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TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE LIANGMEI TRIBE WITH REFERENCE TO BIRTH: AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The rites of passage are the rites and ceremonies that mark a critical transition in the life cycle of an individual from one status to another in a given society. It usually covers birth, marriage and death. Birth is the first stage in the lifecycle of an individual. The birth ceremony of the Liangmeis comprises a number of rites such as cutting the umbilical cord, tying the baby's neck, leg with a black thread, taking only plain food by the mother, naming the child, fifth day Tajum Gibo ceremony etc.; the main objective of all these rites are to secure the child and sometimes the mother from evil forces and diseases. After birth, the young baby is developed, severed from the mother's body and becomes an independent individual. And the woman also has become a socially responsible mother. On fifth day, a ceremony is observed in which a name is given to the child, as without a name a person cannot be counted as a member of the family. The fifth day ceremony also recognizes the existence of the child and responsibility of the parents to bring up the young baby.

Keywords: Liangmeis, Birth ceremony, Tingwang, Kachapui, Tek Mumkhaibo

INTRODUCTION

The Liangmei¹ are one of the oldest tribes of Manipur. Racially, they belong to the Mongoloid racial stock and speak the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 2000:477). The population of this tribe is found mainly in Tamei sub-division of Tamenglong District, Manipur. These people are found scattered also in the neighbouring districts of Tamenglong District, namely Churachandpur District and Senapati District; outside the state of Manipur, they are found inhabiting in Juluke, Dimapur of Kohima District of Nagaland and Hailakandi District of Assam. The present article is a humble attempt to examine the traditional beliefs and practices of birth of the Liangmei tribe of Manipur.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The present study has adopted ethno-historical approach. The data are based on available primary and secondary materials of published works and also on interview reports.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

No scholar has so far been examined the life cycle ceremony of the Liangmei tribe of Manipur in systematic way based on the available sources. In fact, some local scholars give light on the subject matter in their respective works. However, still await thorough examination and treatment within a wide canvas. The turning points in the life cycle of an individual are the critical transitions of birth, marriage and death. These rites of passage, as Arnold Van Gennep (1960:11) called them, are practiced universally through their number and stages of life selected vary from society to society. Birth is the first phase in the lifecycle of an individual. It is the passage of the young from her mother's body and it normally happens at the end of gestation the time the baby develops within mother. Birth is always believed to be an important social event; round which gather many traditional practices and often associated with religion. Usually, the Liangmei women bear children without great difficulty. When the pregnant woman starts to feel pain; arrangements for birth are made as quickly as possible. And an old woman (who officiates as priestess) attends her to accomplish the process of birth. But her husband is not permitted to join the party during the process. Among the Patkoi Nagas (Sardesh, 1987:32) and the Todas (Rivers, 1986:323), the expectant father is allowed to present. Usually, birth takes place inside the house, but in a place which is separated from the kitchen and entrance. It is mainly because of the taboo condition of a parturient that birth takes place in privacy (Hastings: 636). The Kacha Nagas place all edibles and eligible things outside the house when a woman is about to give birth (Hutton, 1969:214). As a precaution to avoid trouble during labour a woman use to crack away the necklace of beads she is about to deliver to a child.

Normally, during labour, a woman lies on the floor where a mat made of bamboo pieces will spread with little cloth on it. Every requirement is made available by the family to the midwife or old woman. If the labour pain goes on for a long time without any result, they accomplish a ritual in which a chicken is offered to god for taking away the obstacles (Chapriak, 2002:1). When the woman delivers to a child, the umbilical cord known as *palariang* is cut off with a bamboo blade that is obtained by splitting the rind of a piece of matured bamboo. It is done by the old woman or mid wife and this act symbolizes the division of the baby from the mother (Gennep, 1950: 50). Before cutting it, the cord is tied at a suitable place with a black thread locally recognized as *Chalang Katikbo Mathuira*. The mother lays a few drops of her breast milk on the wound of the navel to dry it quickly (Barua, 1981:185). The ritual act indicates that the child is no longer depending on his mother and independent life starts. Usually, Liangmei people use bamboo scale for the purpose of cutting the navel cord but it is doubtful regarding the origin of this culture. It may be stated that this material aspect of culture is associated with ecological factor because 'Mongoloid culture' is invariably directed as bamboo culture since the whole South Asia is prosperous in bamboo (Barua, 2001:59). Other Naga tribes of Manipur have such practices. A fire is lighted near the mother. It is kept constantly burning for five days (polluted period) in order to protect from the evil forces (Das, 2005:74). When the newly born baby bears a mark on its body that resembles to a particular deceased of the clan, in that case, it is believed that, that particular person is born again (Playfair, 1975:101). Whether it may be right or wrong, a belief which have been practiced by the Liangmei since long time ago.

PASHAN KANBO

The mid wife with a dry leaf of *Makhen*, a kind of plant swings on the temple of the child thrice with an invocation for wellbeing of the child. This ritual is locally known as *Pashan Kanbo* (Chapriak, 2002:2). There is a belief that *Makhen* is the tongue of *Tenglam*, the divine priest of the supreme God, *Tingwang*. Hence, *Makhen* is generally used to ward off the evil forces (Kamei, 2004:269).

TEK MUMKHAIBO

The child is put a little chewed rice in its mouth ritually by the priestess. This act indicates that the baby is claimed in the sense human food is given. This rite is called *Tek Mumkhaibo* (Interview report). It is also believed as for the healthy and long life of the child (Chapriak, 2002:2).

DUI-KHIUBO

The child is bathed ritually with luke warm water by the mid wife. This is known as *Dui-khiubo*. The first bath of the baby is only for hygienic purpose and it is also a rite of separation from his mother (Gennep, 1960:52).

Chalang Riang Mathui Khaibo

In *Chalang Riang Mathui Khaibo* ritual, the mid wife ties around with a black thread at the neck, wrists and ankles of the baby. This act signifies to the evil forces that the baby who comes from the other world is now in the human world (Chapriak, 2002:3).

Alam Phupbo

Like other Naga tribes, they also bury the placenta (*Alam Phupbo*) inside the house, that is near the mother's bed close to the wall and never outside the house (Singh,1998:61). A man must dig a burial pit about one foot and some inches in depth; it is believed that the child would bear from recurrent vomiting if the pit is less than this dept. The priestess cloaks the placenta with a piece of cloth of its mother and buries it ritually (Interview report).

Ngena Jan Mathakbo

According to Liangmei tradition, when a child is given birth, the mid wife gives a temporary name at once according to the sex of the baby. This is called *Ngena Jan Mathakbo*. It is done in the faith that if the naming is delayed, the evil forces would name the child first, and then this may lead to untimely death to the child (Interview report).

Usually, the mother takes only plain foods like, rice, dry fish or meat along with salt for three months in case of first born or certain days in other cases. She is advised not to eat fresh meat, chili etc. in the belief that these foods are harmful to both the mother and child (Interview report). Like his wife, the husband also eats only plain food for five days for the wellbeing of his child (Interview report). In Liangmei Society, the first birth has a social significance, because with the birth of a child, the mother is no longer a mere woman, she raises her moral and social position and becomes a legitimate wife of the husband. It is impossible to get a divorce from a woman who is given birth one or more off springs; among the people whose custom allow divorce easy(Gennep,1960:49). There is a custom of the Liangmei that parent designating themselves by the name of the first born, say, 'Adibou' and 'father of Adibou and mother of 'Adibou'. It is believed to be created in the natural prides of the parents at the birth of a child in whom they are now essence to immerse their personality (Hastings:31). The eldest son will hold the superior position in the family or lineage and the younger sons are expected to obey the elder.

Thiunu Mara

On the coming of fifth day, a ritual known as *Thiunu Mara* is observed in the early morning of the day in which a fowl is sacrificed to the god not to give any damage to the child (Chapriak, 2002:3-4).

Tajum Gibo

Thiunu Mara is followed by a ceremony locally recognized as *Tajum Gibo*. According to Liangmei tradition, in the life cycle of an individual, this is the first worship of *Tingwang* and *Kachapui* (creator of human – being) for longevity, good fortune and future issues of the child (Interview report). It is said that the birth ceremony which is celebrated on the coming of fifth day has been fixed on the basis of the faith of the people in the menstruation period, who takes and washes her cloth on the fifth day of the period. Before the performance of this ritual, a child is unrecognized as a human being. In this ritual, two beautiful fowls are offered to the *Tingwang* with a sort of religious hymns. Here, an important point may be noted that omen is read by observing the legs of the fowl (Chapriak, 2002:5). The elders who present in the ritual will confer a fresh name of the child (Hastings:130) or get confirmed the provisional name which was found better without giving a second name. It is a rite of incorporation which introduces the child into the family because without a name a person cannot be counted as a member of the family (Gennep, 1960:54-55). Colonel Mc Cullock has stated that “five days after birth of a child it is named with various ceremonies names are not given at random but are compounds of father’s and grandfather’s names or those of other near relations”(Hodson,1996:143) Most commonly the ancestor names are gives to the children. The name is given sometime having some definite signification, and mostly alluding to some supposed quality or to some accidental circumstances which have happened at the time of birth. They do never give the name of a living relative because it is considered to be unlucky and if a name is conferred so it is assumed that the latter will die soon. Since a substitute for him bearing the same name has been provided for this earth (Singha, 1996:269). So, the Liangmei prefer the name of the deceased ancestors for a child.

In Liangmei society, a new born child is not allowed to take out for five days in the belief that evil forces would do harm to the baby. After the observation of *Tajum Gibo* ceremony one can take out the baby by besmearing soot of the fire place on the forehead (Interview report). And it is the normal practice of feeding the baby with mother milk. They feed their children as long as milk is available in the breasts. It will continue to feed till the arrival of the next child because milk of the mother is considered best. It is a normal feature that a child has to depend on its mother for its nourishment and bodily comfort. When a baby cries, the first reply of the mother is to put her breast at the mouth of the baby and this feeding will carry on as long as the child cries. The mother will stop feeding her milk only when she gets pregnant because the milk of the mother will break short (Interview report).

Alaobo

Alaobo means feeding the child with solid food. After five or sixth months old, the child gets first solid food for the first time. Traditionally, the family prepares food items of beautiful bird or fish of white colour on this occasion and feeds the baby with it ritually (Interview report).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in the life cycle of a Liangmei, birth is an important social event. It has changed the status of a woman to a socially responsible mother and the husband too to a responsible father. After birth, the child is

separated from the mother's body and becomes an independent individual. Fifth day *Tajum Gibo* ceremony is significant as it recognizes the existence of the child in the society. It is the first ritual worship of *Tingwang* and *Kachapui* for wellbeing and prosperity of the child. A name is also conferred of the child most commonly dead ancestor's name as without a name a man cannot be counted as a member of the family. It is a rite of incorporation.

NOTE

ⁱ The Liangmei literally means Northerner; Liang means north and mei, people.

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18. (The author is thankful to all the informants (village elders) for giving rich information of their traditional beliefs and practices of birth.)