

THE ANCESTRAL COMMUNITY LIFE OF THE POUMAI NAGA: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

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Abstract

The Poumai Naga folksongs and folktales state that Poumai Naga is one of the major and oldest Naga tribes. Poumai have its own distinct cultural heritage. The ancestral community life of the Poumai Naga can be seen through their folk songs, folktales, customs, dances, feasts, games, festivals, dresses, ornament, rituals, practices, handicraft etc. In the olden days the life and activities of Poumai are not beyond their village. They lived only within their own village territory. In Poumai Naga society there was no class, caste system and any social distinction between them and therefore, every person enjoys equal rights. The Poupais are by nature cheerful, humorous, hospitable, honest and industrious. The people practice several customary laws and traditions in their societal formation, for instance, they practiced dormitory system, where separate dormitories are allotted for the bachelors and the bachelorettes. There are some important practices and laws that provide a good atmosphere and safety life for the society such as traditional customary laws and customs. Traditions, laws, customs, beliefs and social structures were very central to the socio-cultural life of the Poumai Naga. Although there are no written customary laws, people are aware and respectful of their rights, duties, and customs of the village. With the coming of Christianity along with modern education marked the new transformation of Poumai Naga community life. Christianity plays an important role in transforming the old social values and ways of life.

Keyword: Indigenous features, Christianity, and modern education

1.INTRODUCTION

The present paper tries to unearth the rich unwritten ancestry community life of the Poumai Naga that have been passed down from generations and how their ancestral community life has changed with the coming of Christianity and modern education. Every tribe including Poumai Naga has its own certain set of social customs and traditions to distinguish them from other tribes. One can see their particular traits as cultural traits of behaviour and these social relationships give cultural identity to Poumai Naga. E.B. Tylor in his book, "Primitive Culture" (1871) defines culture as, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". The age-old Poumai cultures that have been passed down from ages are not built up suddenly. It is the continuous addition of newly shared acceptance by its generation to control and uphold the society. Therefore, it is the moral duty and social order acquired by practicing and shared by the Poupais. Culture shapes the identity of a community. One cannot isolate from its own culture that has been passed down from generation to generation.

In the past, traditional culture plays an important role in safeguarding the identity of Poumai. It is said that when traditional culture governed the Poumai society there were less social immoral activities, there was peace and unity in the Poumai villages. Though all these rules and laws were not written, people are aware of all these traditional laws and norms. There was no class and caste system nor any social distinction between rich and poor in society. Therefore, every person enjoys equal rights.

Every Poumai village safeguards their own village boundary, enmity and head hunting started among the Poupais because of hunting expedition to other village territories. During that time those who chopped off more heads were highly respected in the society. Those great warriors who made fun with woman private parts

when they chopped off their heads have completely lost their generation because of the sins they have committed during the war. There are some stories stating that some warriors chopped off woman breasts and the private part when they killed for fun and teased unkindly. It is a taboo to disrespect human private parts even during the war. Women played an important role between neighbouring villages, they brought reconciliation, love and peace amongst Poumais during the practice of head hunting culture. Inter village marriage was commonly practiced by all the Poumai villages for security and to bring brotherhood amongst them. During the war between villages, women who were married to other villages goes to their village on behalf of the village with rice beer and cooked meat to ask forgiveness and brought reconciliation among the villages.

Every Poumai village has some stone platform in the village, this platform serves as a centre of their community life. They held any meeting from this stone platform as there was no community hall. During festivals or any special occasion, the villagers exchange drink rice beer, curry and eat together from the stone platform. It is alleged that the unity and the prosperity of the village can be seen through the erection of stones in the outskirts of the village. It is deemed that united villages have erected more stones than the rest of the villages. When a family is to perform 'Feast of Merit' the whole villagers help the family in preparing the feast. The whole village men folks pull together the feast stone from the jungle and erect the stone in the outskirts of the village. The village elders and leaders encouraged the young potential leaders to performed the 'Feast of Merit' and defend the village.

For a long period, the Poumai Naga is isolated in their own village, without practically any contact with the outside world and knew none other than their own villagers. Change is unavoidable. Every human society has been revolutionizing in different ways. Since time immemorial Poumai Naga society also has been changing tremendously. Their ways of traditional administration have also been changing after encounter and contact with other higher cultural levels and advanced people. Willaim Carlson Smith in his book, "The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam" states that, "Old beliefs and customs are dying, the old traditions are being

forgotten, the number of Christians, or quasi- Christians, is steadily increasing, and the spirit of change is invading and pervading every aspect of village". The new changes have brought quite incongruous to traditional practices that have been practiced and followed. Though new practices and different cultures have been introduced and diffused to old practices, still the old customary laws and practices play an important role along with a modern system that has introduced and practiced.

When Christianity and modern education were introduced to Poumai society, some changes took place to suit according to the situation and Christian perspectives. The early Christian missionaries assumed that natives culture and beliefs were immoral and against the Christian doctrines without understanding the core value of its culture and beliefs. The missionaries did not only bring the gospel, they spread the gospel with their culture assuming that their culture is superior and they imposed their culture to tribal people including to Poumai Naga. The British missionaries and modern education played an important role in contributing and transforming their old traditional culture and their outlook which has benefitted the Poumai to compete with other civilized society. Though Christianity introduced to Poumai lately, they are progressing in all aspects of development.

2.CONCLUSION

After contact with the western culture, there are some demerits that affect the Poumai ancestral community life and its culture. The missionaries misapprehend the tested values of Poumai culture and transformed their ancestral community life to westernization. In the present Poumai Christian society, one can see the distinction between the rich and the poor, literate and illiterate in the society. The rich and educated people are enjoying more privileges in society as well as in the church. People hardly listen to the poor and counted their words in any decision making. It is said that in the past Poumais were simple, truthful and kind-hearted. They have a deep respect for the elders and their love for justice is well known. But today these qualities are diminishing in the society. Therefore, the present Christians need to reconsider and be rooted in their ancestral ethos to counter the negative effects. In this

way, the Christian message and the gospel will be more effective and relevant to the present Christian society. Change is inevitable but it is sad to note that, some of the negative changes have devastated their cultural heritage. Some of the challenges and tragedies being faced by Poumai Naga are identity crisis and cultural conflict in the wake of Christianity and modern education. The new culture and values are overtaking as the gospel truth, forgetting the old tested culture, values and this has created social and religious tensions in the present society. M. Horam has rightly pointed out in his book, "Nagas Old Ways and New Trends", "The modern Nagas have imitated a good deal of western life-style and yet they do not feel comfortable. At the same time, they feel out of place because they do not fit in the traditional Naga society". No doubt Christianity, and modern education marked the beginning of socio-cultural transformation and contributed more to peoples' development than otherwise. However, because of the coming of Christianity, a new era has begun.

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