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Life Cycle Rituals And Traditions Of The Poumai Nagas: A Study Of Laii Circle In Senapati District Of Manipur

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Abstract:

A ritual is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects, performed in a sequestered place and performed according to set sequence. It is a tradition performed by the community and religious community. Ritual cannot be defined by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performed because each ritual has different way to performed by different people or community. Ritual may be seasonal, hallowing a culturally defined moment of change in climatic cycle on the welcoming of an activity such as planting, harvesting or may be contingent and collective crisis which are performed at birth, puberty, marriage, death etc. religious ritual is the division between purity and pollution. Due to urbanization and westernization, the people had negated the ritual of the community. The development of modern technology, education and the change life style has obligated the communities to adopt the new way of life by ignoring the importance of different rituals. The community's nature, history and rituals should be preserved and documented to protect the identity of the community. A life cycle of ritual hold the culture and tradition of the community and it reflects the value and identity of the community. This papers attempts to study the life cycle rituals of the Poumai Nagas from Manipur and understands how it changes over time.

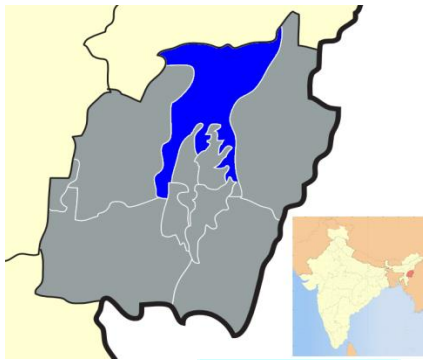
Introduction:

The *Poumai* community is one of the major tribe of *Nagas*. The words *Poumai* means “*pou*” refer to the person name and “*mai*” refer to people (literally the people of Pou). The majority of *Poumai* community lives in *Senapati* district of Manipur and few live in *Phek* district of Nagaland situated in northeastern part of India. *Poumai Nagas* are spread out over 100 villages that have been divided into three blocks; 1. *Paomata* 2. *Lepaona* 3. *Chilivai*. The people are known for bravery, fidelity and wisdom. The *Poumai Naga* is well known to the entire tribal areas in Manipur and Nagaland since antique due to its *Pouli* (*poumai* earthen pot) and *Poutai* (*pou* salt) production. The *Poumai* community language is called *Poula* and now all most all the people follow Christianity in *Poumai* and only few follow their ancestor. The people of *Poumai* are strategically perched on hill top for security reason a tribal warfare was very frequent in those days. The *Poumai Naga* also recognized as a separate tribe in 2002 and as according to 2011 census the total population of *Poumai* tribe is 1,87,180. The *Poumai Naga* had no caste system in terms of high or low, pure and untouchable, rich or poor.

Statement of the Problem

The *Poumai* Naga tribe are very close to nature where majority of their ritual reflect their dependence and close proximity with nature, but of late because of different reasons as acceptance of Christianity, westernization, urbanization, mass media and interaction with other communities, there is a visible impact in the rituals of the tribe and there has been some significant changes that has been observed in the rituals of the tribe. Hence the present study is aimed to capture the life cycle rituals of this tribe inhabiting in the remote periphery of the north east region and also understand the changes in the life cycle rituals over the period of time.

Area of Study



Senapati district in Manipur map

Laii circle fall under the sub division of *Paomata*, *Senapati* district, Manipur. *Laii* circle consist of 6 (six) villages namely:

1. *Laii* village with the total population of 5,518 and the male literacy rate is 35.67% while female is 24.76%.
2. *Laii sarafii* village with the total population of 751 and the male literacy rate is 34.13% while the female is 26.20%.
3. New *laii* village with the total population of 515 and the male literacy rate is 71.91% while female is 50.23%.
4. *Katafiimai* village with the total population of 995 and the male literacy rate is 63.01% while female is 43.42%.
5. *Chingmei khullen* village with the total population of 1856 and the male literacy rate is 59.84% while female is 39.53%.
6. *Chingmie khunou* village with the total population of 3800 and the male literacy rate is 72.19% while female is 60.40%. as according to 2011 census.

As per constitution of India *panchayatiraj* act lai circle is administrated by *sarpanch* (head of village) who is elected representative of village. The majority of the land area is covered by forest while the rest are utilized for cultivation. Rice, maize, potato, cabbage and cereal are the major produces of people. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people and terrace cultivation is generally practice by the people.

Objective: The main objective of this paper is to study and understand the patterns of life cycle among the *Poumai* Tribe pre colonial Naga society and some changes in the life cycle ritual in community over the period of time.

Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary data are collected. Primary data are collected from senior citizens, community leaders and religious leaders of the village. A sample of 5 senior citizens, 5 community leader and 5 religious leaders are selected by convenient sampling, as these leaders may not be always found in particular place at one time. The secondary data are collected from books, journals etc. The tool of data collection is unstructured interview schedule, field notes and camera.

Common ritual practice by laii circle:

1. Pregnancy ritual (*nahrii yu nanou*)

Once the women is pregnant she cannot or they are forbidden to kill a snake because people believe that snake is poisonous and as it shows tongue so it may affect the unborn child and once they were born into this earth they may follow the footstep of the snake like talkative, lie, gossip and may even hurt others.

The pregnant women are not allow to collect a firewood which have branches and if she does that she may face trouble during delivery or it will be difficult to give birth to a child which means there will be more pain than the normal delivery. The husband cannot beat his pregnant wife with a broom and firewood because it affects the unborn child. When we see a black birthmark in a child butt people believe that the mother have struggle during her pregnancy.

2. Birth ritual (*namonaya na*)

During the birth only the husband and some of the elder women who have experience are allowed to assist the delivery of the child. They place the mat (*zha*) on the floor for the women and as the child is born the father cut the umbilical cord with sharp bamboo knife (*anghin*) and from the umbilical cord the blood were collected and buried in the ground beside the house where people cannot see or where animals cannot find as they believe that if the animal ate the umbilical cord than bad things may come or they even belief in short life of the child. As soon as the child is born unto this earth the father of the child will hold him or her and say “the child is mine and he don’t belong to any one but me” as they were scared that the evil may own their child life. They observe (*nabuo rei yu*) five days after birth as for the male child and three days for female child and the reason is to avoid bad things in life and for male child is to be a great headhunter, hunter, good in games and sport.

Dissimilarity

We can observe few exceptions in the birth rituals of laii village where the mother sleep the next five days after the birth of the child in the place where she gave birth to a child and she is not allowed to take bath or wash away the blood from her body until the naming ceremony is over. The mothers eat only boiled rice, water and salt. The husband can go to field but is not allowed or forbid to carry the lunch with him for fifteen (15) days. The couple cannot sleep together for 32 days from the date of birth. After the completion of 32 days the mother and the child will go to her parent home early in the morning and the parent will kill the hen and cock according to the child sex and this is to keep the bond relationship between the mother and child and on the same day they have to return home with the uncooked meat for her husband to keep the good relation with the child and the mother and this ritual is practices in seek of blessing from the mother’s parent.

According to Chingmai khullen village, the husband, sisters and in-law will take care of the mother during delivery and it take place in the verandah (*kipromii*) beside the barn (*bao*). And after birth they observe (*rei*) for five days and first three days they stay without wine to clean or purify her body and those five days they cook food from *pouli* (handmade pot) and the mother is allow only rice and salt to eat. And during the birth they boil water from *pouli* and give bath to the mother to give strength to her body and to make her body relax. The pot (*pouli*) which they use for bath have to pass to the next pregnant women who is about to give birth. They believe that if they use the pot it may bring good for the child and the mother like the mother and the child who gave birth before them.

In case if the mother gave birth to the child in the forest or in the field than they have to gather and bring the umbilical and even the blood and buried it beside the house or in the verandah (*kipromii*) beside the rice crashing (*pa*). it signified that if they kept some where people can see or where animal can eat than it bring bad fortune to the mother and the child and believe short life.

3. Naming ritual (*nazhisayu nanou*)

Among the Christians after the child is born into this world they can give the name according to their convenience i.e after one week or even after a month and the naming ritual were performed in the church by the pastor, the pastor will call out the child and the parent in front of the church member and read the bible. And make a vow with the child parent and then the deacon will join the pastor and rise their hand before the child and pray for child”. And then, the pastor will fill up the birth certificate of the child by adding the name,

time, date, day, month and year and give it to the mother of the child. The record will be maintained by the church.

4. Ear piercing ritual (*nuvuyu nanou*)

On fifth days from the date of the birthday they performed ear piercing (*nuvuyu nanou*) in both the ears when the skin is soft so that it won't affect any diseases and its signified loyal, honest, obedience. There is no difference in the practice of ear piercing as far as the sex of the child. Though according to the sex, they kill hen for female and a cock for male child during the ritual.

Dissimilarity

According to chingmai khullen village this ritual is performed early in the morning before having anything and it is performed by any elder of the family or any person who have experience. Ear piercing ritual is performed after five day from the date of birth. It signify loyalty, honesty and obedience.

5. Engagement for marriage

After man choose the women the parents of the man will have to see or wait for their dreams and if the dream is good than the parent have to go and approach the girl parent as a proposal and then the girl parent have to see or wait for the dreams and as according to the dreams the girl parent have to accept or refuse the proposal. After that both of them accept and discuss the right to own property and the marriage engagement will be in the beginning of the year and have a gap of 8 – 7 month and the groom cultivate and papered for the marriage for those months and after the harvesting they can get married.

The parent should have understanding on engagement day. The church ministry board will invite the groom's family member to the bride's house and they have to take oath for engagement and they will exchange their ring, shawl and they will discuss the own property, they can even fix the date of the marriage and they discuss the formality of the marriage like the exchange of gift between the relative. They will be in disciplinary action or manner if they back off after engagement.

6. Marriage ritual (*shiheyu nanou*)

On the marriage day as a custom the bride has to wear two shawl (*saa*), an a necklace (*tao*) and a ear ring (*niivo*) and the priest (*mumumai*) will performed a ritual by killing a hen for her good fortune and the dead hen will be taken by the priest and the bride had to give one of her shawl (*sakho*) to the priest. As before the bride step out from the house the mother will give her a walking stick (*sasii*) this signified the spirit of the women and when she is about to move out the mother will ask the bride father to place a pure iron axe on the verandah (*kipromii*) and the bride had to step over the axe with her right foot and this signified that the bride has left all the bad thing as she is going to start a new life and as for the protection till she reach her husband house. After the ritual the groom relative and the bride friends have to pick up and drop her to the groom place once they reach the house the follower will ask the groom to throw out the axe (*morei*) and when the groom throw out the axe the bride have to step over the axe again with her right foot and enter the house (the axe signified the bad thing remain in the cold iron axe) and put down her stuff and exchange a wine fill in a banana leaves (*lei*) and drink the wine (this signified that they become one as husband and wife). Followed by which the groom parents bless the newly wedded couple. The bride's mother cannot drop her daughter to her in-laws place. It will signify shot life of the newly wedded couple.

The husband and wife are not allowed to sleep together for five days and the wife will sleep in the verandah (*kipromii*) with her bride's maid and she will give her ear ring to her bride's maid as a token of appreciation and friendship. After five day the wife will go to her parents for *jo* (gift) i.e. wine and meat and bring to her husband house and have a grand party with her husband's relative or clan and be a part of the family (the party signify the welcoming of new member in the family). They catch fish (*khazaizai*) and cook in a hand make mud pot (*pouli*) and throw as a ritual and this signify the new beginning of their life. The next day the husband with a relative's kids went in search of crab and if he got first than the first child will be a male child and if the kid got first than the first child will be a female child, this is what they believe and practices in by the villager.

Though we can observe some exception among the people of lai village who observe that after five days the wife will go to her parents' house to bring a pot full of wine and meat and celebrated only among the women and the next day she will celebrate with her husband and relative. The deferent types of marriage are, Arrange marriage, Love marriage, Home marriage and Elope marriage

7. Sick ritual (*sounou souyu nanou*)

Rashi (evil) when the person is spiritually sick or touched by the evil than they go to the person who have vision or magic (*momumai*) and perform according to his instruction. Sometime they left the cock on the forest or on the road where the person meet the *rashi* (evil) and if the cock go towards the forest it signified that the evil had accept the offering and they believe that the evil go with the cock and if the cock return back it brings bad things to the person and it is believed that the evil did not accepted the offering and the people are forbidden to kill the cock which has already performed for the ritual because they believe that all the bad things are with it as they have already cursed the cock and this ritual is called as *huraphayu*. Sometime dresses and iron were left in the place where the evil had demanded and this ritual was performed by the relative of the patient.

Criticized sickness: if the man is sick due to criticizing that they have received from different sources, than they have to cut a bamboo into 32 pieces and throw them on the way to field (*romii*). If the sick person is a women, than they cut the ginger in the middle into two and kept them in the resting place (*kho*) in the road side of the field. The reason is that the person can't handle those criticize whether it criticize in good way or in bad way so they ask those sickness to stay with those bamboo and ginger.

Rako hayu or razhi louyu nanou (Lost spirit)

When the person left his or her own spirit in the forest or when the evil capture the spirit of the person and in order to call the spirit back they go to *mumummai* (priest) with some stuff of the person who is sick and give it to the priest and the priest have to performed the ritual and tell the relative where the spirit has lost or where he has been kept by the evil. The elder relative have to left the back door open and go to the place where the priest has asked without talking to any one and call the name of the person and ask him or her to come back home and the person have to collect or pick up two stone from the mentioned place and while coming back they should not talk to anyone and when they reach back door they have to invite the spirit in and keep the stone which they picked under the bed. If the spirits came back home with him than the sick person get better day by day.

8. Death ritual (*thaiyu na*)

If the king is dead, the villagers will observe (*rei*) to mourn his death for five days and during those five days they will kill animals (*pradathayu*) like cow, buffulo and pig and serve and share with the villager and the wrist of the animals will share among the king clan or relative and this is called as *poumaihe*. After five days of the ritual (*rei*) the animal's meat which is killed for funeral are forbid to eat and the remaining meat have to be thrown or feed to other animals. They believe that if they eat the meat after five days it may bring bad fortune to the people, the family member of the dead and to the victim. And even short life to the person who had ate the meat after five days.

And as the common people the villagers will observe the day of death and the family member will kill the animal (*pradathaya*) like cow or pig and share a pieces of meat with the people as a token of love and the relative of the death will observe(*rei*) for three days and make a memorial stone in the road side of the field to let people remember him and rest on his stone.

Khaokhapie yu na this ritual lasts for a year and it is performed by the mother of the family. The mother have to keep food for her death husband or children every day and if they cut or kill animal they have to kept a piece of liver in his or her plate and they believe that the death spirit visit till the end of the year and this signify that they still remember him or her and they keep the food as his or her share.

We can again observe some contrast in the rituals in lai village where if the person is dead than they kill the hen and put under the basket (*hui ro*) and than cover the dead hen with the bigger basket (*ro*) and kept three days for kids and five days for man and women and the next day they throw the dead hen and the reason behind is that, it is a share of the dead.

According to chingmai village, on the death of the person the people bring wine to comfort who were mourning and the dead family will kill the animals like cows, buffalos, pig etc., it is called as *pradathayu* and share with the people who come to pay respect of the death.

Thro-a: on this ritual they have to kill the dog (*shi*) and make the statue with the dog and throw away the funeral food and meat and people are forbidden to eat the meat after the day of the ritual. This ritual is to avoid bad thing in the future and to avoid dead.

Among Christians as soon as the person pass away or the person is dead, the family member call the pastor to pray for the departed soul and to have a peaceful funeral service, and ask the church care taker or chowkidar to ring the bell to let the people know that someone has dead in the community.

Funeral service

Among Christian, the family members, relatives and friends were mourning for their loss and the people who have come to pay respect to the death come with some gift like sugar, rice, money to the barrier family and the reason is that they cannot come to funeral with empty handed to meet them. The family members have to cut or kill animals to serve the people who have come to the funeral.

As before they took the body outside they pray for the family and for the dead body, after the prayer, they move the body outside and give time to the relative, friends to say a few words to the dead and time to thank and appreciate the people who have supported him through his sufferings or pain and than the pastor will take time to encourage the family, read the bible and pray together for the death and put the coffin into the grave. The people will throw the stone into the grave as a symbol of farewell.

Dormitory (khilouziifii)

The unmarried man sleep together in their king's house and the unmarried women sleep together in a selected house called *kidziipfiipou* and during those days there used to be a surprise attack by the headhunter and neighboring villages by firing the village or burned down the village so during the day the father or the married man used to guard the village and at night the unmarried man used to do the same. During the festivals the members of the dormitory use to collect ten pieces of meat each and give to their king and the *kidziipfiipou* (owner of the women dormitory) and the wine were served by the owner of the dormitory to celebrate together and their cup were filled only for three times.

During the festival the youth sing a song and dedicate to one another and share the feeling through song.

Launei or launii nanou (ritual)

This festival is celebrated to remove the old and welcome the new and this festival is celebrated after the plantation which is why it is called *laulo* which means remove the old, as people work so hard and as they have finish their plantation they celebrated to remove their dirt, as they step into new season they celebrated with hold hearted forgetting the tiresome, the pain and the labor and also pray for good harvest.

During this festival the male child age below 10 (ten) had to performed ritual called *mochazii* with their father. They cut the bamboo and sharp it than they have to put the cock (*huidzii*) under the basket (*ro*) and then father and son sit side by side of the cock which is cover by the basket and they start to poke the cock with the sharp bamboo until the cock is dead.

Once the cock is dead they took out from the basket and they started to papered for the meal from *pouli* (pot) and when the meat is cooked they drink wine with the meat with his father and the remaining meat will be kept for dinner as during this ritual the boy can search for his best friend and this is called *khramai* (lover) and invite him for the dinner to have the remaining meat he cook for ritual in the morning. Their relation of friendship has to be close and have to share everything in their life and if they kill any living animals they have to exchange the heart of the animal they kill as a symbol of friendship and till today it is practices by the people of *laii* circle.

In the evening they make a bone fire and the people gather with their own cup of wine and sing folk songs to their creator and they divide into group and have a song competition for their enjoyment.

Conclusion

The Poumai Naga has a number of ritual during the ancient time from birth to death and they practice or follow the ritual strictly to strengthen the people and for the betterment of the people. Pregnancy ritual, birth ritual, naming ritual and ear piercing ritual are the ritual for the child safety and good fortune of the child. Engagement for marriage and marriage ritual are the ritual to keep the relationship tie and prosperity in their life. Sick ritual was performed by the priest to let the individual regain their health condition. Death ritual and funeral ritual are the ritual to send off the death spirit and this ritual is performed in remembering of his or her life. Dormitory and Launie ritual are the ritual for better life of the youth and as the process of growing. The Christian ritual like baptism and communion ritual were the ritual to strengthen the faith of the individual.

In the life circle ritual of laii circle, the study found two standard practices such as traditional ritual and Christian ritual. Christian ritual is based on biblical and religious form whereas traditional ritual is based on the belief of the ancient practices (*paipoumai na*). At present, a lot of changes take place in the community of laii circle as people have converted into Christianity and started to follow the norms and values of Christian like baptism and Holy Communion. The people have changed not only in the practices of rituals but also change in their lifestyle and their living standard. The major change of the laii circle ritual can be observed in birth, marriage and death. Today people do not practice or performed any ritual during birth like in olden days and also marriage system had totally changed from olden times and it became less strict and mandatory. But people still believe and follow one ritual "The bride's mother cannot drop her daughter to her-in-laws place because they believe short-life to the newly wed's couple". In case of death, the traditional ritual last for five days but the present ritual last for one day only. The pregnancy ritual and the lost spirit ritual are still believed and followed by the people, where other traditional rituals are not practiced today. Today people did not give much importance to the traditional ritual because of Christianity and westernization but these rituals are the identity of the community and if the people ignore the traditional ritual of the community then there will be no history tomorrow.

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