

LAONII FESTIVAL: A CATALYST FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE POUMAI NAGA

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Abstract

Since time immemorial traditional festivals have been an indispensable part of any society. Festivals manifest intangible cultural heritage reflecting its rich culture and tradition of any community. The present paper attempts to situate the meaning of festivals of Poumai Nagas with special reference to Laonii festival. Laonii is an oldest and the most popular customary festivals celebrated in the month of Laokhou (July) which has multifaceted meaning and significances. It is an occasion of renewing bond and believing that no one should be in want of foods and wine (rice beer). It begins with the ritual purification of the house by compiling articles for religious rituals. Some of such rituals are as Loutouyu- a male gender sacramental ceremony, sending off the visitors/guests - the day the villagers eat and drink rice beer to their hearts content. Veilii- the village male folk who have taken sacrament shout at their enemies. The fourth day village cleaning day, the fifth day festival is the day for refusing evil spirit. The priest will release a cook and a branch of Vai (smellies herb) which is kept on the road side so that the spirit won't be able to bear the smell and will not encroach into the village, followed by male mass hunting after performing Pousouyu (diviner) foretelling about the suitability of area for hunting and about the village for that calendar year. Men folk will go for hunting with their weapons and kill wild animals or birds as much as they can whereas women are restricted to go outside the village gate, and also restricted them from weave till the hunting is over. After returning home from hunting, all the man folk proceeded to the nearby village river in whooping where all the males take a dip and all the war weapons like gun, spear, swords, shield, etc., are washed off. On completion of bath,

the elders bless them. This paper analyses the importance of customary festivals and its preservation of the Poumai Naga with special reference to Laonii festival.

Keyword: *Laonii, Laokhou, Loutouyu, Veilii, Vai, Pousouyu (diviner)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Every festival manifests its deeply rooted meaning of any society through celebrations. Each festival also has its descriptive connotation with special meanings for its celebration and ceremony to preserve rituals by every community to fulfill specific purposes. It is the outward manifestation of the subjective and intrinsic characteristics and identity of the community and provides a distinctive identity of particular place and its people. Thus, festivals act as a linkage of the present with the past while inculcating the spirit of communal solidarity and cooperation to work towards common goals. It is celebrated with a unique aspect of the community. It is also part and parcel in the social life of the community. For the *Poumai Nagas*, festivals are not only to have joyous celebration but also to worship gods with thanksgiving and supplication for protection, well-being and prosperity. *Poumai Naga* tribe is one of the major *Naga* tribes inhabiting in a contiguous area bordering *Chakhesang* in *Phek* District of Nagaland in the North, the *Tangkhuls* of *Ukhrul* District in the East, the *Maos* and *Marams* in the West and the *Thangals* in the South. The land of *Poumai* is very fertile with thick forest rich in flora and fauna. The *Poumai* forests are the catchment source of the *Vouri* (Barak River), *Reihdurouri* (Iril River) and the *Ngairi* (Lane River). Agriculture being the main occupation of the *Poumais*, all their festivals are intimately connected with the various agricultural activities throughout the year. For the celebration of various festivals, the *Poumai Nagas* follow the lunar

calendar. Like the Gregorian calendar, it has four seasons but the number of months in each season differs from twelve to thirteen and they do not generally coincide with the Gregorian calendar. Many communities have their different calendar, which may be variable with the Gregorian calendar.

The *Poumai Nagas'* calendar begins with the agricultural cycle with the seed sowing and plantation of *kharif* crops especially paddy. Once the plantation is over, *Poumai Nagas* celebrate one of the most significant festivals called *Laonii*, which was celebrated with prompt and gaiety. *Laonii* is one of the oldest and the most popular customary festivals celebrated in the month of *Laokhou* (a lunar calendar month usually falls in the month of July). This festival has multifaceted meanings and significances. The name of the festival derives from the *Laokhou* (July) which is a combination of two words, '*Lao*' which is the name of the month which literal meaning is 'sanctification', and '*nii*' means 'festival'. Therefore, it can be translated as "Sanctification Festival". This festival is celebrated on completion of hectic and tiresome paddy transplantation of the villagers. One should complete paddy transplantation before the first day of the festival. Any field that is not planted before the festival is to be abandoned for the year as it is believed that paddy transplanting after the festival usually does not yield crops.

Laonii festival is also an occasion of tracing family lineage and renewing the bond of brother-sister relations, renew tie with friends and a time to give out foods and drinks to the poor, orphans and dear ones. It is celebrated in superfluous manner and spent lavishly as much as one could afford. In *Laonii* festival, no one should be in want of foods and wine (mostly refer to rice beer). One should not deny giving rice or paddy for festival when someone asks for it.

Although *Laonii* is celebrated by all the *Poumai Naga* villages, however, there is little variation between the villages with respect to time of celebration. These variations especially the timing of celebration are between those villages in the southern parts and those on the northern parts of the *Poumai* villages. This difference in timing is due to climatic variation which let the people to adjust the timing of paddy plantation. The southern villages are generally ahead of the northern and western as they generally complete their paddy plantation little earlier than the northern villages. Thus,

every village celebrates *Laonii* festival in different timing depending on the climatic condition of the villages and areas, yet its ritual performances and sequences of events, its meaning and purposes of the festival remain the same across the villages and regions.

Laonii is one of the oldest and the most popular customary festivals celebrated among the *Poumai Nagas*. Celebration of *Laonii* has multifaceted meaning and its significances. With the advent of the month of the festival, preliminary preparations are made for the celebration. The Village elders/priests make the public announcement of the advent of the festival and make necessary preparation for the celebration. Every household will prepare rice beer of one brim (approximately of 300 litres capacity made up of wooden) each for the festival. As the festival approaches elderly people will sing a song of seeking blessing from god. The lyric of the song goes "*Hourokeo, houronai-o, du-u, toke-o, ngatokeo-o, jatokeo-o, diotuniimatho, alikhaodipao hi veluo, Oh! Ah mukkho-e*". The translated meaning goes; "like the spider eating comfortably from its nest, come and bless my crops, come to my big field, oh! I seek the wealth" (Interview with S. Thaipi, 29.8.2018).

The festival begins with the ritual purification of the house called *Kidii*. Early in the morning of that day, the priests would tie *Liisho* (compiled articles for using during religious rituals) on the wall of the back side house prepared on the plantain leave as a part of their custom. Only when *Kidii* is performed women will be able to start cooking for the festival. The first day is called *Niidu* which mean the main day of the festival. A blameless cow is killed and its meat is equally distributed to the whole villagers. The meat was dried and kept to use for religious purposes for the whole year. The most exciting event of the first day was *Loutouyu*. It is a male sacramental ceremony. It is the occasion on which the male children leave the "women's side" (Hutton, 1969, p. 204). All the boys who have attained three (3) years of age will perform the male sanctification. On that day everything that is related with eating will be new. The fire was ignited through *Mousii* (a dried-up cover piller light wood) after rubbing with a split bamboo rope. Each family having male children will rear up a blameless cock. The cock is generally kept at a separate place in the form of small hut. This separate place is made up of bamboo and thatch within the corner of the house or

outside the house. Thus the cock is fed with the choicest food. Generally, children used to bring their specially fed cocks to a particular place for fighting competition. Then on the day of festival the cock is killed and cooked in a new oven with water drawn from new pond. The meat is served in a new wooden spoon, plate, and cup, but not in any utensils made up of clay/mica/steel/crockery.

Female genders are not permitted to cook food for *Loutouyu* (eating of food cooked with some medicinal and scented herb called Lou). This cooked food with rice beer in plantain leaf cup is offered to God by invoking with prayer. "God our creator and protector come and partake this food and wine to your heart content. Protect us from all evils". It is a must for all the male gender to take the food. It is taboo to eat the remnant of the food. Any leftover food is buried. A bunch of Lou is soaked in water and dab it in all the joints of limbs of the boy by the adult accomplished, and then bless him to be active, dynamic, victorious and bright as the sun and the moon. They are now recognized as a bonafide male member of the village who shall enjoy the manhood privilege and opportunity. It is a pride and honor for the family in the society. A boy who has performed *Loutouyu* was forbidden to touch any woman's materials for weaving. *Loutouyu* will continue till the 3rd day of the festival.

The second day of the festival is called *Niishepao* which means sending off the visitors/guests. On this day the villagers eat and drink rice beer to their hearts content. The invited friends, sisters (who were married off to other villages), relatives near and dear ones from the neighboring villages are given a special hospitality. Brothers gave meat and rice beer to their beloved sisters (who married off to other villages) and close relatives on their departure day. Thus, women who were married to other neighboring villages, friends and relatives who came from other villages joined the *Laonii* festival are sent off to their villages on this day. It is the customary practice of the *Poumai Nagas* that during *Laonii* festival *Sousa* (piece of meat) was to be given to the younger sisters who are married to other villages. It is a sign and symbol of blessing and remembrance. Giving *Sousa* indicates the bond of love and remembrance even though they are separately living in different villages. On this day no one should quarrel, no debt should be asked and no one should insult other in any manner.

The third day of the festival is called *Veilii*. On this day of festival all the village men folk including those who

have freshly taken *Loutouyu* shout at their enemies by saying; 'My remaining food is good enough for you. Take this and that. Oh! You my enemies, who hate me, take this'. This saying is a sign of victory over the enemies. On this day every eldest male member in the family swear in the name of god that; "This year if I steal others property, let the curse befall upon me and my family, if I ever do that I shall end my life". This swears was taken so that there are no natural calamities and no untoward things happen in the village.

The fourth day of the festival known as *Piiliidivayu*, which is the cleaning day for the entire village and the road which lead to the field. All the trees which grow in and around the village were trim and the village roads are properly repaired. Village pond, well, place of sitting, place of taking rest are all cleaned. The roads were properly clean so as to invite the spirit of luck known as *Liipiitu*. *Liipiitu* is *Vah* (spirit of luck) about one foot in height and a long body hair. It is believed that if the road is properly clean the spirit is pleased and the villagers had a good harvest. But if the road is not clean properly the spirit refused to come and the villagers had bad harvest.

The fifth day of the festival is a day to perform a ritual known as *Rahlai* -which means resisting the evil spirit. On this day the village elders will go to the end of the road where it was previously cleaned and released a blameless cock to please the evil spirit. The village priest will in a ritualistic way released the cock and a branch of *Vai* (smellies herb) is kept on the road side so that the spirit won't be able to bear the smell and go away from the village. It is believed that if anybody came home after releasing the cock, they will not live long. The herb is also kept in every village gate and every household within the village. The day was closed with the announcement of the next day hunting and observation of *genna*.

The last day of the festival is called *Hainai*. The village chief will make another announcement on forth day evening about the next day plan. As announced by village chief about villagers that all male gender would go for hunting, early in the morning the village *Pousoumai* (diviner) foretells about the suitability of area for hunting. The foretellers would also tell and predict the possible events of the village in that calendar year. On this day all the village men folk will go for hunting with their weapons and kill wild animals including birds as many as possible, for killing animals is considered to

be a good sign. More fresh blood is considered more fortune for the villagers. As the day hunting is very important even those who hardly go for hunting joined on that day. It is believed that on this day even the cripple joins in the hunting. Women were not allowed to go outside the village gate nor will they be allowed to do weaving till the hunting is over. After returning home from hunting, all the man folk proceeded to the nearby village river in whooping where all the males take a dip and all the war weapons like gun, spear, swords, shield, are washed off. For those sick people, relative will bring water from the river in the jug (made of dried gourd) and wash them. On completion of bath and washing, the elders bless them and thus the happy *Laonii* festival comes to an end.

2. PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Laonii festival is not only an occasion of sacrifices, feasting and drinking rice beer but it is also to strictly observed *genna* as it is the festival of plantation which needs certain observations to expect good harvest. The six days long activities were not taken lightly. All the rites and rituals are thus strictly observed with utmost reverence. As it was believed to have its consequence, reverence draws its existential meanings. Any eventuality occurred in the village in the current year is generally attributed to the quality of rites and rituals during the festival. This beautiful festival also reminds about the rich cultural heritage of our forefathers welcoming younger male generation to the world of adulthood. Thus, it gives meanings that each stage of life has different meanings and according to each one has to play roles within the society. It helps to preserves the culture and tradition of the *Poumai Nagas* by keeping its cultural elements, such as food, ethic, identity, language, value and belief system alive. *Laonii* festival also highlights the rich customary cultural values and tradition cherished by their ancestors, through this festival, the values and beliefs of the people are demonstrated. They give meaning to the social, political and religious life of the people celebrating them. In the olden days the *Poumais* were known for having high level of reverence to the community, sense of justice, equality, integrity, work ethic, honesty, generosity, hospitality and religiosity. The *Laonii* festival exhibits and reinforces this value system. Nekha (2015 p.24)

points out that festival is one of the oldest institutions for imparting social and cultural values to the people. Unlike any other festivals, *Laonii* festival is generally accompanied by a number of *genna* and religious ceremonies. The rituals and sacrifices are basically performed to appease god and the evil spirit so as to avert troubles and destructions. The *Poumai Nagas* traditional religion was based on oral doctrine propitiating deities and spirits. Agriculture being the prime occupation of the *Poumai Nagas*, all major festivals are connected with the agricultural operation and their traditional beliefs and practices are mainly characterized by this occupation, while the entire activity of the agriculture operation is controlled by their religion. Mathur (1992, p.135.) states that; "Religion, much like other cultural information is inter-generationally transmitted through the process of enculturation with emphasis on oral tradition. Children are narrated specific instances when infuriated spirits caused harm to life and crop of the person who challenged their universality and authority by ignoring or violating the commandments of *Zhevo* (priest). Out of fear and threat emanates obedience and conformity, the *Angami Naga* child accepts the narrations as factual and agrees to abide by the dictates thus perpetuating religious practices and belief system". According to Maitra (1991) "...the participation of young ones is very significant. They learn the ritual and customs so that they can take in future" (p.85.).

The *Laonii* festival is an occasion for universal celebration where every member of the village participates. It is an event for establishing new relationships and renewing the old ones, and also building new relationships with one another. It also helps to spread message of brotherhood, friendship, and peace within and outside the village community. The observance of *genna*, participation in *Loutouyu* (sanctification), hunting, clearing of village roads, etc., indicates the sense of responsibility of every individual towards the welfare of the village. "...the *gennas* are public rather than private affairs. They are performed keeping the community rather than individual at the central position. They provide ample opportunity to work in collectively as going out to hunt or fish, cooking on the single heart and feasting thereby strengthening the adhesivity between individuals and reinforcing solidarity and common identity" Mathur, (1992,p.133). *Laonii* brings equality and unity among all the villagers.

In all, the festivals food constitutes an important element. Like any other Naga tribe, rice beer and meat have been important elements of festivals among the *Poumai* people for centuries. The unique food system and culinary knowledge that have been inherited from one generation to another makes them culturally distinct. *Laonii* is an occasion for unlimited consumption of rice beer and meat. It manifests their ethnic food habits, surplus and the accumulation of wealth of the individual and the community. In short, the traditional food of the *Poumai Nagas* reflects their cultural identity. Thus, *Laonii* festival helps in the preservation of the traditional knowledge of food habits and transmission of the associated heritage.

Laonii festival gives an opportunity to sing folk songs, folk tales and other art forms. It offers an important way of socializing, providing a sense of rootedness and connection to the past. During the festival various folk songs are sang by old and young alike especially at night when the day activities are over. Various peer groups spend hours of feasting and singing. It is a time for the youngsters to know each other deeply so that it helps them easy when time come for them to choose their life partners. While singing on this occasion, they play a single string musical instrument called 'Lana'. In the process the younger generations learn folk songs from them. The folk songs are generally composed of on traditional themes which are derived from oral discourse which is passed down from generation to generation. The folk song reflects the richness of thought and artistic talent of the people. Folk songs act as the medium for the expression of ideas and emotions held in common by the community. Jadava (2013) points out that the cultural traits of their rich folk heritage can be discerned mostly in their folksongs and rhymes (p.65). It is vital mainspring in their traditional education and remit of the people's culture. The *Poumais* unlike in the other festivals do not wear traditional dresses and play traditional games in *Laonii* festival as the festival is about sanctification of paddy field therefore, it is concentrated more on observing *gennas*, rites and rituals.

3. CONCLUSION

The *Laonii* festival of *Poumai Nagas* is thus not only an event of feasting but also situating cosmological aspect of the *Poumai Nagas* -its culture and tradition. *Laonii* festival reflects the dynamic value systems of individuals

united by the same customs images, collective memory, habits and experiences. It is an occasion when they learn the basic principles of community living, folk songs and folk-lore which were passed down from one generation to another through their memory in spoken language. Through this celebration of *Laonii* festival the community feeling have been strengthened and revived to renew and reaffirm the *Poumai* ethnic solidarity. Therefore, *Laonii* festival is a catalyst for preserving cultural identity of the *Poumai* Naga.

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