

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE AMONG THE KHARAM OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to delve into the system of marriage and divorce found among the Kharam, one of the least populous tribes of Manipur. It describes the different ways of obtaining a spouse: arrange marriage, preference marriage (between one's mother's brother's daughter), and love marriage (elopement) and associated rites and ceremonies. The marriage ritual called Aarke-Kaen is executed by an elder of village council (Kataar) in the presence of the bride and groom. They follow clan exogamy and therefore marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. Bride price (Man) is an important feature of their marriage system as the bride's family loses the right over the girl. After marriage, a woman lives in the house of her husband (patrilocal) and worships the ancestors of her husband. Remarriage of widows or widowers are permitted without any loss of social stigma in actual practice. Divorce is permitted but it is very rare; only the husband has the right to initiate divorce, not by a wife. The separation is done with the knowledge of Kataar.

Key words: Kharam, marriage, Manipur, Kataar, Bride price, Divorce

INTRODUCTION

The Kharam are one of the natives of Manipur belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of the mongoloid stock (Grierson, 2000: 477). The population of this tribe is found inhabiting in Senapati District in four villages namely, *Kharam Pallen, Tampak Kharam, Tuisaphai* and *Laihot Phai*. The total population of the tribe is about three thousands according to 2011 census. Like other tribes of Manipur, the *Kharam* also trace their origin to a cave. It is believed that the said cave is located somewhere near the *Makhel*, about ten kilometers away from *Oklong* village, Senapati District, Manipur. Another theory suggests that they came from two regions: Southeast Asia and south west China. According to Gangmumei Kamei, as the Kharam are Tibeto-Burman, they must have

lived with other groups of the same family in south West China before 1000 B.C and migrated to eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into Irrawaddy valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and they returned southward and entered north East India through Manipur river, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present habitat, Manipur (Kamei, 2004:13). The present article is a humble attempt to examine the traditional marriage system and divorce of the Kharam of Manipur.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study has adopted ethno-historical approach; the data are based on the secondary materials of published works and also on information collected from selected well informed informants of the Kharam community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

No scholar has so far been examined the marriage and divorce among the Kharam in systematic way based on the available sources. So, thorough investigation on the subject matter is still awaited. The institution of marriage is regarded as the backbone of all forms of human society with which we are acquitted. *Innai*, marriage is the union of a boy and girl to form a family with social and religious consent, in which the mates, their parents and the village elders have to give consent. The Kharam society is a patrilineal and patrilocal. Like many other societies, Kharam society is also dominated by male. They are divided into seven exogamous clans namely, *Saichal, Raangla, Saiphu, Jaiche, Rakhou, Marem and Seilon*.

In Kharam society, marriage is not regarded as a simple social contract but a religious ceremony. A marriage relations between a man and a woman cannot be separated because it contains rites and rituals performed in the name of God. On the day of marriage a ceremony called *Aarke-Kaen* is performed in which a big and beautiful cock is offered to God for wellbeing and prosperity and line of generation of the couple. It is performed by an elder of the *Kataar*, village council who officiates as priest. The legs of the victim are carefully examined to know the omen when it dies. Then, a ritual called *Tui Kahe* is observed in which the same priest offers rice beer to the village deities for happy married life of the young couple. After this they are recognized as husband and wife. And no one has the right to interfere them. Hence, marriage among the Kharam is a religious sacrament.

To the Kharam, marriage is regarded as one of the important events in the lifecycle of an individual. It is a necessity and customary duty for every man to get married to continue the society, although, he is expected to

follow the certain rules of the society. They strictly follow clan exogamy that a man must have his spouse from outside his clan. “Each clan is an exogamous unit and a man cannot marry a woman if she belongs to the same clan. A man cannot marry his father’s brother’s daughter or mother’s sister’s daughter because parallel cousins are regarded as taboo marriage with any of them is unthinkable. However, marriage with mother’s brother’s daughter is allowed and preferred. Marriage with father’s sister’s daughter is not permissible (Singh, 1961: 8).” There is no evidence of any linked marriage among the Kharam: a man with his wife’s brother’s daughter, a woman with her husband’s sister’s son, a man with his sister’s daughter and a woman with her brother’s son (Das, 1985: 37). The society prohibits such oblique marriages.

Marriageable age

Among the Kharam, the ages of fourteen and fifteen years are very important. At the age of fourteen years for girls and fifteen years for boys, both the boys and girls come out of babyhood. Generally, a boy marries between eighteen and twenty five and a girl between fifteen and twenty one. The age of boy is higher because he is expected to have source of income before he marries. In olden times, the hair of the unmarried girls was often kept short quite close to the head but it was permitted to grow its natural length only after their marriage (Brown, 2001:10). The style of coiffure is a symbol of identification between a girl and a married woman.

Marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from “one social category to another, because one of the spouses it involves a change of family, clan, village or tribe and sometimes newly married couple even establish residence in a new house (Gennep, 1960:116).” A girl after marriage normally shifts to her husband's residence bringing with her resource of knowledge and experience. In fact, marriage is the change of family and clan name of the woman to that of her husband. She will worship the ancestors of her husband’s family not those of her own parents. In the same way, a married Kharam woman fixes into the clan of her husband.

Prohibited marriage

Saar sa innai, inter-clan marriage is strictly prohibited in the society and 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 *Kataar* for breach the marriage custom. This fine must be paid whether they stay together or not. If they live together they are socially boycotted by their clan members. They are not allowed to attend any ritual called *Indei Kabor*, ancestral worship as they are considered unclean. Such restrictions are lifted only on their separation (Sangkham, 2006: 66-68).

Forms of marriage

Monogamy, union of a man and a woman is the common form of marriage. Polygamy though not prohibited, is a very rare case and concubine is not at all, tolerated. Polyandry is totally absent. Child marriage does not exist and adult marriage is the rule. They follow three types of marriage. They are: a) Preference marriage, b) Love marriage, and c) Arrange marriage (Sangkham, 2006:68).

Preference marriage

Marriage of a man with the daughter of his material uncle is considered to be the most preferred union in Kharam society. Such marriage in some tribal custom is to maintain and continue the family relationship. Besides, the property does not move out of the family circle. In fact such alliance unites the family but the family circle does not expand beyond the two families. Today, such marriage is no longer encouraged in the society.

Love marriage

In Kharam society, an individual person has free right to choose his/her right partner but outside one's clan. Such a marriage is not considered to be a valid marriage as the consent of the parents is not taken and they elope of their own. Later on it is, however recognized by observing the *Khobaak Tum*. According to this custom, the *Khokalakpa*, village chief asks consent of the boy and girl and accordingly the bride price (*Man*) is paid to the parents of the girl. A day is fixed for the payment and on that day too, the groom's parents must request for the hand of the girl from her parents three times and at the completion of the third request, the girl leaves her parental house for her new residence. No ritual is observed.

Arranged Marriage

Arranged marriage is regarded to be the best form of marriage in the society. In this type of marriage the consent of the girl and her parents have to be taken. To complete the arranged marriage, one has to follow the three formal procedures: (A) *Moilamkasaat*: It is an informal proposal made by the boy's parents to the girl's parents by giving an article. *Moi* means daughter-in-law *Lam* means path and *Kasaat* means to make a way. This formality is so called as it is meant to bring a daughter-in-law. It is to be performed without the knowledge of others. The acceptance of the article they bring is taken as acceptance of the proposal (Sangkham, 2006:69). (B) *Voini Moikabiek*: It is the second formal proposal in which after accepting the article of the boy, the girl's parents will give positive reply to the parents of the boy. The parents of the boys along with some of their near relatives go for the hand taking with them a jar of rice beer. The parents of the girl give their positive reply in the formal

proposal. The second proposal is followed in the next year in which their positive reply is given. This is called *Voini Moikabiek*, the second proposal. (C) *Voithum Moikabiek*: The third or final proposal is done in the following third year for the third time. It is after this proposal that preparation for marriage take place. Before marriage takes place, the bride price locally called *Man* must be given to the bride parents. The payment of the bride price is permitted to the groom right to marry the bride and the right to her children. In most patrilineal societies, a marriage is marked by the transfer of bride wealth (in cattle, spears, money or other goods) from the groom's family to that of the bride. Bride wealth ensures that the children of the union shall be legitimate and affiliated to the husband's clan or family. Bride wealth is not, of course, purchase of a woman but a means of legitimizing the marriage (Bozman, 1967: 250). The payment of bride price, a woman has to lead to remain a wife rather than come back to live as a sister in her parental family (Goody and Tambiah, 1973: 12). Bride price is commonly also a guarantee that the young wife will be well treated in her new home. It is only after the payment of *Man* marriage takes place. On the day of marriage the *Khokhalakpa* and his councilors (*Kataar* members) are invited to the residence of the groom. Marriage rites and ceremonies locally called *Aarke-Kaen* and *Tui Kahe* are performed by one of the councilors as directed by the *Khokhalakpa*. All the ritual acts are done in the presence of the couple. When the marriage rituals are over, the bride and groom exchange the drink in the presence of *Kataar* members and relatives (Sangkham, 2006:69-70). The people present are the witnesses to their union. After marriage a woman leaves her parental house by changing her clan to that of her husband and she will worship only the ancestors of her husband not those of her father (Coulanges, 1874: 23). Here, it may be pointed out that arranged marriage takes three years and involves not only the two families but also the whole villagers of all works of life for successful and happy married life of the young couple.

Bride price

Traditionally, *Man* consists of two gongs (the bigger size is given to the girl's father and the smaller size, to her paternal uncle) and one traditional shawl for the girl's mother.

Remarriage of widows/widowers

There is no restriction for remarriage of widows or widowers (Sanajaoba, 1995:400). In this case, the usual procedure i.e. requesting the hand of the woman for three times is followed but no ritual is involved as in the ordinary case.

Divorce

Divorce is permitted by the custom but it is very rare. It is initiated only by the husband but not by a woman since she belongs to her husband on her marriage and she is for him. She may leave him and stay with her parents but she does not divorce him legally. If a man wants to divorce his wife, he has to pay a fine of a pig of 5 cubits and a jar of rice beer and forfeits the bride-price he gave. It is done with the knowledge of the village council. If the woman is with a minor child, she has to maintain it for three years and the former husband must give 20 baskets of paddy annually for the child besides buying the essential clothes. The fine so paid is consumed by the members of the village council. The village council plays very important role in bringing two people together for life and it also has the role in giving to their separation.

CONCLUSION

In Kharam society, a girl on her marriage leaves her parental house and lives in the house of her husband. Thereafter, she becomes the essential member of her husband's family. This establishes firmly the right of the husband and the paternal authority. The system of marriage plays an important role in maintaining group cohesion and solidarity.

NOTES

The term *Kharam* mean southerners; (*Kha* means south and *Ram*, southerner).

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