution is recognised wherever there is human civilization and it possesses societal values, most of which are socio-economic and religio-political values (Mechieo,2020:69)

Lothas are one of the sixteen tribes of Nagaland, the Lothas belong to the Mongloid stock with Tibeto-Burma group of language. The Lothas are medium brown in complexion and medium structure in height. The language that the Lothas speak among themselves is known as Kyong-yi¹, the Lothas have an oral tradition and their histories are know from their stories, legends which are been passed on from one generation to another (Ovung,2012:20). There is no different dialect like the Ao's and the Rengma's nagas ,except a slight difference in the accent between the Liyo (lower range) and Nrung (upper range).(Mills, 1922:207) Wokha district is the home of the Lothas. In December 1973, it was given a separate district. Before it was one of the sub-division under Mokokchung district. Wokha town is named after wokha village. The Wokha district is divided topographically into three ranges; the upper range which consist of Chukidong, Englan and Phiro circles. The Middle range with Sungro, Aitepyong, Sanis and Lotsu circle and the Lower range with Baghty, Bhandari, Chanpang and Ralan circles. The district is classified as rural having 111 recognized villages except, the Wokha Town which is classified as urban because it is the districts headquarter (Ovung, 2012:20-21).

¹ Kyong-yi – Lotha language

They called themselves as Kyon², there is a traditional belief that long ago the Lothas were living in China near the riverbank of Nankiang and from which they got the name as “Kyong” which is derived from the name of the riverbank (Lotha, 1998:21).

Traditional practice of Lotha Marriage system:

In a Lotha community Exogamous marriage system is practiced, except in some villages where only one clan exists. From the very beginning of its existence as community the Lothas were divided among themselves on the basis of “PHARATRY” which is called ‘Motsürüie’. There are three phratries which are again sub-divided into many clans and kindreds.

Generally, the Lotha’s follow a monogamous marriage system. But general understanding of polygamous marriage, the customary practice allowed a man to have more than one wife on the following grounds:

1. He should be a rich man to maintain his family
2. With the consent of his principal wife. As usual the original wife used to search new wife for the husband
3. If the wife is incompetent sexually such as sickness, no desire, etc
4. If his wife is barren
5. If his kindred agree to him having second wife
6. If he can afford to perform Tssuroshantha (Feast of fame) and followed by Ozü Esü (Dragging of Genna stone) (Ezung, 2009:4)

Engagement:

The talks for marriage were carried on by the parents of the groom. It is never done against the will of the girl. There is a mutual consent between parents and the bride for marriage. The Longapvüi³ (go-between women) should inform of the proposal to the bride parents. She also visits for the second time and she offers Soko⁴ as a present. Such giving is called Soko Pithaka⁵, which means that the girl is promised by giving Soko, like that of the engagement ring given during the engagement party in the modern period. After this the groom and the bride were allowed to contact each other by the exchange of gifts. The groom used to give handicrafts such as Okhyak/Phari⁶ and Onhyan⁷. The bride in return gives the groom Lejüpzü⁸ and Rüge⁹, these gifts were exchanged out of love.

After the engagement is completed, the groom is by obligation to live a slave-like life in his father-in-law’s house for a period of one year. During this period “Without Solvent” he works by chopping firewood, fetching water, clearing bushes etc, the purpose for doing this was to judge the groom’s ability whether he could work hard to maintain his wife. Upon the completion of one year period, the groom had to cut the ‘Khorotssüng’¹⁰ and used to tie it in bundles out of which five bundles used to be given to the bride in the form of a display on both sides of the bride’s door which signifies that the bride is ready for marriage. (Gosh.1978:40)

Upon the completion of a slave-like life in his father-in-law house, the family of the groom constructs a new house for the groom and bride, by performing the pig-killing ceremony, in which the best portion of meat (right thigh or arm) is given to the father-in-law. According to Zanao no marriage before Pikhuchak¹¹ the villagers believed that if marriage takes place before that the prosperity of the village is hindered. In the month of feast of prosperity, or after killing the pig it must be given to the family of the bride as a price of equilibrium (Hanlam). This is given prior to the actual marriage day. (Ezung:2009:6)

² Kyon- which simply means “Man”

³ Longapvüi- Go between women

⁴ Soko-Rice beer

⁵ Soko Pithaka- Rice beer is given

⁶ Okhyak/Phari- a basket like carrier

⁷ Onhyan- Ropes to carry the baskets

⁸ Lejüpzü- scrabbard rope/ hipties

⁹ Rüge- outfit

¹⁰ Khorotssüng- a special kind of firework

¹¹ Pikhuchak- feast of prosperity

Hanlamvü (Bride-Price):

In a Lotha community they have this customary tradition of gift giving by the bride's family to the couple at the time of marriage. Hanlam is the Lotha traditional practice of giving a live pig by the groom's family to the bride's family. The bride family distributes a sizeable amount to the members of the phratry (jiwo). The etymological meaning of hanlamvü means "bride-price". This is a unique cultural practice among the Nagas that is practiced only by Lotha Community. Despite the cultural distinctiveness its meaning is not different from "dowry" or the comparatively more direct term "bride-price" (Nienu,2021:187). If dowry means property or money brought by a bride in her husband on their marriage then hanlam has the same meaning. Therefore, hanlam when translated into English it can be safely known as dowry because it involves bringing in wealth or cash or kind into the new relationship ie marriage. Interestingly this hanlam is closely tied with the pig which can be also called as hanlam voko (pig) Three days prior to the scheduled wedding day the groom is expected to bring a live pig to the bride's home. In the ancient days, the hanlam pig was usually reared. According to the belief the pig has to be male, without any marks or wounds or any kind of infections. These three elements seem to be an ideal even in determining the value of a person.

After the pig is brought in the bride's place an elderly person prays over it and it is speared to death. Then it is cut and distributed to the brides paternal *jiwotsü*¹² members and married sisters. To whom the hanlam-so is given they are expected to give varied items on the wedding day like spade, hoe, domestic animals, baskets, food items and winnow. In modern time usually cash is given instead of giving such items. This Hanlam was mainly practiced to ensure that the bride and groom have basic needs to begin a new and independent life as a couple.(Nienu,2021:188)

Marriage Ceremony:

A day is fixed for giving Halam, this is given three days before the wedding ceremony. On the day of the marriage a portion of marriage price is given to the father-in-law and the remaining prices are given in installment basis.

According to J.B Mills the following bride price were given in installment basis:

- I. Loman¹³- There is no fixed rate. The price varies from village to village
- II. Chüka¹⁴- The amount is about two hundred and fifty basket of paddy, or thirty rupees if paid in cash. The money or paddy is paid in installment after a long interval.
- III. Etechhiman¹⁵- Once they receive etechhiman the bride cannot claim for further intallments.
- IV. Myingshi Man¹⁶- If the wife dies leaving the children, a payment of one or two rupees called myingshi is made to her parents or their heir or if their brothers is alive or who can in this case claim any of the Opye etssoman. (Ezung, 2009:7). According to Mills this is not given by the groom to the bride's father. But the daughter of the bride who married to another man must give the price to the brother of the bride eventually, the husband of the bride's daughter become ejanphi¹⁷ of the brother till death. (Mills,1922:155)

Contemporary system of marriage:

In the present marriage system marriage is never made against the girl's will. Most marriage are arranged by the young people themselves with the one they wish to marry. But there are marriages which are negotiated by Longapvüi¹⁸. After the proposal is accepted, a day is fixed for the engagement party in consultation with the church pastor.

Practice of Engagement party:

It becomes official when the pastor is invited to conduct the engagement party. The engagement oath is taken in the presence of both members of the families and some church elders. The wedding day is fixed on the day of the engagement party. (Ezung,2009:11). According to Ghosh, it was observed that if there are premarital

¹² Jiwotsü- There are three phratryes, comprising of several clans among the Lothas: Ezonmontsü rüi, Tonphaktsü rüi and Limchachan rüi. Rüi means "descendants"

¹³ Loman- Bride price

¹⁴ Chüka- the price of feeding the bride's brother

¹⁵ Etechhiman- price of dead

¹⁶ Myingshi Man- Price of repurchasing the name of the bride

¹⁷ Ejanphi- Obedient man

¹⁸ Longapvüi- a go-between

sexual relations who can be known only after pregnancy, the marriage does not take place in the church, but in the house of the groom by throwing a party and not by any religious solemnization.

Preparation of wedding feast:

This marriage feast is held at the bride's parents' house. Marriage feasts are held with eagerness and with great passion. All the members of the clan and even members of the phratries are also invited, eating and drinking becomes the top priority. In the feast they discuss how many kgs of pork for Halam should be taken, how many pigs, oxen and fowls are going to be killed for the feast becomes the main point of the people. In this present time marriage has become like a competition. As a result of the competition Halam has increased from thirty kgs of pork to three to four hundred of porks which has become a social problem. The marriage expenditure in the Lotha community is also another social problem. Even in villages people spend a huge amount of money for the wedding ceremony, this has become a competition. Preparation of marriage ceremony usually starts one month before the wedding.

Ceremonial Day:

On the appointed day and time, the bride and groom wait in the church with the family members and friends. The bride and groom proceed to the church to take the marriage oath. The bride enters the church holding the father's arm, followed by the family members while the whole congregation stands and remains silent. While the musical prelude is played tenderly, the father hands over his daughter's hand to the groom and the couples are seated in the seat that is arranged. Then the service starts with prayer, devotional songs, bible reading, and preaching etc. The minister calls them forward for the vows. One by one, they speak their vows. After taking the vow the couples are asked to put their signature on the covenanted document. Then the wedding ring is exchanged, if its available. Then the bride and groom are asked to kneel down in front of the pastor for the prayer. The pastor offers a prayer of blessings to the couples. After the prayer, the marriage certificate is presented to them, declaring that they are no more two but one, henceforth they will be called as husband and wife. Feasting follows and the bride and groom are congratulated. Presents are received at the reception and they are brought to the newly wedded couple's house. Then the newly wedded couple begins their married life.

Conclusion:

If we look at the present time, so many beliefs and practices have changed. But the importance of marriage institution is still there. The customs, rituals and beliefs attached to it are still there. Change in marriage rituals in the Lotha community now is the prominence of individualism, which appears more distinct when factors such as education, economic liberation and exposure/interaction with other culture are associated with the individuals who are marrying. It is also in marriage rituals where the assimilation of westernization such as exchange of rings, cake cutting, wearing of white wedding dress etc appears most prominent. Lotha's, has done away with the old traditional practices and system and one major change in marriage rituals after coming of Christianity is the prominent role of the church – while the priest solemnizing the marriage ceremony can be considered a continuity of the indigenous custom where the indigenous priests played significant role in performing marriage rituals, marrying in the church is actually a western Christian tradition.

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