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"Social Customs and Practices of the Khamnungan Nagas (With special reference to Noklak Administrative Area, Tuensang)"

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ABSTRACT

In order to live in society man had to abide by certain norms and practices which slowly evolved in the society in which man lived. These make man tolerate their fellow being respect their rights and fulfill their own obligations to society. These social customs (norms) and practices later on developed into usage which more or less acquired the force of law and subsequently became known as customary law. Customs have all the ingredients to meet requirements of contradiction. Admittedly, modern needs are varied, but for the villages and remote areas where the new civilization will take time to reach, these customary practices would be enough to help Naga societies to grow and flourish Naga societies (Khamnungan society too) cannot grow, rather cannot exist unless they have a code of conduct and behaviour, and law of justice.

Introduction:

The Khamnungan tribe is most popular among Nagas. They are living in the district of Tuensang and Kiphire. This Khamnungan tribe was known as Kalyo - Kengyu until 1950. This tribe is one of the most active and light footed tribe among the Nagas. The district is named after the town of the same name Tuensang and it is surrounded on the north by Mon district, on the east by the nation Myanmar, on the south by Zunheboto and Phek district of Nagaland and on the west by Mokokchung district. The latitude of the district is 2506¢ and 2704¢ North and longitude is 93020¢ and 95015¢ East. The district situated at an altitude of 1,371.60 meters above sea level, the total area is 4228 sq.km.

There is no written record of Khamnungan before the advent of Britishers. The source of information about Khamnungan ancestors are oral tradition in from of folk tales and myths. According a popular myth, Khamnungan 'means source of great waters'. The Khamnungan occupy the eastern most part of India and Northern

part of Mynmar. They are linked linguistically as well as culturally to the Tibeto Burman family.

Objectives :

The study help us to know about social customs and practices of Khiamnungan Nagas.

In this study, I have attempted some social customs and practices (according to their tradition) within the Khiamnungan tribe living within Noklak administrative area under Tuensang District.

Methodology :

The study based on secondary data. Documents like Naga customary laws and procedures, Souvenirs of Directorate of Art and Culture, government of Nagaland, journals, books and other research work and library resources are consulted.

Under Article 371A of the Constitution, special safeguards have been provided for Nagaland that no act of parliament in respect of :

- (1) Religious or social practices of the Nagas.
- (2) Naga customary law and procedure.
- (3) Administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law.
- (4) Ownership and transfer of land and its resources shall apply to the state of Nagaland unless the legislative assembly of Nagaland by a resolution to decides.

According to Dr. Adino Vitso (1957) "In all social systems it can be seen that both man and women have an important role to play in proper functioning of society has as is the case with patriarchal or tribal societies." Mair (1962) also commented about social customs and practices that "Law is concerned with rules and conducts and in a wider field is called social control." The Naga customary laws are not in uniform and these customary laws vary from tribe to tribe, because of different social and customary practices adopted by each tribe as their respective culture. It should be Nagas object to find out the proper channel to collect the materials on different tribal customary laws. This is to collect and record the existing customary laws and practices traditionally held by each tribe for centuries together both published and unpublished. The customary law will generally cover the following aspects, namely :

1. The system of village Govt. and its functions.
2. The religious and social customs.
3. Significance of customs and ornaments.
4. Inheritance of movable and immovable properties.
5. Rights and obligation of villager.
6. Inter village treaty maintained between the villages.
7. Method of cycle of Jhuming and village jurisdiction etc.

1. Belief : The Khiamnungan believe in one supreme God above all deities. They call Kooa the supreme deity. The regard that the sun and the moon are representative of God. They believe that the souls of the dead go to the other underworld through a tunnel on the top of a peak called Sukey, which lies about 10 Kilometers west of Noklak village and continue their life there as before.

2. Rites and Ceremonies : The Khaimnungan observe several reasonal rites and ceremonies. These celebrations are mostly related to jhuming cultivation and prosperity in life.

Ewam : When new jhum is cleared and burnt, the villagers construct new jhum hut in the fields. It is taboo to make fire during the construction of jhum hut and that no smoke should be produced by making fire, unless the hut is completed. As soon as the hut is completed, the villagers will perform this Ewam ceremony and after this fire can be made free in the fields. When the villagers complete construction of jhum huts in the fields, Ewam ceremony is performed in respective fields by all on the same day by sacrificing pigs, chickens, etc. and ask blessing from God for a good harvest in the fields. The chief priest of the village goes to the field one day ahead of all the villagers and perform the same on the following day. This general celebration of Ewam cannot be done unless it has been performed first by the chief priest one day ahead.

Chukhai Khan : As soon as the sowing of seeds in the fields is completed, the villagers perform Chukhai Khan celebration in the fields by sacrificing either pigs or chickens to purify the seeds sown in the fields and perform rites asking for good harvest in bounty.

Cheetap : When the millets will be ripe for harvest, the villagers go to their respective fields in a particular day chosen by the priest and harvest millets nominally just around the jhum hut and bring home for taste by observing some ceremonial rites. The villagers are free to harvest their millets in their respective fields after this celebration, but not before this celebration is performed by the priest.

Peeyam : When village harvest would be over and collect the grains in the village granaries, the villagers perform Peeyam celebration asking from God of inexhaustible stock of grains in the greeneries by killing chickens, so that there should be no scarcity of grains for the family till the next harvest.

Tsukhum : When paddy plants start blooming and other vegetables bear fruits in the fields, the villagers perform Tsukhum celebration at the village by sacrificing mithuns, buffaloes, cows, pigs, etc., feasting for six days with meat and drink ; but they do not dance till next Woo celebration is performed.

Woo : The Khiamnungans remove skull of their deceased from the bamboo made coffins which are kept on a scaffold near the village in a year. They remove the skull on Woo celebration day killing cows, pigs, etc. All the relatives of the deceased assemble in the house of the deceased and really mourn for the dead. Early morning just before the sunrise, all the relatives of the deceased led by the eldest man of the clan who is also the priest of the clan go to the spot, where the dead body was kept before on the scaffold and remove the skull from it. The skull is wrapped with a piece of cloth and put into a small basket covered with leaves and some items of foodstuffs and ornaments offered to the soul of the dead. The skull of the cow or the pig killed on that day is also tied to the basket. The clan priest holding the basket

containing the skull of the deceased wrapped properly and followed by the relatives of the deceased including women mourning aloud go in procession to the spot in the jungle and dump it along with skulls of the deceased relatives. Every clan in the village has a selected spot in the jungle either by the side of a big stone or big tree preserved for centuries together to collect the skull. The relatives in the mourning procession then return to the house of the deceased and have final feast of mourning rite with fresh meat and disperse.

Hookha : This is the greatest annual festival of the Khiamnungan Tribe. They celebrate this by killing mithuns, buffaloes, cows, pigs, etc., and dance for days together. Both men and women dance together hand in hand in the houses of those men who have killed mithuns, buffaloes, pigs, etc., in several numbers purposely to celebrate this grand feast. This celebration is observed for 6 days at all the villages. Some villages extend the period more than 6 days. The traditional friendship and solidarity between men of equal means and status are declared on such occasion by exchanging legs of mithuns, cows, pigs, etc., and such friendship established on such occasion can never be broken arbitrarily by any one. This friendship can be declared between men of equal status from the same village or between men from different villages.

3. Dress & Ornaments : The Khiamnungans have no restriction or distinction for use of dress or ornaments like some other tribes. No dress or ornament is the perquisite right of any clan. Any member of a clan can wear any type of dress and ornament within his means if he can afford.

4. Dormitory : There are separate dormitories for boys and girls in different Khels. Those unmarried young men of a Khel or boys belonging to a clan in a Khel sleep in a separate dormitory, so also grown up unmarried girls sleep in separate dormitory. The boys and girls begin their intimacy in these dormitories. It is a taboo that a boy from a clan should visit a girl from his own clan in the dormitory. A boy or a girl may enjoy the favour of others also unnoticed by his or her boy or girl friend. When a girl becomes pregnant before the marriage, she has her abortion done with the help of an expert old woman, who practises such primitive abortion.

5. Marriage : The Khiamnungan marriage is one of the simplest and the most economic performances ever known. Normally the marriage ceremony is secretly performed at dead of night without the knowledge of the parents and unknown to most friends of the couple. There is no time to prepare for the marriage ceremony nor intimation is given to other relatives. There is some difference in performance of marriage ceremony between the people of Noklak and Pangsha under one group and that of the Panso group within the same tribe. Marriage between a boy and a girl is performed by them after having enough love affair and not with the knowledge and approval of the parents. The parents of a girl married to a boy do not know that their daughter is married and that they have a son-in-law ; because the girl is not supposed to disclose such news to her parents. The marriage ceremony is solemnised at dead of night before the cock crows. Exogamy is strictly observed for marriage in Khiamnungan society except at Wui village. When a boy and a girl

from the same clan fall in love, such affair is regarded as a social offence bringing ill omen and misfortune to the village in form of a famine and other natural calamities. The people strongly oppose such incestuous marriage and expel the incestuous couple from the village. When a normal marriage is to be performed, the boy brings the girl to his house at dead of night along with 2 or 3 trusted friends of his and his girl ; but neither his parents nor her parents are invited for the occasion. One cock is killed at dead of night and the cock's blood is collected in two separate but small concave shaped tray made of green banana leaves by cutting the cock's throat. The couple dip their fingers separately one in each banana leaf tray containing the blood and declare their allegiance to each other in the presence of the those trusted friends. Thereafter, a little rice and the chicken are boiled separately and the members present there share the feast of the marriage. Thus the marriage is solemnised according to their long practised custom and tradition. When the cock crows, the girl goes back to her parents ; but the parents would not know that their daughter is married until some indication is shown by their daughter. It is a practice at all villages of the tribe that all grown up girls should go to the jungles every early morning and collect firewood once before they have their morning meal. So from the morning following the marriage ceremony, the girl will start dumping the firewood in the house of her husband. This is the sure indication that the girl is married and that she has a husband. The parents of the girl will know that they have a new son-in-law.

Marriage ceremony among the Panso group of the same tribe is more simple than that of the Noktak and Pangsha group. Use of any form of fresh meat during the marriage night is strictly restricted on the ground that if fresh meat is served on the marriage night, the wife may in later days blame the husband and charge him, if misfortune baffles on the family that he could no longer feed her with fresh meat as he used to feed her at time of courting and marriage to persuade her to marry him. The boy simply goes near the house of his girl at night and waits for the girl to come out of her house. As soon as the girl comes out of her house, the boy holds her up and takes her to his house. There he feeds her with ordinary food along with boiled smoked meat as a token of their marriage ceremony. The girl goes back to her parents house again. This is a customary practice to maintain the prestige of the girl and also to test the love of the boy.

Menu Joa : Since ancient times, only 2 clans the 'Lam' and 'Shin', exist among the Khiamnungans. As such, marriages could take place only between these two clans. It was taboo for a couple to marry within the clan an offence that called for excommunicating them from the village. It was a common practice for parents, relatives or friends to arrange marriages. However young people were also allowed to marry person of their choice. Each year, boys and girls of similar age group worked in each other's field on rotation, enabling them to have an insight to each other's character, mannerisms, temper and habits. As such, attractions developed and persuasive courtship ensued. If the boy wanted to take this relationship to the next level, as an appointed time, at night fall, the boy and his friends go to the girls house and calls her out. As she comes out, the group escorts her to the boy's house and rests for a time at the pounding table. After which some rituals are performed by the boy's bosom friend. The girl is then asked to pound some grains. If she refuses, it is taken to mean that she is unwilling to marry the boy, and is allowed to

head back home.

6. Divorce : The Khiamnungans strictly observe monogamy ; but a man can divorce his wife if he is not happy with her and marry another girl. A man, if he wishes can divorce and marry several times ; but he can have only one wife at a time. Similarly, a woman, if she wishes, can marry more than one after divorce. If a man divorces his wife at his own will against the will of his wife having affairs with another girl, he will have to give her half of all the household properties including livestock. The divorced wife also can impose a restriction on her husband binding him not to marry a particular girl, if she knows of such intimacy between her husband and a girl. It will be difficult for him to ignore such restriction according to the tribal custom. In case of violation of this restriction, the members of the clan belonging to the divorced wife will oppose it will be difficult for the man to stay at the village. The wife also can run away from her husband leaving all her children with her husband if she does not like to live with her husband any more. Even after marriage, a woman retains her relationship with her clan and she still remains a member of her clan. There is no fixed penalty for offence on adultery, whenever such offence is detected. The degree of penalty depends on the social status of the aggrieved husband. But such cases of adultery are not often taken up publicly, because of moral laxity in the society.

7. Inheritance : Inheritance is patriarchal. All immovable and movable properties are inherited from father to son. When a father dies, his son or sons inherit all the properties including the house ; but a daughter can inherit some household properties at the time of death of her father. When a man dies without leaving a son to inherit his properties except some daughters then most of the properties are inherited by the brothers of the deceased or cousins save those due to the living daughters.

The widow can remain in the same house after the death of her husband even if all the grown up children are married. In case a widow is young enough, she can marry again and in that case, she will have to vacate the old house and the same house will be claimed by the relatives of her deceased husband. The land is owned by the clan as whole, by the group of families and by the individuals within one's own means. There is no restriction for sale or purchase of land and forests within the village.

Nokle : In olden times, misunderstandings between different villages could arise over cultivation of Jhum land, thefts insults etc. On occasions when disputes could not be resolved peacefully, the rival groups took to armed conflict. On the appointed day, holding their shields, spears and wearing headgears, rough cloth to protect their bodies. Women also contributed to the flight by supplying stones, drinking water and tending to the injured. Customarily, the group that emerged victorious sang, "Oh shiang so tsoi" - the victory song.

Poniu Phe Ta : The use of logdrum has been a custom since time immemorial. It was accorded a place of honour played an indispensable role in smooth functioning of village administration. It was a means to communicate important information to the villagers. Different beats carried different information - conveying death of a fellow villager, fire, an eminent, an eminent attack by approaching enemies, victory

in war etc. A strict set of rules and rituals had to be observed before carving a logdrum. The wood to be carved the artisans and tools to be use were dedicated by a priest from Meyo clan. The workers involved in the carving stayed on in the jungle till it was completed. The day it was to be dragged to the village, a morung elder invoked the blessing of the almighty and members of the morung, dressed in their traditional fineries pull it ceremonially amidst singing, dancing and yelling victoriously. On reaching the spot where it is to be placed, the pulling group, reverentially pay obeisance to god successful completion of safe arrival of the logdrum.

Conclusion :

The existing Naga customary laws or traditions vary from tribe to tribe requiring proper research with the help of the experience Naga village elders or ethnologist representing different tribes before these customary laws and traditions become history of the past.

Nagaland is in a state of ferment politically, economically, religiously, socially and culturally. These forces are directly molding the basic foundation of the Naga society and drasting changes are effecting the social and customary laws of the Nagas and come to a stage where they are initiating the foreign culture. They may not be able to retain those good customary laws of the Nagas in future unless something is done at present. They have retain those good customary laws of the Nagas to maintain peace and harmony in the society by reforming some savagely revengeful customs of the some tribe and at the same time absorb those good customs and etiquette of the foreign culture.

It should be mentioned regarding religion that in ancient Nagas were animist. But at present many Nagas are converted into Christianity. Christianity has been accepted by these converts as much superior to the tribal religion having tremendous effect on their ways of life and progress. It really brings drastic changes in the outlook of a convert, who had been living in a secluded society clouded with superstitions and other expensive ceremonies of primitive faith and belief.

Nagaland is in a state of evolution today. The Nagas have been enlightened and united through Christianity ; but it has also adversely affected the culture of the Nagas and has made deep erosion into it requiring proper study and reform, so that the Nagas retain their good culture without being swallowed in the flood of the highly sophisticated international culture creating social and economic unrest in the society. When a nation or a community loses its culture, it also loses its identity and existence. It is therefore, important to restate those good customs and traditions of the Nagas through some legislation to retain their ethnic identity and existence of their culture.

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