ISSN: 2349-8269
Dimapur Government College Journal • Vol. IX • Issue No. 1 • 2023
An Annual Peer-Reviewed Journal

Feast of Merit of the Sangtam Nagas of Kiphire District: With Reference to Yingphir, Thsingar, Hurong and Phelungre Groups

S. J. Levi Keor

Author's details

S. J. Levi Keor
Research Scholar, Department of History & Archaeology, Nagaland University.
Email: levikeor@gmail.com

Abstract

The Sangtam Nagas are one of the seventeen tribal units in Nagaland. It occupies a vast area within the district of Nagaland, as the Sangtams form a large number and are a leading tribe in Tuensang and Kiphire districts. The Sangtams in Tuensang district are known as Northern Sangtam, those found in the district of Kiphire are known as Eastern Sangtam and the Sangtams of Dimapur district are called as Western Sangtam.

The Sangtam tribe of Kiphire district practice different distinct rituals and social programs at different times and seasons. Even in terms of identity markers such as, rituals, customs, practices and language are also distinctly different. Before the coming of Christianity and introduction of formal education into their soil, all the above groups maintained their distinct and separate identity in terms of culture, tradition and belief.

This paper aims to understand the reason or reasons for the multiple Feast of Merits being observed within the same community and to find out the role and functions applied to establish the social standing, privileges and status of the feast givers.

Keywords: Feast of honor, Yingphir, Thsingar, Hurong, Phelungre, Pongthrüm Müyang, Anyidsiba, Nyingthsaba, Müzukh, Kuri Tsüba, Culture, Christianity, Save-Soul-Model and Ritual.

Introduction

The Sangtam Nagas of Kiphire District

The Sangtam Nagas of Kiphire district is a conglomeration of five different groups namely, Yingphir, Thsingar, Hurong, Phelungre, and Sanphur. Even in terms of identity markers such as, rituals, customs, practices and language also distinctly differ from group to group. They practice different distinct rituals and observe different festivals and social programs at different times and seasons. It was the Sümi Naga who introduced Christianity to the Yingphir and Sanphur groups, whereas for the rest of the groups, it was introduced by the Sangtam Naga Missionaries from Tuensang district. In the present paper, I have taken the case of Yingphir, Thsingar, Hurong and Phelungre groups, as the first three groups in terms of language, culture and practices are common and markedly differ from the latter.

The feast of merit is one of the special features for the Sangtams in terms of social distinction in the olden days. There are series of feasts, known by different names being observed by three different distinct groups within Sangtam community at different times and season in the district of Kiphire. The processes of hosting the feast involve a series of adherence to many social customs and practices. This feast of merit exhibited the affluence and wealth of the host family before his fellow villagers and others. In doing so, it also entitled the host, the privileges of certain cultural rights like, the right for him and his spouse to wear special and new patterns of shawls, ornaments, and, the right for the host to decorate his house with elaborate motifs in befitting manner according to the feasts they have hosted. To host feasts, it involves meticulous planning so that nothing goes wrong in the process of it. By hosting such kind of feast, it does not merely show or display

the riches of the host, but also carries a deep meaning, both in terms of cultural and spiritual realms. Julian Jacobs (2012) referring to the feast perform by the various Naga tribes stated that, "Feasts of Merit are optional Feasts performed by an individual. They are distinct from life-cycle and from agricultural-cycle Feasts, though all of these share the notion of *genna* (generally, a rite, but with strong notions of tabu or prohibition) and sacrifice. The feasts are ranked in importance and scale, each stage carrying rights to new kinds of personal adornment and house decoration, and prohibitions in terms of permitted food" (Julian Jacobs 2012: pp.77).[1] On the importance and two important functions of Feast of Merit, he states that, "first, the need for lavish outlay on cattle, pigs and rice-beer is an incentive to production, and ensures that poorer members of the clan and village are feasted when they cannot themselves afford to kill pigs or cattle. Equally, in conditions where storage of perishable foodstuffs is limited, the Feast ensures that food is not wasted. Second, the Feast of Merit allows individuals to make symbolic statements about their power. Power ultimately is based on land" (ibid: pp.78-80).[2]

By flaunting one's wealth and richness before the community, it simply does not share for he has enough, yet it has its purpose and social importance and gain as well. In this context R.R. Shimray (1985) observed that it was partly the generous philosophy of feeding the poor and sharing wealth with the entire population, but mostly the competitive spirit to climb the ladder of social recognition that prompted the Naga rich men to perform the series of feasts of merit and honour round, which the wheels of Naga society revolved.[3] Naga feast givers, in the quest for social recognition and also to climb the ladder of social status offer lavish feasts by dint of their hard work and sheer determination. And thus, it benefited both the recipients of the feast and the host as well.

According to Sangtam (2007), the Sangtam observes *Anyitsi, Yongdi* and *Longthsa,*[4] and the special features of the feasts are killing mithuns, cows, pigs and merry making, singing, dancing and social visit[5] and those feast givers are entitled to wear rich man's attire and earned popularity, honour and respect.[6] The stages of the feast of merit of Sangtams are:

1st stage, *Yongdiba*, 2nd stage, *Anyidsiba*, and 3rd stage known as *Püh-hümba/Thsatsu*.[7] Therefore, the purpose of offering the feast is to get social prominence.

Different kind of Feast of Merits observed by the Sangtam Nagas of Kiphire District

Traditional Feast of Merit is the hall mark social distinction for Sangtam people of Kiphire district. Feast of Merit was the most coveted and most-sought after in the olden days as it entitled the person who performed or gave feast to the villagers with special privileges and enabled to maintain superior status in the society. However, not everyone could afford to offer such kind of feast, as it required ample wealth and hard work for someone to feed the whole village.

I. Yingphir, Thsingar and Hurong Groups:

These groups of Sangtam community namely, Yingphir, Thsingar and Hurong observe same feasts called, *Pongthrüm Müyang Thsaba* and *Anyidsiba (Yongdi)*. It is also called, *Langthsaba*; meaning, to pave way for peace.

a) *Pongthrüm Müyang Thsaba: Pongthrüm Müyang Thsaba* feast is hosted or given to a friend whom he wants to establish a permanent friendship. All the relatives and villagers are involved in the festivity. The feast is organized on account of the two following reasons:

i) the desire to foster a new relationship, and,

ii) on account of humiliation, and dispute relating to *jhum* land, forest tree, and loose words.

The purpose of the feast is to restore permanent peace and friendship between the two conflicting people. When the need for such feast arises between two people, an elderly person called, *Langpurü* is assigned as a mediator. He is first fed with local rice beer and food and sent out with either a *dao* (machete) or spade to his rival place and kept an item called *'ihthse thrüm'* at his place. This act as an extending of an invitation for the feast and if accepted, it completed the formality of fixing the date and time for the feast. On upon agreement of the date and time for the feast by both parties, then they will finalize who should host the feast,

first. Once it is done, the first host would start the preparation for the feast by slaughtering animals like, pigs, mithun/buffalos and arranging other food items like rice and drinks.

On the day of the feast date, the guest would march to the host village or place with host of relatives comprising of *Jangni-Kunyi* (in-laws), *Nahthrerü* (specific relatives from spouse side), *Ayangrü* (villagers) and feasted upon it by singing folksongs and merrymaking. When a time has come for the guests to depart, the host would send-off his guest with meat killed for the occasion. The different sizes and portions given to his invited friend are:

i) Certain portion of buffalo meat called, *Thsüza Khingphi*

ii) The half portion of pig body (meat).

The members who accompanied the guest, would help in carrying the meat meant as a gift from the host's village to the house of the guest. When the time for the second person to host feast in honor of his friend, the same process and procedures are repeated and observed by him as observed by his friend. Like the first, all the friends, relatives and helpers of the invited guest would go to the host village and used to indulge in drinking, eating and merrymaking with gaiety and enthusiasm. When both the party completed the task of hosting and feasting by feeding certain parts of meat like, hearts, kidney and wine to each other. From that day onward they become a bosom and permanent friends by forgetting their past bitter relationship.[8]

The prominent significance of the feast is to restore mutual respect and fostering unbendable friendship between two people for years to come. Through this feast, it sealed the past animosity and all the differences between the two friends and strengthens the bond.

b) *Anyi Dsiba (Yongdi):* The *Anyi Dsiba (Yongdi),* the second series of the Feast of Merit of the *Yingphir, Hurong* and *Thsingar* groups. To be eligible to host this feast, one has to be married. Meaning, one should be a married person to hold such kind of feast. It is the couple's decision to host the feast and as and when they are readied with the feast, they would announce it to their clansmen, *Aasahrü* (*khel* members) and to all the villagers. To host the feast, the couple would cultivate bigger

and more fertile paddy field and work harder and reared around five-six pigs. Normally, the date and timing for the feast is declared during the month of *Chingyong* (December) by the host.

Once an announcement is made for the feast by the couple, both their clansmen and *khel* members would come forward and assist the couple in the preparation for the feast. For the feast, paddy is taken out from the barn according to the requirement and sun dried on the bamboo mats. Then the women folks would pound the rice on a traditional rice pounding mortars using pestles to split the husks, and then the grain is taken out and tossed in a winnowing basket to split the husks. It was also the duty of the women folks to prepare a special yeast to make rice beer for the feast.

However, prior to the start of activities for the feast, a person called, *Ai putpü*[9] would first performed a certain ritual to observe whether the omens will be favorable or otherwise. *Ai putpü* would wrap/tie shredded cloths in the middle of the rice pounding mortar, placed winnowing basket on the mortar in a reverse position and draw three signs with an egg resembling zero figure, circling round the winnowing basket and then the same egg is broken on it. If the broken egg drips off in two-three lines, it was considered a bad omen for the host. But, if it drips off in one line, it was considered a good omen. Then she would first perform the act of pounding rice and followed by other women folks.

The next task in the preparation for the feast of merit is, making/crafting of wooden trunk called, *Singdisho*. The process of it is started by observing certain rituals. This is followed by an activity called, *Thsohthsa*, where relatives, in-laws, and clansmen were invited by the host and fed with rice beer and goes back to their respective home with full of cane baskets filled with wrapped food. The next activity in the follow up to the main event is known as, *Arü-ü Athsa Müjang*. The significance of it is feeding of rice beer to their relatives, in-laws, and clansmen along with food. Interestingly, in the morning, they were fed with cold rice beer and in the evening they will be fed with hot rice beer. The event is called, *Arü-ü Athsa Müjangba*. Once the above activities are performed, the next morning starts with the commencement of house warming. On this day, they would slaughter livestock like, pigs, buffalos/bulls and assemble

woods from the forest for brewing of rice beer. They would continue brewing rice beer for the whole night. For the dancing troupe, two pieces of slice meats are also prepared and wrapped in banana leaves and then put into a cage basket and taken to a particular place in the village being led by a person called *Langpurü* and shredded the sliced meats further and gave it to *khutong khudirü*. This event is called, *Langthsa dhipa*. Thereon, the invited dancing troupe with their dancing gears and attires would dance in the compound of the host by chanting traditional folk songs honoring his name. The next day is known as, *Ku-u Changebü*, meaning, the last event of the feast. On this day, the diviners or ritual performers like *Langpurü* and *Ai Pu tpü* were invited by the feast host and fed them with specially cooked meat of leg and arm portions. That will be followed by inviting others who took part in the feast and fed them with lavish food. This act sums up the end of the *yongdi* feast.

The traditional feast of merit given by the host to his guest with all gaiety and lavishness exhibits one's richness. It also shows magnificence and lavishness of an individual's way of life, as everyone in the community cannot afford to host such grand feast. Thus, Feast of Merit is given only by the rich people who harvested in plenty. It is sharing of wealth."[10]

II. The Feast of Merits of Phelungre Group

Phelungre, the other group within the Sangtam community observe three series of the Feast of Merit in order to obtain social recognition by offering their wealth in hosting feast for their relatives, in-laws and community in general. It was a show of abundance and generosity by the host. In doing so, the host name is being listed among the list of the wealthiest and an elite within the community.

To host the Feast of Merit, one must be a married person. Unless one fulfill this norm, he is not qualified to host such kind of coveted feast in his lifetime. The feasts were normally hosted or observed during December to February. The series of feasts are:

a. *Nyingthsaba* Feast: This feast is the first in the series of all the feasts. The main purpose of this feast was to gain social status and prestige. The activity starts with the collection of fire wood for the feast. To mark

this event, four pigs would be slaughtered and feasted upon. It is called, *Khaphuh*, meaning, the first killing of animals and the commencement *Nyingthsa* Feast. During this occasion, the close relatives of the host come forward and assist the host and his family in collecting fire woods from the forest and also help the host collect three/four basket bins of paddy from the barn, sun-dried, pounded and winnow it, remove the husks from the rice. That would be followed by preparation of rice beer where it takes around five to six days to process it for human consumption. When the brewing of rice beer is completed, then from there on the real feast would begin. Completion of brewing of rice beer marks the beginning of the feast.

On the day of killing male pig for the feast, the eldest person among the villagers would chant the word, *Muulo*. He would put the left over rice (from brewed beer) into beer mug and utter the phrase, *"Muulo, muulo tsingtsah hee... muulo...muulo tsingtsah hee"*, and then pour it into the mouth of the killed pig. The same phrase is repeated again, and on the third after repeating the same phrase again, *"Muulo, muulo tsingtsah hee..."* commanded, you eat *muulo* food and pour all the left over rice into the killed pig's mouth. Thus, the feast became more intense.

The second activity of the feast was to collect pine leaves from the forest and place it in front of the house of the feast giver. Those village folks who come for the feast would lineup in ring formation with a small branch of pine leaves each extracted from the erected one, and the eldest among the gathering would utter the names of the host and his spouse and take out the pine leaves and hit with it. The participants then start hitting the eldest person among them with the leaves by chanting, *ho... ho... ho...* and indulge themselves into fun. This is an acknowledgment and acceptance of the host and his spouse as they enter their names into the list of affluent and privileged-few members in their community. The feast usually last for three-four days.

b. *Müzukh* Feast: The second series of feast is *Müzukh*. For the feast, the hosts' relatives known locally as, *Pahtsahre, Pinure,* and *Müinyare* would help the host in collecting fire woods and other essential works for the feast. At least three pigs were slaughtered during the observance of the feast. Relatives, in-laws and clansmen take part in the feast.

c. *Kuri Tsüba* Feast: The main purpose of the feast is feeding of in-laws. During this feast, in-laws are invited and fed with lavish food and meat. For the feast, livestock like, buffalos and pigs are slaughtered for the feast. Normally, two buffalos and four pigs are killed for the feast. The village youth, *Ahiuzari* would help the host fetch water from the village well for the feast.

On the first day of the feast the invited members would simply gather *(Mükyaa Ihang)* and dance around *(Khüdong Kyaa)* and disperse for the day. For the second-day activities, all the in-laws would gather in front of their *Morung* or any designated place and together they march towards their host residence with their respective gift and upon reaching the place, all the members unload their gifts on a spread mat. All the members would in unison argue and complaint to their host on meager slice of meat being given and for which they feel it inadequate. Thus, the host is compel to give a huge slice of meat to all the invited guests. As the feast progresses with gaiety and full enthusiasm, the members shows their generosity and love by exchanging gift with each others.[11]

The privileges for performing Feast of Merit (Stoner 1950: pp. 1-12) and the giver of *Anitz* is entitled:

a) To wear a cloth of which the ground colour is black, with several narrow red stripes, and embroidered in red with symbolic representations of mithun horns.

b) To put bamboo splinters along the top of his roof, placed close together, and criss-cross. They may also be put on the field-house, granary, and graves of near relatives. They are symbolic of the joined hands of the dancers at the feast.

c) Rough wooden models of wagtails (*Metacilla sp.*) may be put on the roof. The explanation of this is that the bobbing and pirouetting of wagtails are reminiscent of the movements of a dancer.

d) Two feathers of the great hornbill (*Dichoceros bicornis*) may be worn in the ceremonial head-dress of the feaster.

e) The wife may wear a fringe to her body cloth.

f) She may wear a skirt elaborately striped with red and blue, and with a narrow white central strip.

g) Necklaces of cornelian beads, large white discs of conch shell, and crystal ear-rings may be worn by the women of the feaster's household, and by his female descendants in perpetuity.

h) In some villages a hanging fringe of thatch grass may be put on the projecting roof of the house. In others, a projecting porch-roof is put on over the door. The hanging fringe is regarded as symbolic of the dewlap of a mithun.

The significance of the feast of merit of Thsingar, Yingphir and Hurong groups are that a man, *Thsapi-Hipirü*[12] (meaning, an accomplished man) who successfully hosted and completed all the series of feasts are entitled to wear shawl with distinct motif called, *Rongshü.*[13] His wife is also eligible to wear a shawl called, *Tangkyak Shü,*[14] designed for this class of people. No ordinary men and women are allowed to use it. *Shara Thung Kuh,*[15] the house of the feast givers are also constructed specially designed with interlaced bamboo split on top of the roof and a bunch of thatch is kept hanging on the frontage of the house. This distinctly marked the house of ordinary and accomplished man in the village.

The similar practiced with Phelungre man who accomplished such kind of feast; as he is entitled to wear a rich man's shawl called, *Rongyu.*[16] The wife is also entitled to wear a rich man's wife shawl called, *Kuthruyu.*[17] The dwelling place of the feast givers are also constructed with distinctive features different from that of the commoners. The horns of mithun and buffalo slaughtered during the feasts are kept hanging at the entrance of the house.

Advent of Christianity and Contemporary Society

During the pre-Christian era, the giving of feast of merit earned the giver, a better social status as it intended to bring honor and fame to the giver not only during his lifetime but even after death. The event demonstrates the generosity and the riches of the host as only rich people could afford to offer such an elaborate feast. The host also invoked the blessings from god for bountiful harvest and good health as he prepares

to offer the feast. Rituals and taboo were strictly adhered to by the potential feast givers. Thus, it has religious and spiritual significance. The fundamental importance of the feast, however, is to strengthen the bonds of friendship, restoring permanent and mutual peace caused due to feud, climbing the ladder of higher social status, earning popularity, honor and respect from his relatives, fellow villagers and friends.

However, with the introduction of Christianity into their land in the late 1950's, the practice of age-old feast of merit has been abolished. In contemporary setting, Christmas is considered to be the main festive occasion when it comes to their spiritual realm. The Church and the rich people do host feast during Christmas for their congregations and are fed lavishly but it has no meaning and connection with their traditional and cultural character as it is in line with the teaching of their new faith, i.e. Christianity. In their new faith, there is no place for traditional diviners or priests to partake in the celebration as Pastors and Ordained priests take the center stage. Hence, it has no relevance or connection to their age-old practice of the feast of merit. The traditional primer festival-*Mongmong* is also vaguely observed by the present generation. Some traditional festivals like- *Hünapongbi*, *Thrütsu,* and *Tsonglaknyi* are in the process of fading out. This is linked to the early Christian missionaries as when they proselytized the early converts to Christian faith, their approach was "Save-Soul-Model" and perceived material well-being as curse and projected the traditional practices and culture of the people in a very poor light and denounced it as evil practices.[18] This teaching has an adverse consequence on their traditional and cultural way of life affecting even their traditional belief system and ritual life.

Conclusion

The process of hosting Feast of Merit may differ from village to village or from one group to others, but the ultimate goal is to acquire glory, honor, social distinctions and status in the society. As such, upon completion the host of the feast automatically acquires the social sanction to wear special clothe and ornaments and to add distinctive motif on their house. Organizing Feast of Merit also imply that a family had gathered prestige and social status. The practice and social custom of Feast of Merit pave

the way for preservation and promotion of cultural songs, dances, and festivals and this all are blended with feasting and merry-making. Thus, to prevent the degeneration of age-old practice of feast of merit, holistic approach need to be taken so that age-old cultural, traditional and religious practices are not sabotaged in pursuit of saving soul, social progress and advancement.

End Notes

[1] Julian Jacobs, *The Nagas, Hill Peoples of Northeast India.* (Revised edition, 2012), p. 77.

[2] Ibid, p. 78-80.

[3] R.R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of the Nagas.* (New Delhi: Somsok Publications, 1985), p. 108.

[4] Lanuyanger Sangtam, *The Trans-Dikhu Mission: A History of Sangtam Baptist Church.* (Dimapur: Mapula & Children, 2007), p. 59.

[5] Ibid, p. 59.

[6] C. Tsalongse, *Traditional Culture of the Sangtam - Naga* (Second ed.) (Kohima: Private Publications, 2014), p. 51.

[7] Ibid, p. 51-54.

[8] Field interview with Yingphire Village Council Members and Elders on 14th April, 2018.

[9] Field interview with Tsatongtsi, Govt. Teacher (Rtd.), Yingphire Village on 14th April, 2018.

[10] Field interview with Tsapizi, Head Gb, Hurong, Hurong Village on 29th December, 2018.

[11] Field interview with Phelungre Village Council Members, Gb's and Elders on 3rd June, 2018.

[12] Interview with Litsao Gb, Thsingar on 13th May, 2018.

[13] Ibid, 13th May, 2018.

[14] Ibid, 13th May, 2018.

[15] Ibid, p. 51.

[16] Phone Interview with Tsipise, Ex. VCC, Phelungre on 21st May, 2023.

[17] Ibid, 21st May, 2023.

[18] Interview with Rev. Khingka, Pastor, Tsadang Baptist Church on 16th April, 2022.

References

Stoner, C.R. Source: Anthropos, Jan. - Jun., 1950. Bd. 45, H. 1./3. (Jan. – Jun., 1950), pp. 1-12.

Ghosh, B.B. (1981). *Nagaland District Gazetters - Tuensang District.* Kohima: Govt. of Nagaland.

Horam, M. (1977). *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas (The Tangkhul Nagas).* Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

Hutton, J. (1986). *Report on Naga Hills.* Delhi: Mittal Publication.

Imchen, Panger. (1993). *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture.* New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.

Jamir T., & Lanunungsang, A. (2005). *Naga Society and Culture.* Jorhat: Nagaland University Tribal Research Centre.

Kumar, B.B. (1998). *Society and Culture in a Corner of Nagaland.* Meerut: K.K. Mittal for Pragati Prakashan.

Nienu, V. (2015). *Naga Cultural Milieu.* San Francisco: Dorylus Publishing Group.

Venuh, N. (2014). *People, Heritage and Oral History of the Nagas.* Guwahati: Papyrus Books & Beyond.

District Human Development Report, Kiphire. (2014). Department of Planning and Coordination.