

Partaking And Responsibility Of Zeliangrong Women In *Gaan-Ngai* Festival

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Abstract

Festivals are considered as safety valve. It removes the stress and strain of time and circumstances. In a year, the Zeliangrong people of Northeast India celebrate nine festivals based on agricultural operations of lunar calendar. The ways of life of the people are reflected in their various festivals and their social relevance is very great. They provide not only entertainment and social festivities to them, but also act as an integrating force for the community as a whole. Among the festivals, *Gaan-ngai* is the biggest festival of the Zeliangrongs and it lasts for five days. It is during the celebration that they perform rites and rituals, offer prayer to *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God for abundant harvest, well-being and general prosperity for the whole village community. They also bid ritual farewell to the dead ancestors. The cultural values, the aesthetic and creative senses, their love of beauty and color are expressed in the festival. Dances, folk songs, drum beating, shouting of hoi, traditional games and sports etc. are performed in the festival. Various items of delicious food and drink for the festival are prepared and consumed. The role of women is very great as they actively take part in the festival like their male counterparts. The girls of the dormitory perform the dances called *Chapa Laam* and the married women too perform dances on the fifth day. Food and drink of the festival are prepared by them only. Without women the celebration of *Gaan-ngai* festival is incomplete. Usually, the *Gaan-ngai* festival is celebrated in the month of December or January every year.

Key words: *Gaan-ngai*, *Zeliangrong women*, *Chapa Laam*, *Hoi*, *Tingkao Ragwang*

Introduction

The Zeliangrongs¹ are one of the natives of Northeast India. They celebrate festivals at different stages of agricultural operations according to lunar calendar. They express their joy through prayer and thanksgiving to *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God for safety and prosperity. Dancing, singing, eating and drinking are the integral parts of the festivals.² “The festive occasions among the Kawpois (Zeliangrong) are numerous, and are characterized by feasting, drinking, dancing and singing, and shouting of the *Hoi, Hoi* without which no entertainment of

any kind would be complete.”³ During the festivals, the dormitories like the *Khangchu*, boys’ dormitory, and *Luchu*, girls’ dormitory play the major role in the whole activity.⁴ In a year, they celebrate nine festivals. These festivals go by through the ages despite various changes in their social and cultural life.

Gaan-ngai is the biggest and most colorful festival of the Zeliangrongs. *Gaan-ngai* means the festival of dry season; (*Gaan* means dry season and *ngai*, festival). It is a post harvest festival and lasts for five days. When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works and people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of *Tingkao Ragwang* and honoring of the dead. In the festival, they produce a new fire so it may be described as a New Year Festival.⁵ The whole culture, religion and social life are interwoven in the performance of *Gaan-ngai* festival. The festival commences on the 13th day of Manipuri lunar month *Wakching*, which falls in December or January.⁶ It is a festival for prosperity and preservation of cultural identity.

Genesis of *Gaan-ngai*

Local myth says, *Tingkao Ragwang* created a god named *Tingpurengsonnang* and he was given the task of patriarch of a common dormitory of gods, men, animals and all creatures. The members of common dormitory spoke a common language. As patriarch *Tingpurengsonnang* taught men how to speak, sing and how to behave a way of life. He also gave the knowledge of cultivation and mode of worship to them. With the development of wisdom and intellect, man started collecting and storing of food grains. Then man began to celebrate *Gaan-ngai* festival praising *Tingkao Ragwang* for good harvest and thus bringing peace and unity among men. As instruction given by *Tingpurengsonnang*, man offered food and drinks to *Tingkao Ragwang* with prayer for long life and prosperity. They also offered foods and drinks on the grave as a mark of respect to the departed souls.⁷

***Gaan Shanmei* (Heralding of *Gaan-ngai*)**

In the commencement of *Wakching*, an elder will announce the coming of the festival by blowing the horn of the buffalo or mithun informing the community to prepare food and drinks of the festival. It is also an invitation to all deities for participation in the coming festival. This is locally known as *Gaan Shanmei*.⁸

***Ngaigangmei* (The first day or coming of the festival)**

In the early morning of *Ngaigangmei*, *Gucheng Phaimai* (ginger offering) at the abode of village presiding deity is performed by an elder of *Pei* (village council) for safety and protection during the festival. On return to *Khangchu*, the same elder offers holy wine to *Tingkao Ragwang* for wellbeing and prosperity of the village followed by beating of *Khong* (drum) by young boys. This act signifies that the *Gaan-ngai* festival begins.⁹

Then, all the males of the village gather at the premises of *Khangchu* and an omen taking ceremony known as *Gaukpaijaomei*, (observation of pig spleen; *Gauk* means pig, *Pai* means spleen and *Jaomei* means to observe) ceremony is performed offering a big pig to *Tingkao Ragwang* for wellbeing and prosperity of the village. The spleen of the victim is examined carefully for the sign of good and evil that is to come in the year. The victim is cooked and

consumed by the members of *Khangchu*. Eating together of the pork meat is a vow they make to stand as one in times of misery and happiness.¹⁰ Next, the boys will produce a new fire by the wood and bamboos friction called *Mhailapmei* (making new fire) at *Danshanpung* (village jumping ground) and the same fire will be distributed to every household of the village. The villagers cook their food with the new fire of the festival wellbeing and prosperity. The young boys will dig the village jumping ground where the sports of long jump and short put are to be performed.¹¹

In the afternoon, all the members of *Khangchu* wearing traditional attires perform *Hoi Gammei* (*Hoi* procession). It starts from the *Khangchu* and will come to a halt when they reach at the *Daanshanpung*, the village jumping ground where the young boys perform *Taophai Daanchammei*, competition in stone throwing and long jump in the presence of the villagers. The village chief will introduces the sport first for prosperity of the village. *Hoi* procession will go back to the *Khangchu* from the *Danshanpung* when the competition comes to an end. On this day, they bid ritual farewell to the departed souls. It is believed that the departed soul does not leave the village until the parting meal is over. They beautify the grave and offer drinks and eatables on it as a way of sharing the meal with him or her.¹² This is locally called *Ngaidongmei*.

All the families of the village prepare various dishes for the evening meal. The meal is prepared by the household mother. The unmarried boys and girls of *Khangchu* and *Luchu* will visit every member houses to enjoy the tasty foods. This is called *Napcha Tukaronmei* (dinning together). On this day, two married males of *Khangchu* will be appointed as *Tuna Munshinmei* (in charge of girls' dormitory) and they will look after the affairs of *Luchu* in the festival.¹³

***Ngaidai* (The second day of *Gaan-ngai*, the great festival day)**

The second day is called *Ngaidai*, the great festival day also known as *Tamchan-ngai* (performance of *Tamchan* dance). All boys and girls of the dormitories will bring *Tamcha*, gift in form of drink, meat, vegetable and rice or eatables along with a pot of rice beer to their respective dormitories. In the past they brought ingredients for *Tam* (chutney) only or eatables that would last for whole five days. But nowadays, a fixed amount of money is contributed. In the afternoon, girls and boys of the dormitories will distribute from their collection of meats, drinks, and vegetables to other dormitories such as *Peikai* (village council), *Gaanchang kaibang* (house of elders), *Karapei kaibang* (house of old women) and *Mathenmei kaibang* (house of married women). While presenting these gifts the members of *Khangchiu* and *Luchu* will sing songs and dances as well. This dance is known as *Tamchan Laam* and the dance is performed only by the girls. Because of the performance of the *Tamchan* dance the day is also called *Tamchan ngai*. The remaining *Tamcha* are returned to *Khangchu* and *Luchu*. After the evening feast, folk song competition between girls and boys at *Luchu* will continue throughout the night and no song will be repeated by any singer.¹⁴

On this day, at the house of married women, the collection of vegetables and meat from the *Khangchu* as *Tamcha* is cooked and consumed. This is called *Gaanlum Tumei*. All the married women take part without fail because they enjoy a lot on this day.

***Tuna-Gaan ngai* (The third day of *Gaan-ngai*)**

The third day is called *Tuna-Gaan ngai* which means festival of the boys and girls; (*Tuna* means girls, *Gaan* means boys and *ngai*, festival). In the morning, the *Khangbons*, senior members of *Khangchu* will bring their *Tamcha*, eatables and best prepared rice beer to the *Khangchu*. The members of *Khangchiu* taste the eatables and drink after oblation of holy wine to *Tingkao Ragwang*. In the evening of the day, farewell dance in honour of the dead called *Theikadilam* is also given at the selected families in which death occurred in the preceding year.¹⁵ The family offers rice beer, meat and eatables to the spirit of the dead over their graves. It is the so called departure of souls of the dead.¹⁶ *Khangbon kadi Laam* (farewell dance in honour of the promotion of *Khangbon* of *Khangchu* to *Peikai*) is also performed by the boys and girls of the dormitories when the *Khangbon* of *Khangchu* are being promoted to a higher grade position known as *Ganchang*. These posts of *Peikai* are called *Ganchang*. The same posts are not given by resolution or appointment order, but by songs, dances and cultural activities.¹⁷ This day is important for both the dead and living and for the prosperity of the village. All activities of the day are performed by the members of boys' and girls' dormitories. So, the day is known as *Tuna Gaan-ngai*.

Longkumei (The fourth day is hill trekking)

The fourth day is known as *Longkumei*, hill trekking. The boys and girls of the dormitories perform *Longluimei* in a nearby mountain range. On the top of hill, they will show their talents and capabilities of the lifetime achievements. *Khong baimei*, drum beating is carried out by the experts. The killers of enemy, tiger, bear, python, wild pig etc. show *Kabaomei* (warrior talks).¹⁸ The boys offer girls, sing traditional songs called *Luchenlu* (lamenting song) and eat the *Gaktingtam*¹⁹ with drink. Among them, two boys and girls are chosen to be kings and queens and each of them wears a crown made of *Fak*, a kind of long grass. The boys and girls are known as *Fakgwangs* and at the end shouting *Hoi* is performed. In the evening they return to the village and perform *Phakgwang Laam*, dance in front of the houses of the *Phakgwangs*. The participants are entertained with eatables and drink.²⁰

Napchanmei (The fifth and last day of Gaan-ngai)

The last day is called *Napchanmei*. On this day, they perform calling of paddy at their respective dormitories such as *Khangchu* and *Luchu* to restore the consumed and wasted rice in the festival invoking *Tingkao Ragwang* and *Kangdailu*, goddess of food grain for the plentiful harvest in the coming year. Cooked chicken with rice and drink are placed on the hearth stones.²¹ This is called *Napchan*. The same offering is also placed on the *Nashampantilai*, grain jar. The mother of the family performs the ritual. Man is not allowed to do it.²²

In the evening of the day, the members of house of married women perform dances at the houses of newly married women as formal recognition of their entry into the group. This is called *Meipui Laamgangmei*. At the end of the dance, the family entertains the participants with sweets and drink. Though there are nine festivals in a year, it is only *Gaan-ngai* that a time of merriment is allotted to them.²³

The sixth day after *Gaan-ngai* is called *Raang patmei*, gate opening. On this day, a ceremony called *Raren Loumei*, worship of Seven Bothers Gods²⁴ is performed by offering

fowls, wine, water, ginger, egg etc. for wellbeing of the whole village community. It is carried out by a priest outside the Northern gate of the village, the seat of *Kaipu Bambu*, upper village deity.²⁵ A complete genna known as *Neihmei* (prayer) is observed during the period of the sacrifice. The chickens are cooked at the ritual place and consumed by the elders of *Pei*, old women and children. A colonial writer wrote that in Zeliangrong society food tabus are not rigidly imposed on either the very young or the old.²⁶ Adults are not allowed to eat these chickens. At this place appointments and retirements of person, handing over of charges in connection with religious-cultural matters concerning the village are announced because such announcements in front of the gods are believed to have strong customary sanctions behind them. Then, the village elders return at the *Peikai* and perform *Buhkaomei*, calling of the soul invoking *Tingkao Ragwang*.²⁷ Hence, the biggest and most colourful festival, *Gaan-ngai* comes to an end.

Conclusion

After observing the above facts, we can conclude that the Zeliangrong women play very important role in the *Gaan-ngai* festival. They actively participate like their male counterparts. Without women the celebration of *Gaan-ngai* is imperfect. It is a multifaceted festival playing multi role in shaping the life of the Zeliangrong people. By observing the festival they can preserve and sustain their rich. It neutralizes enmity and differences among the people and ultimately brings social solidarity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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 - ⁴ Marurung Remmei, *Nagagi Dharma Amasung Houna Lonchat*, Imphal, 1983, p. 55
 - ⁵ Interview with Chaoba Kamson, General Secy, TRCP, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.
 - ⁶ Lal Dena (ed.), *History and Society*, (A felicitation Volume of Prof. Gangmumei Kamei) Calcutta, 2000, p. 114.
 - ⁷ Interview with Jangdai, village elder of Langthabal Khoupum, Imphal west, Manipur.
 - ⁸ Interview with Poudongai Kamson, President Zeliangrong Art and Cultural Organization, Manipur.
 - ⁹ Ibid.
 - ¹⁰ The New Illustrated Columbia Encyclopedia, Vol.VII, New York, 1978, p. 2332.
 - ¹¹ Interview with Moirangchao, Khullakpa of Langthabal Khoupum, Imphal West, Manipur.
 - ¹² Rajat Kanti Das, *Manipur Tribal Scene: Studies in Society and Change*. Inter India

Publications, New Delhi, (First Published in India), 1985, p. 68.

¹³ Interview with Dingbulung Panmei of Pongshanmei, Churachandpur District, Manipur.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chamdin Then, *Changbi*, Vol. I, Imphal, 1973, p. 2.

¹⁶ Interview with Jangdai, village elder of Langthabal Khoupum, Imphal West, Manipur.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Boiled pork pounded with salt, ginger, chilies and made into balls.

²⁰ Interview with Chaoba Kamson, General Scy. TRCP, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

²¹ It is believed that *Kangdailu* lives in the form of hearth stones.

²² Interview Makudaru Kameipui of Langthabal Khoupum, Imphal West, Manipur.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ The worship of Seven Brothers Gods, namely *Ragwang*, the King of the gods of the earth, *Bisnu*, the most powerful god on earth who looks after affairs of men, nature and animals and communicate with men, *Chonchai*, adverse to wine, he looks after the health of men, *Napsinmei/Laorang*, the god in charge of food grains, *Charakilongmei*, the god who keeps peace and ward off disturbance on earth, *Koklou*, the *Peipou*, the owner of the office of the gods court, *Karangong*, a god who is a teaser of unruly and misbehaved persons particularly youth, healer of man suffering from dizziness, *Dimei*, the deity who could not hatch and remains in the earth.

²⁵ Marurung Remmei. op.cit, pp. 58-59.

²⁶ T.C. Hudson, *The Naga Tribe of Manipur*, Low price Publications, Delhi, 1996, p. 77.

²⁷ Interview with Poudongai Kamson, President Zeliangrong Art and Cultural Orgnization, Manipur.