



Revisiting Tradition: Exploring Gender Role On Kuki Youths In The Lawn-Sawm Institution

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Abstract

The Kuki Youths play an important role in the socio-economic life of the traditional Kuki society. This can be reflected in their socio-cultural practices of the Lawn and Sawm institution. The youth members in this organization were to sustain and perpetuate the village society through a uniform code of conduct and discipline, for it was the potential source of strength for maintaining the health and vitality of the village society. It was a traditional learning center where both young boys and girls receive training like art of hunting, warfare, agriculture, discipline, cultural and traditional practices etc. Through a critical analysis, the present study explores this institution and the gender roles assigned to both young men and women. It also examines the changing scenario with the advent of colonial modernity. The present study is carried out through ethnographic research supplemented by both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Culture, Gender roles, Institution, Kuki, Youth, Traditional knowledge.

Introduction

The term 'institution' is generally applied to aspects of social behavior regulated by well establish and relatively stable norms, values and laws. According to Malinowski (1944), for achieving any purpose or to reach any ends, human beings have to organize. Organization implies a very definite scheme or structure and the main features of any organization are universal and are applicable to all groups in their typical form. For a unit of such an organization, Malinowski therefore uses the term 'institution' which implies an agreement on the set of traditional values as a result of which human beings come together. This 'institution' satisfies various sets of needs by fulfilling a function. Thus, as man do not live alone and in order to meet his needs, food and shelter, companionship and love, recreation and play, they form associations and build institutions through which such needs are satisfied. A social institution is therefore, a structured system of norms and practices that help govern the society. It is a set of social norms, values, and beliefs and practices that shape and control the everyday activities and interaction of Individuals and groups in the society.

The word 'culture', comes from the Latin word 'Colere' meaning 'to cultivate' or 'to till the soil'. In medieval times, the term refers to the progressive refinement of crops, hence the term agriculture for the art of farming. However, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the term was applied to the refinement of people as well, so that persons who are refined and well-read were considered to be cultured. Each and every society of men possesses its own distinctive culture, so that the members of one society behave differently in some significant respect from the members of other society. 'Culture' is something that human species have and others species lack. Bodley (2011:10) define culture as the learned, shared, transmitted knowledge, values and behaviors that characterize a human group. This would include speech, knowledge, belief, customs, art and technology, which are learnt from our ancestors of the past including what we add to it. At the simplest level, culture is everything learned and shared by men. Thus, a society cannot exist without culture. It is the total socially acquired way of life of a group of people.

Youth according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is the time when one is young, especially the period between childhood and maturity. Bucholtz (2002) in her study states youth lacks a clear definition, and in some situations may be based on one's social circumstances rather than chronological age or cultural position. In a given present culture, preadolescent individual is counted as a youth, while those in their thirties and forties may were even included in this category. Gender refers to the economic, social, political, and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with belonging to 'male and female categories', which may vary among cultures and change over time (Eagly: 1997). It is a cultural construct that refers to the social, cultural and psychological characteristics that distinguish men and women (Mead 1963: 146). Buter define it as a social

institution that refers to the set of social, cultural and economic arrangement that shape the relationships between men and women (1990: 17). In the context of the Kukis who followed patriarchal system, there are different roles assigned to men and women, specific clothes in certain occasion, rites and rituals which has its own purposes and significances. It is in this milieu that the study would explore the gender roles on youths in Kuki socio-cultural practices of the lawm and sawn institution. Methodologically, the researcher used both primary and secondary sources.

‘Kuki’ is a generic term which includes a number of tribes and clans. They were found in Northeastern part of India, North West Myanmar and Chittagong hill tract in Bangladesh (Haokip 2018: 1). The Thadou are the sub groups of the Kuki community. They are the most numerous branches within Kuki groups in terms of population as per Manipur Census, 2011. In Manipur, the Thadou-Kuki has spread across various regions with a significant concentration in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Chandel, and Tengnoupal, western part of Tamenglong district and south eastern part of Ukhurl district. In the present paper, the word Kuki and Thadou were used interchangeably as the Thadou were one tribe within the umbrella term Kuki.

Problem Statement

The Kuki community has a rich cultural heritage which shaped their own cultural identity. The present study focuses in the socio-cultural practices of the Lawm-Sawm institution which played an important role in shaping their community life and governance. In the present paper, a comprehensive study of the Lawm-Sawm institution that includes the cultural significance and gender roles, which still remains poorly understood is attempted and has carried out. An attempt is therefore made to answer the following question: What are the cultural and historical context of the traditional gender roles on youth in the Lawn-Sawm institution? How far colonial modernity has impact on the traditional youth roles?

Sawm Institution: An Overview

Every Kuki village is an independent political and administrative unit. The chief is the overall head and is assisted by the village council (Semang Pachong) appointed by him on the concurrence of the people. The chief and his council of ministers were assisted by this vibrant institution called ‘Sawm’ headed by the Sawm-upa who acts as a guide, mentor, a friend and a teacher to the young boys of the group. His duty is also to control and oversee the behavior and well-being of its members. Thus, Sawm is under the strict watch of the chief and his council of ministers.

It is the bachelor’s dormitory or institution in which only the able-bodied young boys in a village used to sleep together at night. All the young men from the age of nine/ten join the sawm till they were married. They acted as the supporting force in the community base organization of the traditional Kuki village society. The main purposes of ‘Sawm’ is to defend the village from

external dangers and in times of peace, they render every possible service to the village community whenever required. Gangte (2003: 133) states that “the nature of hostility and practices of tribal raids necessitate the existence of this organization, so that in times of emergency the service of all the able-bodied men might be available at short notice.” Another significant purposes of Sawm is to keep the young boys alert to notice happenings such as thieves, fighting, fire etc. to prevent further problems in the village. In olden days, when the incendiary wars were frequent, the sawm boys kept their daos, spears and shields and other weapons in their sawm house so that they could use them in any emergency. To the poor, needy and destitute, it was a source of help and assistance in respect of building and repairing of houses, cultivation, and execution of the welfare scheme etc. They have to offer their free and compulsory service for the villages. Overall, ‘Sawm’ is an institution where boys used to learned traditional education like techniques of war, fighting, games and sports, handicrafts, discipline, responsibility and leadership.

The senior and experienced members taught the young one’s different types of traditional dances in various styles and motions, song and heroic myths. They practiced bontol-kho (wrestling), kung-kal (high jump), suh-kho/tiengcha-kho (spear-throwing), kang-kap (whirling of tops) and other items of sports. They also produce handicrafts such as wood carving, bamboo work, cane work and basketry. Articles necessary for girl such as beng (basket for carrying paddy and others), kongvang (basket for carrying fire wood, bamboo tubes of water), sinkhup (basket for keeping valuable articles), kolnam (rope for carrying beng and kongvang) and samthi (combs) are made by the sawm boys for their sawmnu. The sawm members also extend help to the owner of the sawm house in construction of house, cultivation such as sowing, weeding and harvesting. In fact, sawm is an institution where young boys acquire practical knowledge and training in the traditional way of life. In this connection, Gangte describes the sawm or bachelor’s dormitory as an “archaic form of economic, social and religious organization. It must have been its time and effective economic organization for purposes of food quest, a useful seminary for training young men in their social and other duties, and an institution for magico-religious observances calculated to secure success in hunting and to augment the preventive power of the young men so as to increase the number of hunters in the tribe” (2003:134).

The practice of 'Sawm' institution differ from one tribe to another and one clan to another in the traditional days. For instance, building a separate house for the young bachelor’s in the Kuki society was not found while in the Naga and in Mizo, they constructed a separate house called 'Zawlbuk' (in Mizo) and 'Morung' (among Nagas), somewhere in the central part of the village. In contrast, the Kuki boys used to sleep together in a house where there is a young woman in the family. The reason for this as narrated by Gangte (2003: 135) is that there was a time when there was a fight between the Pois and the Lhungtin (Hangsing clan village). It so happened that one

night, when all able-bodied young men of Lhungtin village slept in their dormitory, the Pois stealthily came and butchered them, killing instantaneously as many as eighty young men. This give a serious impact besides all other repercussions that the institution of sawm which was centralized took the character of a scattered form due to defense strategy. DOUNGEL (2024: 65) asserted that the number of Sawm depends on the numbers of young women in a family. In a house where there are many Sawm, they used to make 'Aibu' (A place to sleep which is made of straw or hay).

The 'Shomnu' or the young woman mends and washes the young men's clothes, arranged sleeping places, offer tobacco leaves and comb the boy's hair (traditionally, Kuki boys used to keep their hair long and called it 'Tuhson' or 'Tuhbenson'). She is the last to sleep and the first to wake up in the morning. Despite this intimate relation and close association, promiscuity and pregnancy does not occur instead made a friendship bond between the Shompa and Shomu. In times of Sawm-nu marriage, LENTHANG (2003: 74) states that, the Sawm member used to charge some cash amount to the bridegroom's family and brought pig and used to eat together with their Sawnu when she came for 'ki-Inlut (first entering of the bride to her parent's house after marriage: 74). Besides, the bridegroom is to pay one jubel (a jar of wine) to her sawm youths as a fine which is known as meivah chanman because they are deprived of their sawm-nu who used to light fire for them (SITLHOU 2009: 92). This is the amount claimed by the Sawm boys from the groom's family as a symbol of the loss of the person who keeps the room lit and the flames burning in the heart. In case of dead or marriage of the Sawm-nu, they (sawm members) may find another house for themselves or in some case; they may continue to stay there if the Sawm-nu have other unmarried sisters. All these customs were prevalent in the old Kuki society before the advent of Christianity and modern ways of living (GOSWAMI 1985: 97).

Lawm Institution: An Overview

'Lawm' or informal labor organization are concerned mainly with the economic life of the village. GANGTE (2003: 132) defined Lawm as "an informal labor organization in a simple and corporate life of the Kukis, where in all the able-bodied young boys and girls are members." The Haosa or chief of the village summons a highly capable and faithful young person and entrust him with the task of organizing the 'Lawm' or labor corps (GOSWAMI 1985: 95). Lawm-Haosa, Lawm-Upa, Lawm-Upanu, Tollaipao, Lawm-Pengkulmut, Lawm-Becha and Lawm-Tucha are the important portfolio in the lawn institution.

The main duty of Lom-Haosa is to maintain liaison between the village chief and the Lawm organization. He is also a member of the chief and his cabinet who is also entitled to have the special Semang Pachong wine (GOSWAMI 1985: 96). Lom-Upa is the head in this organization who

is selected by the Haosa and Semang pachong (Chief and his cabinets). He maintains discipline and harmony in the group and supervises the members in learning the methods of cultivation and various other types of handicrafts. If any member of the village requires the help of the group, they must first seek the permission of the Lom-Upa. It is only with the permission of the Lawm-Upa that the Lawm extend its help.

The role and functions of Lawm-Upanu is to keep a strong vigilance on the proper wearing of dresses by the female Lawm members. She also sees that no one gets intoxicated or develops improper liaison with any boys of the Lawm. Another important function of the Lawm-Upanu is keeping all the wine mugs of the Lawm. Goswami narrated that whenever someone comes after hunting a big animal or after winning a fight with the enemies, the lawm-upanu takes the predominant part in offering the wine of honor to the hero called Laljudon (1985: 97).

Tollaipao or Lawm-Lhangva is the spokesman of the Lawm-upa. All the orders and decisions of the lawm-upa are conveyed through the Tollaipao. It is his duty to see that every member of the group is working sincerely. He used his stick to punish the lazy members and also help those who are weak. Lawm Pengkulmut or trumpeter acts as the timekeeper of the village Lawm group. He sounded the Pengkul (trumpet) as a signal to wake up, to have food, to rest, to work etc. Sounding his trumpet the third time in the morning, he would proceed towards the Khomol, a gathering point outside the village.

The Lawm-Becha usually consists of one male and one female, selected by the Lawm-Upa with the consent of the chief of the village. All the festivals and social functions of the Lawm are organized under the supervision of the Lawm Becha. In the same manner, one male and one female were selected for Lawm Tucha. The Lom-Tucha are the persons who execute all the jobs like distribution of wine and cooking food while at work or during the festivals. Properties and belonging of the Lawm institution such as cups, mugs, kettle etc. are taken care by the Lawm-Tucha.

Lawm is organized into four types viz. Lawm-pi, Lawm-lai, Lawm-neo and Lawm-changpah, consisting of mainly the grownup boys and girls. Lawmpi is the biggest among the Lawm organization. It was also known as the Hausa-Lawm (Lawm of the Chief) or Kho-Lawm (Lawm of the Village). It consists of mainly the eldest group in the Lawm or the eldest brothers and sisters in the family. Any minor boy or girl in whose family there is no grownup member to join the group, such boy or girl is allowed to join the lawmpi. Sometimes, even the newly married male members continued for a while after marriage. Participation from every household is made compulsory and no distinction is made between the rich and poor, the weak and the strong, male

or female, etc. and everybody is treated alike in the Lawm-pi. Thus, Lawm-pi maintains and promotes equality of its member's irrespective of sex and strength.

Lawm-lai consists of the junior unmarried boys and girls whose elder brothers and sisters are in Lawmpi. Lawm-neo consists of the younger brothers and sisters of Law-lai members and other teenagers. Lawm-changpah are the training group and is the smallest among the Lawm organization. Lawm members reciprocate in helping each other. In case, when any Lawm member works more, other than his own will be credited and will be repaid to him by the other members with labor (Gangte 2003: 132). The 'Lawm' can also be hired by any village or chief.

In the traditional society, agriculture was considered the main economic activity and as the main sources of livelihood. Although, hunting and gathering were part of the economic activity, yet the major source of food production was agricultural. The agriculture cultivated in the hilly terrain involve tremendous efforts, time and hard work, thus, perhaps Lawm system evolved and in the long run into a well-organized system. Therefore, Lawm institution came into being as a means to tackle food insecurity and the social and political well-being of the village.

In the Kuki society, men are primarily concerned with hunting wild games or to go to war etc., while agricultural work is thus mainly done by the women. The housewife is therefore considered as the owner of paddy. So, when the harvest is good and more than sufficient, a ritual called Chang-Ai (victory over paddy) was celebrated. This ritual is connected with harvesting of paddy and spiritual well-being of the housewife after death. While, the Sa-ai ritual is performed by man of great hunter to subjugate and gain complete dominance over the spirits of the animals killed. Women who have performed Chang-ai feast are permitted to wear the Thangnangpuon which is dark blue cloth with the embroidery at the two ends in red and white cotton of a special design (Shaw 1929: 75). The performer and the priest are adorned with the feature of eagle or muvanlai lhaving, the longest eagle feature. The performer of the sa-ai get dress into his own male attire with bows and arrows. Chang-ai or victory over paddy is the only ritual lead by women in the Thadou Kuki society and was done in connection with the spiritual well-being for the housewife after death. The man/woman performing Sa-ai/Chang-ai ritual has to feed the whole village for one day. The performer in order to perform the ritual must first inform his Tucha and Becha along with the village chief and the priest. On the fixed day, the performers offer zu (rice-beer) to the young boys and girls, his tucha and and becha with a request to help him in preparing all the necessary arrangements. But, chang-ai ritual can be performed by women when her husband is alive and widow cannot perform it (Goswami 1985: 172).

Besides learning agriculture method, Lawm was also useful for imparting technical and practical knowledge to its members like hunting, fishing and sporting activities such as kung-kal

(high jump, especially jumping over a choice Mithun), Kang-Kap, Kang-Choi Kap (wooden spinning top), Suh-Tum Khaw (Javelin throw by using heavy wooden implements used in pounding rice) and Suong-Se (shot put). It was also a center where the young people learnt disciplined and social etiquette (Haokip 1998: 7). The institution act as an agency for reforming character, motivating youth in the art and spirit of teamwork, making them responsible and disciplined.

While commenting on the Lawm, Lenthang (2013: 81) opines that “the members are all busy working all year round, benefiting the strong and the weak and the rich or poor. While engaging in the paddy fields, two experience persons are posted at both end of the field to lead the work force comprising both men and women. Weaker individuals are made to work in between two stronger so that the losses can be made up.” The members work in each other’s fields in rotation regardless of the capability of each individual. Thus, it is a collective social service aimed at developing a sense of responsibilities among the youth. Lawm, as an agrarian-based economic organization, operates on the tenets of equality and gender equity. There was no age or gender discrimination among members. The Tolliapao or the superintendent take charge of the work force. It is his duty to maintain disciplined among the Lawn members from dawn to dusk. This organization is in a way connected with the thih-kheng or blacksmith because, the success or failure of the organization depends upon the ability of the thih-kheng to produce and to provide implements (Gante 2003:132).

Discussion and Conclusion

The coming of British and the arrival of Christianity in the early part of the 20th century was one factor responsible for the discontinuation of these traditional youth organizations. In the traditional society, Lawn and Sawm were the only institution where various kinds of cultural practices and the art of life were taught. But with colonial modernity, the institution of Lawn-Sawm, where in the days of yore, martial arts, culture, dance and music were taught and learnt, has gone into oblivion. Guite wrote ‘had not Christianity been introduced in the hill areas of Manipur, the condition of the tribal would be very much otherwise and would be all the more an uphill and colossal task for their development but owing to the impact of Christianity on their life, the tribals have been virtually transformed culturally, socially, economically, religiously and educationally (1986: 1). This institution has now been Christianized and incorporated in Church functions like ‘Baptist Youth Fellowship’ and in secular form as the ‘Village Youth Club’.

While the former institution includes all the youths of the village irrespective of clan and tribe, the latter is an association of youth belonging to a particular faith or denomination. Apart from this youth club and Christian youth fellowships at the village level, there are certain youth

organizations at the district and state level like the Kuki Student Organization (KSO), Kuki Khanglai Lompi (KKL) etc. which unlike the former operates beyond the village at a broader level like the blocks, district and in state.

Another important impact is seen in the status of women. The traditional role of sawn-nu, who takes care of all the need and comfort of the sawm boys, is burdensome. Although, it was a matter of pride for the family and the sawm-nu, but it is rather an injustice to the sawm-nu whose status seemed reduced to that of a maidservant. In today society, the status of the Thadou-Kuki women had drastically changed, though not at par with the menfolk. Women are seen as actively taking part in all walks of life: social, cultural, religion and political. Women are also seen taking active parts in various youth organization like the Youth club, the church functions and in student bodies.

It is through this institution that the Thadou-Kuki women were skilled at weaving shawls, while the men were skilled at making all necessary household items such as Khe (spoon), Beng, Pai-peh, Kongvang (Basket), Nam-Kol (hat sheath for carrying the basket), Sinkhup (cane container), Godal (a bamboo sieve), and so on. At the same time, it is also found that many of the youth's today are uninterested in their own culture and traditions, arts and crafts, music and dance, and knowledge of their own society. The reason is because of the advancement in modern technologies, education, music and musical instruments when majority doesn't depend any more on the traditional arts and crafts.

In overall, there are many significant changes in the Kuki society with the coming of the British and the accepting of Christianity. The Christian missionaries condemned and discouraged them from following their old aged practices. The new religion threatened the social fabric of the Kuki society and was responsible for the loss of many customs and traditions. The traditional rituals and festivals etc. were abandoned and replaced with Christian festivals like Good Friday and Christmas. Similarly, the practices of decorating house with animal head were replace with the pasting of Holy image and Bible verse. The traditional drinking of rice beer or zu were now replaced by tea in several occasions and the role of priest or Thiempu replace by the Pastor or Deacon. In short, Christianity brough modernity and education and also contributed to cultural erosion and loss of the traditional practices.

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