

A MAJOR TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL OF CHIRU TRIBE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are one of the most important cultural elements of Chiru Tribe that distinguishes their distinctive culture from other tribes. Each traditional festival of this tribe involves rites, rituals, custom etc. that reflect every aspect of their culture. There are six major festivals of Chiru tribe that have been handed down from the progenitors since time immemorial. They are Derkai Rohoi festival, Reiinreii Lamvaka festival, Phoibei Moroi festival, Sangroukou festival, Shangbouk festival, Loipuishak Rathakoui festival. The Derkai Rohoi and Reiinreii Lamvaka festivals symbolize the social status of children and youth. The Phoibei Moroi Festival signifies the importance of reading of years. While Sangroukou, Shangbouk, Loipuishak Rathakoui are festivals of seed sowing, harvesting and worshiping of deity. These festivals are integral part of the Chiru society that reflects the ways of life of this community. All these festivals are celebrated with different musical instruments, traditional songs, and traditional dresses in different seasons of the year. The purpose of the paper is to discuss and bring out the rich cultural festivals of the Chiru tribe. It also focuses on the various uses of cultural elements and associated pertaining to the important of these festivals. The paper will also throw light on the identity of Chiru community as highlighted in its festivals as Chiru is a less known tribe in the north east India.

Keywords: Festivals, SeirIn, Reibak, Derkai and Laishu Theiimpu

INTRODUCTION

Chiru tribe is one of the oldest nomadic tribes of north east India. They mainly live in the state of Manipur and Assam. The Chirus mainly inhabit Senapati, Tamenglong, and Churachanpur of the hill districts of Manipur. There are 10 Chiru villages in Senapati, 2 villages in Tamenglong, and 1 village in Churachanpur. Therefore, there are 13 Chiru villages in Manipur. Apart from these villages, a colony known as happy valley/ Reiiim colony is located near the Langol Tarung Thangmeiband Imphal West and at least 20 households of Chirus settle in Chinglamei village of Kom tribe. In Assam, there is one Chiru village known as Budon Chiru village, Punji Kamranga, part-1, Lakhimpur. Some households are also settling in Sachu colony Dimapur and Julukei town in Paren district of Nagaland. The Chiru tribe is recorded to have been living in Manipur since the 12th century A.D. among the so-called 'Old Kuki' tribes like Moyon, Monsang, and Lamkang who were already in Manipur since the first century A.D. In Manipur, Chiru is mentioned as early as the middle of the sixteen century (Col J. Shakespear: the lushai-Kuki Clan). In terms of lifestyle and culture, the Chiru tribe has some similarities with the Naga community. They show predominantly mongoloid features and speak Chin-Kuki language of Tibeto- Burman linguistic family. The

Chiru has affinity with other kindred tribes viz Hmar, Kom, Purum, Aimol, Koireng, and Puimei.

In the present contemporary world, the people of smaller tribes of north east India are confused about their ethnic identity and division because the bigger tribes try to dominate, absorb and claim them as their own though they have distinct culture and tradition. In such a situation, tradition and culture play a very important role in defining the ethnic identity of a tribe. Cultural festival is also an important element of culture that magnifies a tribe's identity. Different communities, tribes such as Naga tribes, Kuki tribes, Nepali, Muslim and Meitei have been living in Manipur since time immemorial. Therefore, all these tribes and communities celebrate different festivals which were acquired and handed down by their own progenitors. For example, Meitei people celebrate a number of festivals in a calendar year such as Ningol Chakouba, Heikru Hitongba, Kang, Laiharaoba, Cheiraoba, and Yousang. For Muslim community in Manipur, Ramjan Id is a major festival celebrated with joy and happiness. Chavang Kut is one of the biggest festivals for the Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups of Manipur. G.Kamei (2003) explores the Festival of Zelianrong People of North East India. Gaan Ngai festival is also a festival of the living and the dead signifying their ritual and customary festival. Kamei Beeju (2014) studies the Kabui/Rongmei festival and its implication to the ways of life of this tribes. She states that Gaan Nagai festival reflects the Rongmeis' beliefs, pattern of society and cultural practices. Ng. Ngalengnam (2015) discusses about the importance and implication of the "Lui Ngai Ni, the seed sowing festival of the Nagas" to the Tangkhul community by celebrating the festival every year in every village so as to preserve their rich cultural heritage and identity. In order to promote tourism in the state of Manipur, "Sangai festival" is celebrated every year for 10 consecutive days in the month of November since 2010 attracting people from inside and around the world. This festival is a state festival of Manipur.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research will be conducted for following objectives:

1. To investigate and discuss the various cultural festivals of the Chiru tribe.
2. To study the importance of the festivals and its association with the way of life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was an outcome of an extensive field survey conducted in different villages of Chiru tribe of Manipur such as Dolang, Charoi khullen, Happy valley Tarung, and Bungte villages for a time period of six months from January to June 2015. Data are collected with the help of schedule, personal interview, and participant observation. Old aged persons, educationists, teachers, scholars, writers etc were also interviewed. Secondary information such as books, literature, magazine and unpublished manuscripts written by different writers, scholars are of much help in authenticating the first hand information. Using both primary and secondary information is a must to ensure less error and to provide proper justification.

DISCUSSION

Deiirkai Rohoi Festival

Deiirkai Rohoi is one of the traditional festivals of Chiru tribe. Its literal meaning is "first time wearing of pants, Ponza (traditional clothe), head gear by a man" and Rohoi means festival. It is also the time where men take up the job of making basketry, holding bamboo basket on the back of the body for going to field for the first time in their life. Deiirkai is also known by another name, "Kouilouina" to indicate a special ritual in one's life. This festival is

popularly known as Deiirkai festival. The festival also marks a person entry into married life. The festival is usually celebrated in the month of Biriiptha i.e December.

Deiirkai is one of the most important festivals since time immemorial among the Chiru tribe and is celebrated once in every three years. This celebration last for three days and is held outside the bachelors' house (Dormitory) called SeiirIn where a gallery like structure is constructed with a kind of bamboo called Moubi, and this form of structure is known as Vanlam Raka. Deiirkai festival also marks the occasion of young men entering into bachelorhood. Parents send their children who have attained the age of 11/12 years and above called Reibak are sent to stay at SeiirIn and are selected for this festival. In this auspicious occasion of three days, special folk songs, rhyme of cymbal and drum is presented along with trumpet sound produced by the blowing of horn. Special folksongs called "Chenthila" are sung by various male and female singers of the village. The songs signify that all the Reibak are now old enough and mature. During these days, the elders and senior boys of the village dress the newly recruited boys with small short (dhoty) in Chiru called "Kaitak" crowned with Deiirkai head gear and wrapped around the chest hanging down from right shoulder to the left loin and perform rows of dance. This festival has an important value in one's life as it is the first time that the boys are allowed to wear Ponza, which were worn before in their life. After two years the group of youth who completed the Deiirkai is given another stage of grown man's life called Sertangkhong (Bachelorhood) followed by other stages called Alamro, Thangva, and Seiirtangva. Each and every member of the youth has to bring one Zu Waibe (liquor pot) during the festival. This liquor is drunk and shared among the village chief, elders and leaders of the village.

Reiinreii Lamvaka Festival

Reiinreii Lambaka is one of the traditional festivals of Chiru tribe that mark the young girl entering maidenhood. In other words, it is the festival where small girls attain puberty which shows that they have become mature and reached marriageable age. It is celebrated in the month of "Purpa" i.e. February, in Chiru language. A day before the start of this festival, girls form a group and collect rice from each and every household of the village and prepare wine or beer. Whereas their opposite counterparts, the boys will go to the river or stream to catch fish or hunt in the jungle where the Chiru tribe refer to as "Ngala se". The fishes collected are cooked and enjoyed with beer. This festival is usually performed in front of the traditional house called SeiirIn, and the platform is surrounded by stone. On this day, the village chief called Koulak will pour Zu -- liquor made of rice and the festival of "Reiinreii Lavaka" begins from there on. Other subordinate leaders such as Shangpu Theiimpu, Laishu Theiimpu, Thirsu Theiimpu, and Besharpu Theiimpu will also be honored by serving rice beer by the girls. At night, the boys and girls will enjoy merry-making among themselves. They will also sing and dance by welcoming this event. "Reiinreii Lavaka" festival plays a pivotal role among the girls as they are officially allowed to wear "Ponve", worn "Pounza" i.e shawl prepared for them and their ears are decorated with flowers to signify that the girls are physically and mentally mature and attain marriageable age. In the early morning, the Koulak will be seated on the "Khampolong" which is made of wood. It is the throne of the village chief; then singing and dancing begin popularly known as "Sangkhhar song" and "Sangkhhar dance" respectively. The so called Laputpa or Laruchupa will crown him and lead the song by holding spear, jumping around the place called "Lamva" eight times and entering the place where rice beer was prepared for him and enjoy drinking the whole night. In the last day of "Reiinreii Lavaka" all the folks, young and old, will gather once again for the last time at "Seriin" and share the happiness of the festivals by pouring the rice beer and drink among themselves and finally go to their respective places. But the boys and girls will go and collect

donation from each and every household in cash or kind offered by the family. And they will return to the dormitory house, enjoy their food and finally get dispersed.

Phoibei Moroi Festival

Phoibei Moroi is one of the cultural festivals associated with work culture in which the whole communities of the village are helping each other in an agricultural society. The importance of this festival is the reading of year or counting the age of year through work. This festival has an etymological significance on the part of the life cycle of the Chiru tribe because in olden days people found it difficult to read the year, age, as there was no calendar; the calendar was not even known by the people. From time immemorial, Chiru people had been counting the year, age through this festival. The village chief, elder, and religious leaders of the village will choose a particular good day and select the person one month ahead of the time to host the festival. On the next day, Laishu Theiimpu the chief priest of the village will go to Niknalon to offer prayer, sacrifice and adult boy will go to the forest in search of vine and cane for tug of war. Three days before the start of this festival, the Reibak and adult boys will go for construction of elevated structure of platform made of bamboo called “Vairap Raka” at the field. On the day of Phoibei, people of the village will go to the field of the host person. Shangpu Theiimpu (the priest of the Goddess of wealth) will offer prayer and sprinkle water at the field. All the Reibak and the adult boy will work in the field. But the chief, priest, song master, elders, and old folk will sit at Valam Raka. Song master will lead the song of Phoibei and sung together. A selected group of girls will serve the traditional wine or beer called “Zutongtang” to both male and female. In the noon time, they will be served a special feast of beef, pork, chicken, fishes to all the people. The tilling of the earth field is popularly known as “Kangraikar” in Chiru language. During the tilling of the earth field all the people will shout a slogan “Houijam”. And this slogan will be repeated three times after reaching the village. This festival of Phoibei is usually celebrated during the month April. Both going and returning home, the village chief and Shangpu Theiimpu the priest of the Goddess of wealth will carried on “Tolai” by the Reibak and adult boys. In olden day, this festival played a very pivotal role, as the age of the children who were born in that year was determined from the date of the person’s Phoibei festival. This festival is quiet similar to the “Cheitharol Kumbaba” of the Meitei. The whole process is known as Phoibei Moroi.

Sangroukou Festival

Sangroukou is one of the most important cultural festivals of Chiru Tribe. It is a seed showing festival celebrated in the months of Monoi (March) and Masai (April). The timing of the Sangroukou festival varies from village to village in accordance to the suitability and arrangement of the village but it should be performed within these two months.

“Pakot” a place which is very near to the Dormitory house called Seriin is properly partitioned by the strips of bamboo and keep the place neat and tidy. Within the place of Pakot, the Reibak and the adult boys built a small barn house including the portioned wall of the Pakot. Different kinds of paddy seed belonging to the villagers are dedicated to God of wealth in the form of sacrifice. After offering sacrifice to God, the Chirus believe that paddy seeds appear to be born and multiplied inside the burn house. In the practice of shifting cultivation, the Chiru tribe usually set fire to the field during the month of February. The priest would appease the souls of the earthly creatures like snakes, rats, birds, earthworms, ants and any kinds of living things. Shangpu Theiimpu the priest of wealth will perform the ceremony by killing the dog and chicken, take their blood and split firewood into the four pieces. Then he will mix with the powder of ginger, calocasia, salt, chilies and wrap up with “Mekebou” meketree leave. Then a banana leaf was set up at his place and made the sacrifice. By doing this, the Chiru tribe believe that, the souls of every creature living in the

field will be pacified through the sprinkling of the blood. The priest of wealth will direct the village steward to collect the seeds to every household of the village and handed over to the Shangpu Theiimpu. Then he will receive and keep at the “Pakot” where burn house is there. Again the priest would perform a ceremony by killing a dog and hen in which the blood of these animals will be sprinkled to the surface of the seeds. A special feast is arranged by Shangpu Theiimpu at his residence and served the Reibaks. After the meals they will play wrestling along the way till they reach their respective beds arranged at the Seriin.

In the next morning, the village chief, elders, harbinger will gather at the house of Shangpu Theiimpu. They will be served with beer in honor of the priest of wealth which will be drunk by the harbinger and the elder. They will also eat a feast of dog and hen which are sacrificed. This special ceremony is known as “Rukang madai”. On this day, they will also fix a date on which the seed will be sown. All the people of the village will go to their respective fields and sow seed. In the evening, a tug of war competition will be held between the younger group and older group which are known as Naipanglom and Uleiinlom. The following day will be observed as complete day of rest in honor of the day of seed sowing known as “Meiichoikhupar”.

Shangbouk Festival

Shangbouk is one of the most important cultural festivals of the Chiru Tribe. It is an annual festival of harvesting because Chirus are mostly agriculturalists and they practice jhuming cultivation. After reaping and threshing the paddy crops, the grains are boarded inside the storehouse near the paddy field. It is usually celebrated in front of the storehouse. The village chief, Shangpu Theiimpu and elders of the village will set the date for the festival of Shangbouk, after every family member of the village has completed harvesting. The duration of the celebration ranges from one week to one month depending on the geographical area and number of households of the village. It is usually celebrated during the months of August and October. For this festival, the foodgrain is shifted from the storehouse and piled up in the open space just in front of the storehouse. Then the Shangpu Theiimpu will start performing the ritual activities in front of the people by killing a hen and a dog; the blood of these animals are mixed with chilies, salt, zinger, calascasia, onion and garlic and sprinkled over the grain and seek the blessing from the God of wealth by the priest. Then the priest invokes the spirit of the goddess of harvest three times. During this festival, married daughter and son-in-law are invited. If they happen to bring animals for sacrifice, the animals will be killed at the end of the day. Any amount of grain is offered to the son-in-law as desired.

While performing the rituals and rites of the Shangbouk, no one is allowed to enter the premises. If anyone happens to enter into this premise, he will not be allowed to return to his place until the rituals and rites are over. He is bound to serve the family in processing the crops till the end.

Those who produced more crop yield in the village perform another ritual known as “Shangto Mosok”. In this ceremony, they will separate the grain from the herbs and shrubs through the winnowing process; all the males will shout a slogan “Houi ti”. Chirus believe that by making such sound the yield will be doubled. Shangpu Theiimpu will also perform a devotional rite and count his footsteps while the workers are winnowing the grains. When the winnowing process is over, the worker will calculate how much grains have been produced. Then the priest will kill one pig and one cock, the blood will be sprinkled over the grain. Some amount of grains will also be distributed to their relatives for their help. After that, the workers will carry the grains to the storehouse called Reimunchu or Chukik. Then they will offer wine and

food of pig and cock to the deity with words “Kouchoui Apai”. At last, they will eat feast which is prepared by the family.

Loipuishak Rathakoui Festival

Loipuishak Rathakoui is one of the festivals of Chiru tribe associated with the soul. The literal meaning of this term is “calling of the soul by worshipping the deity”. This festival is usually celebrated during the month of Birip (December). Laishu Theiimpu, the chief priest of the village first performs a ritual ceremony by worshipping the deity at the place called Niknalon Rothoina. The Reibak and Derkai of the village will go for collecting firewood in the forest and cut fifty logs of firewood’s and dry them in the place itself on the preparation day i.e. Friday. After returning, they will gather at Seriin and compensate for the labour with wine for three consecutive days. In the next day, the bachelor of both the group will go once again to the forest for collecting plantain leaves specially the banana leaves before the sunrise. When they are coming back from the forest, they will hand over the plantain leaves. The chief of the village, Laishu Theiimpu, elders of the village will meet at the chief’s residence to discuss the schedule of date and fixed it when the celebration of Loipuishak Rathakoui will be held. Then the leaders of the village called Thangva will soon give information to all the villagers about the fixed date for this festival. On the day, the Thangva will go to every household of the village to distribute a plantain leaves and firewood. Every household family of the village will donate some rice and food stuff prepared by them. In the noon time, the husband and wife of the villagers will go and collect the logs from the forest. In the evening, they will go and proceed towards the eastern gate of the village by playing the drums and perform a rituals rite at Theiirei Rapakung by calling the soul. Again, the same ritual will be performed on the western side too. The two groups of youth of the village will go to every household to fetch the food stuff. Every food-stuff has an identification mark. After collecting, they will return to the Seriin in which they will be received by the former Derkais. When these food packages are brought to the Seriin, the village folks would shout a slogan calling “ho ho ho se se se”. The village chief will announce to the villagers the location for the terrace cultivation of that year. For the last time, all the villagers will perform the formal proceeding of offering of wine to the earth known as “Kouchoui Apai”, after which they will enjoy different items of food and curry which have been collected from all the households of the village.

Sekem Sak

Sakem Sak is an annual festival of feast of bread. Sekem is a word that refers to small bits of rice and Sak refers to eat. The literal meaning of the terms Sekem Sak is the eating of the bread made of rice. All the youths of the villager called Reibak and Deiirkai will go out to the forest to cut down the bamboo and distributed each to the girls for this particular festival. They will also give bamboo to the Koulak (village chief) and the most senior and the eldest among of all girls. At first, at the residence of the Koulak, the entire woman’s of the village will start grinding the rice and make rice bread. On the next day, the Koulak will place the Sakem and rice grain in the winnowing tray in which the volunteers of the village known as Tangva will carry the tray and hang in the dormitory house Seiirin. On the following day, all the boys and girls will start making the rice bread at the house of Koulak and also give to the Tangva. All the elders and leaders of the village would also join together in eating of the rice bread made by the youth at the Seiirin and also drink the wine made of rice.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of the study shows that the Chirus of the North East India have a number of cultural festivals associated with different ways of life of the tribe. The customary rites, rituals, during the festivals are part and partial of the life of this community. These festivals

are of great importance in one's life as it was associated with youth, adults, reading of year, age, showing of seed, harvesting and worshipping of deity. The village chief, the chief priest, elders and leaders of the village played their parts in accordance with their positions. The youth of the village such as Reibak and Derkai also played a key role in each festival by fulfilling their duties assigned to them. These festivals play a very crucial part in the different stages of men's life and each and every one has to cross it during the course of his life. The number of these festivals proves that Chiru tribe has rich culture and tradition and has distinctiveness from other tribes of the North East India. The Chiru tribe still celebrates and observes all these festivals not just for enjoyment but also to preserve their rich cultural heritages for their generation to come. The celebration of these festivals itself helps in preserving their identity. The most important aspect of the study is that young and old of the Chiru tribe learn their culture through these festivals held at their respective villages. This paper is expected to enhance the knowledge about the Chirus and their festivals as they are less known tribe of North East India.

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.Persons Interviewed

1. Ashek Thanglen of Dolang Village
2. Ahek Thanglen of Dolang Village
3. Angam Zaltung Chiru of Tarung Village
4. Rehongkha Thanglen of Bungte Chiru
5. Thanglenzam Thanglen of Choroï Khullen
6. Thanglenwan Thanglen of Choroï Khullen
7. Rangnetlar Sekho of Dolang Village
8. Thanglenshor of Dolang Village