

Traditional Practice in Shift: The *Koh thsütitü*p Feasts of Merit among Sangtam Naga

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Abstract: This paper attempts to bring together the different practices of the feasts of merit among the Sangtam Naga tribe in Kiphire and Tuensang District. The *Koh thsütitü*p (feasts of merit) in the past brought respect and prestige to the individual during their lifetime and were remembered even after their death; the couple who gave the Anyidsi and Yongdiba wore a unique shümüpi shawl and a shürongthsi wraparound or makhela. An individual who completes giving *Koh thsütitü*p a series of feasts of merit wears Nengthsanengkhongrü renown and thsapihpirü elite shü shawl, signifying the recognition and honour earned through philanthropic acts. The donors of the *Koh thsütitü*p families live in a unique, constructed house that features a new roof made of hay called “shaara,” with its edge cut straight. This work will illuminate the social traditional institutions of feasts of merit and highlight inequalities and stratification based on factors such as authority, prestige, and wealth in society, as some individuals elevate their status by wearing different shawls and wraparounds and by constructing houses in a different form from those of others in the village or community. Gerhard Lenski, in the book *Power and Privilege* (1966), terms social stratification as limited and important resources, such as status and wealth, being distributed within the community, and his analysis of the question of “who gets what and why” indicates power as the significant factor determining this distribution (Lenski, 1984). The study area covered Sangtam villages in Kiphire and Tuensang districts. This study uses the ethnographic method, a qualitative approach. The data were collected using both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Sangtam, Feasts of merit, shift, prestige, Yongdiba and Anyidsi. *Koh thsütitü*p

Introduction

The Feasts of Merit was a major aspect of traditional Naga customs, bestowing social prestige upon individuals. The Feasts is a sequence of banquets that may take years or even a lifetime to complete, with each subsequent Feasts being more

highly regarded than the preceding one. An innovative approach can modify our customs to align with contemporary requirements, facilitating a seamless shift from established practices to those better suited to current circumstances (Allan, 1994). The Sangtam tribe is one of the sixteen tribes in Nagaland and lives in the Kiphire and Tuensang districts, bordering Myanmar. They are one of the major Naga ethnic groups in Northeast India. The introduction of Christianity, modernisation, and westernisation among the Sangtam in the early 19th century, and the subsequent rapid conversions, have resulted in a significant alteration in Sangtam society. Traditional, social, political, and religious structures were consciously and inadvertently transformed into the present stage. The tribal people observe several ceremonies and festivals throughout the year, mostly centered on agriculture and soil. “For tribal festival and ceremonies are not only related to eating, drinking and merry making, but are also closely connected to soil. Celebrated to invoke the blessing of the Supreme Being” (Longchar, 1995). This paper also highlights the shift in the Feasts of merits from a social traditional cultural practice to the religious Christmas feasts. The study area encompassed the villages of the Sangtam Naga tribe within the Longkhim sub-division of Tuensang district, Nagaland. This study uses the ethnographic method, a qualitative approach and secondary sources. The data was collected using both primary and secondary sources.

Decline and transformation of *Koh thsütitüp* feasts of merit

The giving of the *Koh thsütitüp* was rather a means to gain a higher and better social status than a purely religious act. It does not mean that it contained no religious flavour. Certain religious rites and ceremonies, prayer and chanting of incantations accompanied the function. However, the feasts were intended mainly to confer both honour and fame on the donor. Now and after death, and henceforth, he could wear specially designed shawls and ornaments. He can also decorate and embellish his house, especially. Donors became highly respected, and his children had the freedom to wear special dress, which no other common children could wear (Sangtam, 2007). Some of the feasts of merit observed by the Sangtam were Yongdi, Anyidsi, Pühüm, and Langthsa. Anyidsi is the greatest ritual ceremony, which means dancing to honour God, especially the goddess Mukyubelarü. Performed *Koh thsütitüp* by any married individual or family who can afford it. It involves a large amount of wealth. Killed Mithun or gayal, cattle, swine, and other animals during anyidsi. The people who

came to attend the ceremony eat meat, drink rice beer, and dance and sing together. Giving a piece of meat to each invitee who joined the ceremony. After the function, the community believed that the goddess would descend from heaven to bless the family. Suppose observing the ceremony displeases the goddess. They expected the goddess to descend and curse the donor and could even put the donor to death for the offence made to the goddess in the celebration. They observed other forms of feasts were in the same manner but less expensive than the celebration of anyidisi. This kind of celebration was strictly taboo. The wizard or the priest of the community offers the prayer and all the rites during the ceremony. At the end of the ceremony, everyone who attends gets a piece of meat to take home. However, in recent times, donors in the Chimonger village, Mr Tsipongchem Jingrü, Mr Thrilongse Dhonrü, and Mr Thsathsimong under Tuensang District, say that when a family decides to hold a feasts of merit, anyidisi, donors collect a census from the church leaders and the village council. During the celebration, three cuts of meat, both fat and lean, were served: beef and pork. Nearly one and a half kilograms of meat and one kilogram of rice were given to every individual in the village, whether they were one day old or more than one hundred years old. Invited only the church leader, committee members, or leaders of recognised organisations in the village to the feasts at the donor's place.

Yongdiba is the first ever given by a newly married couple to their in-laws and community, seeking their blessing and property. The host gives the rib portion of the meat to his in-laws. According to Chimonger Villager¹, customary practices before the donor gives the feasts to the entire village include the Yongdi, during which only a selected group of leaders and organisations in the village are present. Then, only the second feasts, Anyidisi, follows. At this feasts, the giver invites not only the villagers but also neighbouring villagers to dance, and wealthy people are honoured by hosting it. The status in the community was based not on the accumulation of property, land, or wealth but on the redistribution of wealth through hosting a feasts where food, rice, meat, and also clothes were given to people experiencing poverty and older adults in the village. The feasts-giver received social recognition and prestige for providing the feasts in the community.

Feasting is not unique to one culture in tribal and indigenous communities; however, it appears across many societies described as early societies. The Feasts of Merit has contributed to the development of a field sometimes referred to as the

1. Chimonger Village is one of the biggest village among Sangtam Naga tribe in Nagaland.

anthropology of food. The feasts of merit studies how food practices reflect cultural values and social structure. Feasts in many communities serve as mechanisms for sharing and redistributing wealth, enhancing status and prestige within the village and community, fostering community unity, and facilitating ritual and religious expression (Zama, n.d.). The potlatch feasts ceremony practised by the Nootka and Kwakluti of the Native American tribe involved the public destruction and distribution of wealth to demonstrate influence, status, and prestige. The feasts demonstrated the host's generosity, wealth, building friendships and relationships between families and communities, and sharing food and wealth with others. Even though it was the colonial government that designated the potlatch illegal in the late nineteenth century. However, the practice continued and was later revitalised as part of traditional identity (Piddock, 1965). Gabriele studies the idea of commensality in the Minahasa society's practice of sharing food as a symbol of social relationships and equality. It strengthens community unity and relationships and also serves as a platform for competition and respect. Christian impact also plays a role in the Minahasa feasts. The churches often organised different communal events (Weichart, 2008). The institution of the feast of merit declined with the introduction of westernisation, Christianity, modern education, modernisation. The feasts of merits which encouraged hard work, generosity, sharing and social recognition in the community were rather viewed as extravagant and wasteful.

The significance of the *Koh thsütitüp* feasts of merit institution is that the individual who offers the feasts of merits is entitled to wear different shawls and wraparound from the common people, full ornamentation, and frigid shawls to seek blessings from God and obtain fame and honour in the community, living in a unique construction in the village.

The *Koh thsütitüp* feasts of merit is hosted by an individual to declare a rich man in the village or to give the feasts to request a bountiful harvest and the availability of cattle in the past. The Anyidsi and Yongdiba are the most philanthropic acts for the honour and the glory in the past. Some offer the feasts to gain status and fame, but others generously redistribute food and meat and share resources. Individuals who have completed the series of *Koh thsütitüp* constructed a unique house called *Sharra Thung Kuh* or *Lahmüking Kuh*, featuring interlaced hay and bamboo roofing and thatched construction. After offering the anyidsi, donors added intertwined sticks protruding along the roof's spine. The house structure serves as an indicator

of achieved position and status. In Chimonger village, there are six clans in the village: Dhong, Jinger, Mongzar, Landy Dhong, Rüdý Dhong, and Anar. According to Thrilongse, who hosts the Anyidisi, Yongdi says that one cannot offer both *Koh thsütitüp* at the same time. All the clan has to offer Yongdiba first, and then, only in the second stage, the Anyidisi feasts. However, the Dhong clan can offer a direct Anyidisi feasts if the individual has the capacity. With the impact of Christianity and modernisation, the significance and value of the *Koh thsütitüp* feasts have gradually declined. The *Koh thsütitüp* are offered only by married men. Preparation of Yongdiba begins with collecting firewood, arranging one unblemished gayal or mithun for the first-day rituals, and brewing rice beer. However, today, after the advent of Christianity, people avoid brewing rice beer, constructing a ‘Y’-shaped pole called *khyümdong* to tie *dhsüza* mithun. Rituals of killing mithun were stopped, as in the past, the Chimonger village customary practices of killing mithun during anyidisi in the following ways, On the day of the celebration, *dhsüza* select for the feasts had to be physically flawless and unblemished, free of flaws and deformities, and transported to the host’s home. If the mithun hesitated or stopped moving, a selected man known as *dhsüzaxürü* mithun puller would have to push it with a bamboo stick. With the cane fastened to the mithun’s forehead, a chosen person known as a *langkhürü* would take the lead. A *thsapihpirü*, someone who has previously performed the Anyidisi-Yongdi feasts, takes an active role in the mithun-killing ritual. It is a customary belief in the Sangtam society of Chimonger village that *thsapihpirü* will not be attacked or charged by the mithun, which are often wild and uncontrolled. Once the *dhsüza* was brought to the ground and secured by tying a cane rope around its legs, some men pulled the *dhsüza* while others held it down. The *dhsüza* would then be speared first by any relative who has hosted the *Koh thsütitüp* (feasts of merit). The other male participants would then thrust sharp wooden or bamboo spears into the same area to ensure the animal’s demise. The mithun’s response to the spearing was significant; it interpreted a moan, especially a loud one, or a silent death as a bad sign for the host. Cutting the head of the mithun and preparing the meat for the feasts. Moreover, the construction of the *Kuhying Morung*² also stopped. In the past, the ancestor invited the priest to perform rituals and invited the neighbour, friend, and steward for the feasts. However, in the modern

2. *Kuhying* means *Morung* in Sangtam Naga dialect. It is a traditional bachelor’s dormitory that served as social and educational institution.

day, the first day starts with a prayer from the pastor (head priest in the church) and the *deacons* (church leaders).

Apart from the Koh *thsütitüp* feasts of merit, there are other feasts as well, such as *Langthsa* or *Yangpi Anyidsi*. According to the *Tsathrongo* from Kiphire town state, feast ritual was performed to make friendship with the enemies, either neighboring village or reconcile with old friends, by inviting them to the feast. They offered the bigger portion of meat to the invitees and reconciled with them. In this religious sacrifice, they even share their shawls, spears, and *daos* and become goods (Sangtam, 2006). Usually, performing *Langthsa* feasts during wars or whenever there is a misunderstanding between villagers and friends. Offering this feasts can be done by the entire village community or an individual alone to make peace with them. The feasts gives or offers the larger portion of meat to the villager or a person to make peace with them. The two villages can host the feasts in exchange, depending on the year, usually for five to ten years due to economic conditions. Discussing the *Akongtsu* feasts in two ways. During the festival, the poor people dine on vegetables without meat. Secondly, the rich feasts-giver, after six months, dried the leftover meat from the feasts and called a feasts for the poor and orphaned with the dry meat. Thus, it is called the dry meat festival. The *Thsatsu* feasts is the last in a person's lifetime. It signifies completion of all the feasts of merit. Acquiring the highest degree of honour and respect in society. A person who offers this feasts is called '*thsaturü*'. In honour, they build different architectural house designs and styles. They can wear '*Rongshü*'³ and '*Tsingrangshü*' for women. In all the feasts, women play a big role in serving. Even though she is not entitled to honour and fame, in the songs sung at the feasts, acknowledge her name alongside her husband's, and she is then entitled to wear a certain dress.

One of the most important features of the house is that variation in its structure accurately indicates the status of the owner who offered the feasts of merit. J.B.

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3. The headhunters and warriors, renowned for slaying numerous adversaries and collecting their heads as trophies, were the only ones who wore *rongshü*. These adversaries are eliminated in campaigns, raids, and conflicts. According to oral histories, those who showed exceptional valour and fighting prowess in warfare were given renowned titles, such as *Athrungrü* (warrior) and *Makukhyürü* (head hunter), which reflected their respected standing in their communities. The *Rongshü* can only be worn by men of such high status. Wearing the *Rongshü* was prohibited for commoners.

Mill states that by glancing at the house, we can exactly opine whether the owner has given away a feasts of merits or not (Mill, 1926). Confining the variation in designs to the front of the house and the roof decoration. They used jungle posts, bamboo, and mud walls, roofed with yingshü thatch or shūra (a kind of palm leaf). The Pühüm ritual would be the final feasts, following Yongdi and Anyidsi. While a man might repeat offering the Yongdi and Anyidsi numerous times, after executing Pühüm, the end of the feasting cycle was indicated.

The feasts of merit, like Yongdi, Anyidsi, Langthsa, Yangpi Anyidsi, Akongtsu, and Thsatsu, püham gradually declined after the coming of Christianity and modernity in the Naga society. The society viewed as a traditional religious practice, involved various cultural rites and rituals, and was also opposed to Christian practices because it was associated with rice beer consumption. However, some cultural and traditional elements continue symbolically, such as wealthy individuals and politicians sponsoring communal feasts during the Christmas celebration.

Despite the decline of value and importance of hosting the old traditional practice of feasts of merit, a politician and candidate established political camps during election, provide lavish meal continue for weeks and month before polling day, candidate distribute such as rice and meat to the supporter and villagers, for many society in Nagaland, this practices is not simply bribery however it observe as a moral responsible of leaders. People believe that “ If someone wants to be our leader, he must feed us.” This concept is associated with the capacity to offer and care for the community, similar to the old practices of the Feasts of Merit (Wouters,2015). Margaret Ch. Zama examines the traditional institution of the feasts of merits, which has transformed over time, and argues that, despite its decline and disappearance in many communities, its value and importance have morphed into a new form, shaped by changing religious and ideological contexts. Zama uses the Mizo society as the source of study, demonstrating a Christianized practice of religious feasting known as *Pathian chawimawina*, the glorification of God. More often, it now refers to Thanksgiving, lawmthu sawina(Zama, n.d.).

Finding and Conclusion

Historically, *Koh thsütitüp* symbolised social solidarity, wealth, and reinforced social prestige. Promoted cohesion by sharing goodwill with neighbours. The impact of external influences such as modernisation, christianity, and westernisation has changed values, minimising the younger generation’s participation and appreciation.

Naga society is affected by social problems, political issues, corruption, insurgency, unemployment, and poverty, which contrasts with the merit-based system of the feasts. To restore the institution's glory and value, the merit based contribution to the society knowledge should introduce programmes in schools and communities that highlight the historical and social importance of the institution. Documenting old histories from village elders and continuing rituals to preserve them for future generations. Motivate and encourage modern adaptation of the various traditions that maintain the spirit of sharing while being possible for modern life. The decline of traditional institutions highlights the tension between cultural values and modern social pressures.

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