



Beyond the Wedding: Cultural Significance of Marriage in Kharam

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Abstract: Kharam recognized marriage as a vitally sacred institution of society and considered it ordained for the procreation of children, the continuation of the social unit, and the provision of a helping hand in an individual's day-to-day economic activities. Kharam has its own customary laws, which emphasize community solidarity, clan exogamy, and a sacred institution that strengthens kinship ties, preserves cultural identity, and maintains social harmony. Polygamy, in any form, is strictly forbidden among them. Bride price is compulsory, and marriage involves the entire village. Marriage plays a vital role in the social and cultural life of Kharam. This paper examines the customs, rituals, and practices of Kharam traditional marriage, highlighting their symbolic meanings and roles in community life. The paper provides a deeper understanding of how marriage functions as an important cultural foundation in Kharam society and contributes to the preservation of its heritage and identity.

Keywords: preserves, kinship, heritage, responsibility.

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Marriage

Marriage is conceived differently across social science disciplines, whereas the popular concept is that it is a union between a man and a woman (Ruwali, 2018). Marriage is a universal concept in human society, uniting males and females, and has socially recognized reproductive significance beyond reproduction. It is the foundation of the basic social unit, the family. It serves as a bridge in bringing together two sets of relatives of the connubial pair on the occasion of marriage. The sharing of responsibility between husband and wife gives human marriage a unique

stability and dimension. It defines the interpersonal relationship of the relatives of the married couple. Marriage is therefore a cultural complex (Hoebel, 1966).

Anthropologists like Lowie, Murdock, and Westermarck emphasize the role of social sanction in the union and how it is achieved through various rituals and ceremonies.

Riviere (1971) proposes that marriage should be studied as "one of the socially approved and recognized relationships between the conceptual roles of males and females. This relationship will reflect aspects of the particular society's conventional ideas about the two categories, and it will be possible to define it by opposing it to other possible male-female relationships which exist in the society". Murdock (1949) has suggested that marriage exists only when the economic and sexual functions are united in a single relationship. In all societies, said Murdock, Marriage involves residential cohabitation, and in all of them it forms the basis of the nuclear family.

Marriage is a basic and important unit of society because of its role in generating human capital and its power to influence individual, household, and community behavior (Sriram, 1993). It is also a major source of nurturance, emotional bonding, and socialization, as well as a link between continuity and change (Desai, 1995). Marriage is one of the important social institutions. It is a means of establishing a family through which society perpetuates itself. A successful marriage presupposes trust, mutual affection, and the capacity to adjust, and equal sharing of responsibilities at every stage of life. Marriage is commonly defined as a socially approved sexual and economic union, presumed to be more or less permanent, and entails rights and obligations between the married couple and any children they might have (Ember et al., 2019).

Schaden and Lewinsohn (1962) tell us that many men have a 'companion' before Marriage. After speaking to the girls, the boy goes to his parents, not needing their permission. He takes his companion to the parental home, where she lives with him for a while and cooks with the boy's mother. If there is a child from these relations and if they "hit it off", that is, if there is accord, they discuss Marriage.

Frayser (1985), why? Elaborate marriage ceremonies typically involve a large number of community members, potentially increasing public interest in the marriage. Frayser suggests that the ceremony is one factor that contributes to a society's encouragement of marriage.

Silas (1926) explains that hardly any public ceremony or rite accompanies Marriage. Apart from the placement of the stones and the exchange of gifts between

the husband and the bride's relatives, there is no formal ceremony; the wife joins the man, and they "set up house" together. Moreover, among those with substantial economic transactions, bride price (bridewealth) is the most common, followed by bride service. Bride price involves goods or money given by the groom's family to the bride's family; bride service involves labor given to the bride's family by the groom or his kin (Ember et al., 2021).

In the study by Jeermison and Sahoo (2019), populations of the 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) in India are considered a socio-economically backward section of society. Tribal groups have different rules regarding intertribal and interclan marriage. Tribal communities deeply ingrained marriage practices in their sociocultural life. Functioning as a mechanism for forming families, strengthening community bonds, and regulating social, economic, and religious life. Marriage among tribal communities is considered a significant social institution that regulates family structure, kinship, and social relationships. This paper will study the marriage practices of Kharam.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach and conducts interviews with village leaders, elders, couples, divorcees, widows, and widowers. The secondary sources are from books, research articles, and ethnographic studies of tribal marriage.

Areas of Study

The Kharam is one of the indigenous tribes found in the Senapati and Imphal West districts. The Government of India recognized it as a scheduled tribe on 8th Jan. 2004. The Kharams live across different villages; though they are in the same district, they live quite far from each other. Kharam Pallel is the oldest and biggest village. Laikot Phaijol is in the Sadar Hill, East sub-division of the Senapati district. Tuisenphai, Laikot, and New Keithelmanbi are also in the Senapati district. Kharam Tampak is located in the Imphal West district.

Finding

The Kharams have recognized marriage as a vitally important institution. It is believed that an adult male or female becomes complete only after he or she gets married. However, to get married or to remain celibate is an individual choice. However, once people perform a marriage in accordance with the existing local customs and practices, it gives rise to certain mutual rights and obligations between

the parties. Amongst other rights and duties, the status of husband and wife, and also the legitimacy of the children, is born out of wedlock. Marriage and family are the cultural superstructures upon a biological foundation. Marriage is the social and legal sanction for a man and a woman to live as husband and wife. The basic purpose of marriage is to preserve the human race.

Marriages are arranged only between those who have reached puberty. The question of a person's marriage before attaining puberty does not arise in their society. Child marriage is totally unknown among them. It is also not habitual for a boy to marry just after attaining the age of puberty. Therefore, a boy becomes fit for marriage after attaining maturity and becoming capable of earning his livelihood and maintaining a family. After attaining puberty, a girl can perform all household duties, including agricultural activities, cooking, and weaving. She is supposed to have attained the age of marriage at 15-16 years, and in the case of a boy, at 18-22 years. They follow three types of marriage. They are:

- (a) Preference marriage
- (b) Love marriage and
- (c) Arrange marriage.

The marriage of a man to the daughter of his maternal uncle is considered the most preferred union in Kharam society. In some tribal customs, people arrange marriages to maintain and continue family relationships. Besides, the property does not leave the family circle (Singh, 2017).

The custom on the ground prohibits marriage within the clan, as they are like brothers and sisters. If it happens, the groom is liable to pay a fine in the form of a pig and a jar of rice beer to the village council known as *Kataar* for breaching the marriage custom. The offender must pay this fine whether they stay together or not. If they lived together, their clan members socially boycotted them. They are not allowed to attend any ritual called *Indei Kabor*, an ancestral worship ceremony, as they are considered unclean. Such restrictions are lifted only on their separation (Shangkham, 2006).

When a girl and a boy are in love, marriage does not happen quickly. It takes three years of marriage proposals. The parents are informed first, and marriage proposals are carried out three times over three consecutive years. The boy's parents first find out whether their parents will accept their proposal for the girl's hand by approaching them secretly and bringing rice beer. It is called *Moilamkasaat*; *Moi* means 'daughter-in-law', *lam* means 'path or way', and *kasaat* means 'to cut through or to make a way'. They have to do it without others' knowledge. The girls' family

takes the acceptance of the article they bring as acceptance of the proposal. If the girl's family rejects the rice beer, it is a rejection of the proposal.

Marriage Proposal

The real formal proposal is called '*Moikabiek*'; '*Moi*' means 'daughter-in-law,' and '*Kabiek*' means 'purpose.' The boy's parents and a few of their relatives go to the girl's house, taking rice beer with them. The girl's parents give their consent in the formal proposal. However, that is not enough. They follow the second proposal in the next year and give their positive answer. It is called '*Voini Mikabiek*,' which means 'second proposal.' The third proposal, '*Voithum Moikabiek*', is done in the following third year for the third time. It is after this proposal that preparations for the marriage begin. Again, before the marriage, the groom's family must pay the bride price to the bride's parents. Her grandfather gives her Re 1/- in cash; in return, she gives him a pitcher of rice beer. She also receives Re 1/- from her paternal aunt, to whom she, in return, gives another pitcher of rice beer. She gives Rs 3/- (three) and 1 (one) anna to her maternal grandfather and, in return, gets one hen and a pitcher of rice beer. Her parents give her whatever they can afford for her new home. The girl does not come straight to the groom's house while preparations are going on. The groom's relatives or parents keep going to the bride's parents to ask for her hand in marriage. Finally, when they grant the third request, the girl's relatives lead her to the groom's residence, with her parents' blessings.

Bride Price

It consists of:

- Two gongs of different sizes and
- One traditional shawl called *Panjaaldum*

The gongs measured 7 and 8 spans in circumference. The larger gong is given to the girl's father, while the smaller gong is given to the paternal uncle. The shawl is for the mother of the bride. The groom's family must compulsorily pay these articles before marriage. The marriage takes place only after the payment, at the groom's house.

Marriage Ceremony

The Kharam village council is known as *Kataar* (older adult) or *Tongtum Karet* (eight pipe owners). The council consists of elderly persons; it has eight members.

The eight posts of the *kataar* are: 1. *Khokalakpa* 2. *Lupkalakpa* 3. *Yukapanapa* 4. *Pakhatkalakpa* 5. *Hitang* 6. *Hitang* (junior to the serial no. 5) 7. *Naingaikalakpa* and 8. *Naingaikalakpa naipang* (It is *Naingaikalakpa* Junior). To serve the above *kataar* members, there are smaller posts below. They are called *Taangulen* and *Taangwa*. They are very important; without their help, the village council cannot administer the village. A *Taangwa*, it is said, should be like a bird, active and smart in his service.

The *Khokalakpa* and his council played an important role in marriage ceremonies. Each party brings a cock and a pitcher of rice beer at the order of the *khokalakpa*. One of the councilors holds the cock in his hand and performs the ritual of observing an omen. He says, "Today, we unite two people for life. Let your right leg cross over the left and let all the toes remain straight, detaching from each other and not stoop down". In this way, people first ask the animal to indicate the groom's future, and then strangle it. People watched the animal's legs as it died and predicted the future accordingly. Then the *Tui Kahe* ritual is performed. He offers rice beer to the deities on the ground, first for a long and happy married life for the groom. The same acts are repeated for the bride using the fowl and the rice beer she had given for the purpose. People do all these acts in the presence of the bride and the groom. When the rituals are over, the groom and the bride exchange drinks in the presence of all. The village councilors and the people are the witnesses to their union, and predict their future through the fowls. *Aarke ka-en* and *Tu Kahe* are the two most important rituals for a marriage. People complete the marriage ceremony by serving drinks and feasting. The majority of couples perform a normal, ordinary marriage ceremony called *Patkherroi*, which literally means 'small marriage'.

There is another form of marriage ceremony called *Roipui*, meaning 'big marriage' or 'grand marriage'. Here, the groom incurs great expense, and the bride too spends more than in a *Patkherroi* (small marriage). The procedure for the marriage is the same as *Patkherroi*. After the completion of the three-year proposal, the marriage celebration takes place. On the wedding day, as usual, the groom's family seeks the girl's hand three times, and her parents receive the bride. In the meantime, the path between the two houses, i.e., the groom's and the bride's, is screened on both sides with beautiful shawls. People bring the bride through the screened path in a procession.

Before she leaves her parental house, there is a great merry-making with drinking. Rice beer is served six times, from the tastiest to the least tasty. The six

rounds of drinks are prepared and served by the bride's family. The family also gives the groom's family a dog and a pig measuring 5 cubits. The pig is slaughtered and cleaned neatly, without being cut into pieces. People remove the viscera and stitch the pig back together so it appears to be a full-fledged pig. People then immerse it in turmeric and bring it along with the bride. They actually mean the pig for the village council. The *Taangwas* cut the meat, and all the members of the village council till *Taangwas* are given uncooked pieces of pork. The rest is cooked and is eaten at the groom's house by *Kataar* (village council) members. The dog is for the son-in-law, who has been serving the public since his marriage.

The family served the public rice beer three times, then ate. The food thus served is locally known as *Moibukherng*, meaning the bride's rice. After the meal, the public is served with rice beer three times. Singh (2017) states that after marriage, a woman leaves her parental home and changes her clan to that of her husband, and she will worship only her husband's ancestors, not her father's. The marriage takes three years and involves not only the two families but also the whole village, of all walks of life, for a successful, happy married life for the young couple.

Remarriage

There is no restriction on remarriage of widows and widowers. In this case, the usual procedure, i.e., requesting the hand of the woman three times, is followed, but there is no ritual as in the standard case. If the wife dies, whether with or without any issue, the husband can take one of the sisters of the deceased, but he must pay Rs 3/- (three) to the village council as *Acharam*. In the same way, on the death of her husband, the surviving wife can marry any of the brothers of her deceased husband. In this way, children are brought up without any discrimination because, in one way or another, they have a common link.

Conclusion

Marriage is not only a union of two individuals but also a bond between families and the community. Practices such as family involvement and traditional ceremonies show the importance of harmony and responsibility in their society. Christianity has been an important factor in cultural change. Today, the *Kataar* no longer performs the marriage ceremony. The church performs many social activities, such as marriage, divorce, and the enforcement of moral laws, at various levels of society. Christian marriages take place in the church. A bond between the bride and groom,

with an oath, is performed in the church. There is no longer rice beer served at the wedding; instead, rice beer is replaced by tea, or the marriage family gives a feast.

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