

SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NANU-NGAI

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ABSTRACT

Nanu-ngai is one of the ritual festivals of the Zeliangrong of Northeast India. It is observed for two days in the month of March every year with dance and fertility song to increase the population of the village as well as to have a bountiful harvest in the year. The young and old of the village participate in the festival. In the morning of the second day, they offer a cock and a hen to God for wellbeing and prosperity of the child born in the preceding year. After the ritual offering, all the children born in the previous year are brought at the house of the old women called Kengja Kaibang for ear-piercing. This act of ear-piercing recognizes the existence of the child and the responsibility of the parents for bringing up the child. Next day of the festival, a complete genna is observed to avert death in delivery in the village. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

Key words: Zeliangrong, Nanu-ngai, fertility, Kengja Kaibang, Najumgaimei.

INTRODUCTION

The Zeliangrong,ⁱ one of the natives of North East belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid racial stock. According to local tradition, the Zeliangrong originated from a cave known as *Taobei*. They moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin*, and then to *Makuilongdi*, North District of Manipur. From *Makuilongdi*, they migrated to different directions; the Rongmei to the South, Zeme to the West and Liangmai to the North. Another theory suggests that they came from two regions: Southwest China and Southeast Asia. Gangmumei Kamei writes, as the Zeliangrong are Tibeto-Burman, “they must have lived with other groups of the same family in South West China about 1000 B.C and migrated to their present habitat (Kamei, 2002: 24).” Today, the Zeliangrong people are found inhabiting in the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The present article attempts to examine the *Nanu-ngai* and its social significance.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The data of the present study are based on available primary and secondary sources of published works and also on information collected from knowledgeable persons of the Zeliangrong community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No scholar has so far been examined the festivals of the Zeliangrong of Northeast. Therefore, a systematic study and treatment on the topic still await. *Nanu-ngai*, one of the ritual festivals of the Zeliangrong is celebrated for two days in the lunar month of *Nanu-bu*, which usually falls in March; (*Na* means child, *Nu*, ear-boring and *Ngai*, festival). It is a sort of the registration of the children born in the preceding year in the *Karapei kaibang/Kengja kaibang* (house of old women) for community recognition. It is also meant for the birth of more offspring as well as to have a fruitful cultivation in the coming year (Kamei, 2004: 309). In March, there is a “festival of three days’ continuance, in which the ears of the children born in the previous year are pierced (Brown, 2001: 29).”

First Day

On the first day, the family who has first baby son/daughter offers a dog to God for wellbeing of the child. This is locally called *Jeishanmei* (sacrifice of dog). The child is loved by all as she/he comes first in the family. The victim is consumed by the participants. The *Lugaan* (son-in-laws) of the family will make necessary arrangements for the next day as the last day is the most important day of the festival.

Second Day

On the second day, at the first cock-crow, an old woman along with male members of the child’s family will fetch water in a *Joumuh* (dry guard) from the *Duikhun* (village pond) for bathing the child and cooking of ritual offerings. Before fetching the water, they first contact the water with the spear which they brought (in the distant past, *Duikhun* was generally located far from the village area, so they took spears for safety from wild beasts) as a way of purification. Iron locally known as *Tanchu* represents as a symbol of sanctity of God. This water is locally recognized as *Karoudui* (holy water for sanctification and good health). In view of Frank Byron Jevons (1985: 84), water purification is a means of gaining for the worshipper the protection of water deity against the consequences of pollution. This practice of taking spear is now given up, but it is suggested to contact the water with an iron hoe before fetching the water.

According to creation myth, *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God willed to create the universe, god, men and nature. *Didimpu* and *Didimpui* created the sun, the moon, the stars, the water, the wind, fire, the earth etc. They were the two primal god and goddess created by *Tingkao Ragwang* for the same purpose. After creating the earth, *Tingkao Ragwang* bore the thought of creating human beings who could always remember Him, who could rule the world in place of Him and who could also make offerings to Him. Two additional deities named *Dampapu* and *Dampapui* were created to create human beings. The two deities took a long time in creating the human beings. However, the created man and woman were lifeless and could not move their limbs. Finally, *Tingkao Ragwang* gave soul and life only then they became alive and human lives (Kabui, 1991: 56). Soul and life was given by *Tingkao Ragwang* to men. In this faith, they perform *Najumgaimei* ceremony in honor of the Creator of man. In this ceremony, an elder of *Pei* having living wife who officiates as priest and offers *Sangdai* (a cock) and *Sanglou* (a hen), ginger, wine, cooked rice etc. to *Tingkao Ragwang* and *Dampapu-Dampapui* for blessing the child with a bright future, longevity of life and happiness and prosperity, success in reproduction, victory over the enemies and to overcome all the socio-religious obligations and perform *Maku banru*, great sacrifice etc. (Kadam, 2010: 5-6). If the priest is a widow, it is believed that the child will become a widow in future. This is followed by oblation of holy wine to *Tingkao Ragwang*, *Bambu* (presiding deities of the village), and *Kairao* (ancestors of the family) for wellbeing and prosperity of the child and propitiation of wine to evil spirits not to give trouble to men. In case of twins' birth, the items of the ceremony are made double. The victims are cooked separately for the ritual of *Kashan kanmei* (ritual for safety and protection). After *Kashan kanmei* ritual, all the children (born in the previous year) are brought at the house of the old women for ear-piercing (Kadam, 2010: 5-6). This ritual act recognizes the existence of the child in the society. The objective of ear-piercing is to insert an ear decoration/ornament (Encyclopedia: 2063). This also indicates that the Zeliangrong people begin to wear ornament from infant stage.

In the morning, *Neknanun* (children who are not yet enrolled in the boys' dormitory) will perform a ritual procession distributing mud along with a bunch of *Thinglouthai* to every household of the village for plentiful food grain in the year. *Thinglouthai*, a kind of fruit is traditionally used as symbol of *Nap* (paddy). In the ritual procession, they will sing songs for fertility of the village. At the noon, they will collect like meat, fish, vegetable etc. from every household of the village. This is locally called *Nekgong kakhamei* (collection of eatables). The villagers cheerfully give food items as the young boys performed the ritual activities for fruitful cultivation in the coming year. The collected food items are cooked at the *Nek kaibang* (house of children) and consumed. This is followed by *Pang makumei*, (ritual procession) in which the boys of *Khangchui* seek the blessing of God for healthy sexual life in the society. The young boys actively take part in the festival: they sing songs and pray for

fertility of the soil as well as for man. Each of the child household will bring *Nanu cha*, gifts in the form of vegetable, cooked black rice and curry, local salt plates, etc. at the *Kengja kaibang* and the gifts are distributed among the elderly people. At the *Kengja kaibang*, the elders of *Pei* will sing traditional songs like *Rah lu* and *Magen lu*. In the evening, *Nanu laam*, *Nanu* dance is performed by old women with relevant songs sung by the elderly men at every household of the child born in the preceding year (Chingmeirong Pei, 2004: 58-59). At the end of *Nanu laam*, fertility song called *Konshumei* will be sung for the birth of more offspring in the family. Traditional sexual songs sung in the festival of *Nanu-ngai* arouse the boys and girls of the dormitories, and married couple to expand the family circle and to multiply the family members. Some opine, it is not fair to sing the sexual arouse songs in front of the female members. However, it may not be wrong to do it at a proper place instead of moving from one end of the village to another. In the evening, the boys and girls of the dormitories perform dances at each house who has first baby child, but this not a compulsory; it is an entertainment.

On the next day of the festival, a complete genna called *Nashang nei* is observed in the village. It is a community and individuals prayer to God to avert death at delivery in the village (Kamson, 2009: 239-241). M McCulloch says, there is “an annual village genna of three days in which the ears of the children born after the last festival of this nature are pierced (McCulloch, 1980: 53).” Birth is a question of life and death of a woman. This is the main idea of the prayer.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, *Nanu ngai* is one of the important ritual festivals of the Zeliangrong. The ways of life of the people is expressed in the songs and dances, ritual actions of the festival. Fertility ritual is observed to increase the population as well as to have a bountiful harvest in the coming year. The villagers (young and old) take part with festival spirit, discipline and love. Ultimately, it brings peace and social solidarity. The community recognizes the existence of the child and the responsibility of the parents to bring up the child. The younger generation also has got a chance to learn the process of the festival to carry on their forefathers’ culture and tradition.

NOTE

Zeliangrong is the acronym of the Zemai, Liangmai and Rongmei who live in the three states of Assam, Maanipur and Nagaland.

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