

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Marriage System of Mao Tribe of Manipur: Its Changes

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Abstract:

The Mao tribe is one of the indigenous tribes of North-East India. They are inhabited in the hill ranges to the extreme north of the Senapati district of Manipur. This article portrays the Marriage System of Mao, 'Mao' means North and 'Mei' means People and the term 'Maomei' which refer to the people living in the North. At present, they settled in Manipur and Nagaland States. This paper gave importance to the Mao's of Manipur. They are the inhabitants of the origin and dispersion place of many Naga tribes called as Makhel or Makhrefii in Mao. The traditional customs, practices and other related issues of this tribe had not been explored systematically. The Mao tribe passes down their history from generation to generation through oral traditional practices. It witnessed the changes and demise of most rich cultural and traditional practices and the replacement by modernize Christian practices in the region. The Mao traditional marriage system is seen very rarely in the present context and this paper attempts to preserve and propagate their traditional marriage system of the Mao tribe and its change. The method of data collection is based on primary sources (mainly meeting/interview) as well as secondary sources (published as well as unpublished books/articles).

Keywords: Mao, Dormitories, Chilo Koso (Marriage), Nathu Naku, Kape Kolu

1. Introduction

Manipur is the state of the Indian Union since 15 Oct. 1949. It lies in the northern-eastern corner of the country with an area of 22,356 sq.km, between longitudes 93.03°E and 94.78°E and latitude 23.85°N and 25.68°N. This state is state bound by Burma in the East and Nagaland in the North. The Cachar district of Assam is to its west while Mizoram to its South. The Mao (Ememai), tribe is one among the 37 tribes of Manipur. The Mao habited area is bounded on the north by the Angami villages of Nagaland, on the west by Zeliangrong tribes, on the south by Marams and in the east by the Poumais. How the term 'Mao' came into usage is still not clearly known. The most acceptable explanation seems to be that the term 'Mao' is Manipuri in origin and means 'north'. The widely accepted view is that this term is the abbreviated form of the word 'Maomei'. 'Mao' means 'north' and 'Mei' means 'people' which means the people living in the north. Linguistically, Mao Naga belongs to the Naga-Kuki sub-group of the Naga group of Tibeto-Burman family within Assamese-Burmese branch. The Mao tribe inhabits the northern part of the Manipur state in the Senapati District. The Mao tribe falls under Tadubi Sub-division and the rest under Kangpokpi of Senapati district of Manipur. They reside in the confederacy of 32 villages recognized by the Government of Manipur.

Among the Mao tribe agriculture is the main sources of livelihood. Rice is their stable food supplemented by meat. They still practice jhum cultivation. Potato, cabbage, maize, mustard is the main cash crops. Till today, paddy fields of the Mao have been carved out from the hills only with the sole physical strength of men and women. They had a tradition of consumption of local hayi (rice beer). Today, this tradition is replaced by tea with the coming of western education and Christianity.

The traditional dresses of the Mao tribes are very attractive and elaborate. The male members wear a black short kilt and put on a thick white cotton cloth (now woolen thick cloths are also used) red and black stripes border (lengthwise) and yellow borders along its two ends (breadth wise). A thick red cloth is tied just below the knee of each leg and below it another white cloth a narrower (in breadth) but longer (in length) cloth of black (base) but designed in weaving like combs with white and red colours at regular intervals is used as an upper garment.

The institution of lochiizii for girls and khruchiizii for boys (Morung/Dormitory System) provides to every young boy or girl the opportunity to learn the art, culture, folk songs, dances, folk tales, war techniques, disciplines etc. It was in this institution the seed of love germinated and the soil of future family prepared to grow into a healthy tree of family. The tradition of dormitory system was adversely affected due to the western education and the coming of Christianity. The activity of the Morung/dormitory system is no more practice among the young boys and girls because they were sent to schools, colleges and universities. With the advent of western education and technology, the behavior of youths toward the elders is dying with the passage of time. With the availability of pornographic films and literature everywhere, the youth indulge themselves in immoral behaviors thus spoiling their lives.

2. Research Method

Field research, direct observation and interview have been used in this study. Library research using resources relied upon by the researcher. This research findings presented in the study are the results of field research and secondary sources.

3. Marriage (Chilo Koso) System

Marriage is a unique relationship different from all others. An essential characteristic of marriage is the biological fact that a man and a woman can join together as male and female in a union that is orientated to the generation of new life. The union of marriage provides for the continuation of the human society. According to the belief of the forefathers of Mao, the two sex of male and female are united by marriage and they become one body of flesh and blood. The Scripture of Bible (Gen. 2:24) said "A man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh". Therefore, marriage is a sacred social binding of husband and wife but not a social contract.

The Mao society has its own traditional yearly calendar and in the early days they observed all gennas, marriages and festivals accordingly. The Mao society performed the marriage in the month of January (Chiithuni) according to the calendar. However, after embracing Christianity, the Maos no longer follow their traditional calendar.

The Mao tribe follows the Law of Exogamy. They follow the custom of marring from outside of one's own clan. There are instances of marriage alliances with the neighbouring Maram, Poumai, Zeliangrong, Angami, etc. The marriage with the same-clan is strictly prohibited in their society. The age for marriage is generally between 20 to 30 years for men and 21 to 30 years for women.

Among the Mao society, Monogamy is the rule. In the Mao society polygamy is very rare and is not encouraged by public opinion. Cross-cousin marriage is also not permitted on the ground that the two sexes are descended from the same blood. Hodson, T.C. (2007) mentioned the Mao group has two pairs of exogamous divisions with a prohibition against the intermarriage of the members of the paired clans. Thus, in the Mao society intermarriage of same clan is prohibited. Divorce (marakotu) is very rare in their society. If divorce happened the village court decides the cases.

Horam, M. (1988) stated "The Naga women, on marring into another household, necessarily become attached to the cult of her husband's family". The Mao ladies cannot inherit their parent's properties. All the right to inherit the parent's properties was given to the male heir. The youngest son remains in the parental house to look after the aged parents. Horam, M. again stated that "As Naga daughters could not (and cannot) inherit, descent being in the male line, it was necessary to have a male heir". Thus, the Mao family is a patriarchal family.

4. Nathu Naku

According to their tradition, if the boy reached marriageable age he can suggest the girl of his choice to his parents. If the parents accept, a woman was sent for the proposal. Once the marriage agreement is sealed, a date is fixed for marriage. If the bride happens to be from other village, two girls were sent to her village in the previous night of the wedding for the proposal. On that night the two girls spend their night in the house of some relatives.

Among the Mao there was no 'bride payment' or 'marriage price' a kind of dowry system which was practiced in Kuki-Chin society. During marriage the bride's parents had to contribute one barn (obe/obo) with paddy and a cow as a ceremonial gift but this ceremonial gift was not considered as dowry. The bride brings shawls for her father-in-law, brother-in-laws and uncle's and also for the close relative male members of the bridegroom family. The bride too brought lungi for her mother-in-law, sister-in-laws and for the close family members. The bride brings along with her basket for carrying in the field and also for carrying water to be used during married life. Vessel, winnowing fan, rice barn, spade, weaving materials was give to the bride by her parents for their use in their new married life.

The next day the bride departs from her parental house to her bridegroom house. The bridegroom waits for her with spear on his hand at the village gate to take her to his house. On the evening, the rite was performed by making two knot of the right banana leaf by the man, one for the bride and one for himself. After the knot was handed over to her, the man poured hayi (rice beer) into the two knot and places on the northern corner of the house. From there on the couple become husband and wife. This type of negotiation is called Nathu Nako (Arrange Marriage).

5. Kape Kolu

According to the Mao tribe, when a boy eloped a girl, the boy takes her to his house or to his relative or friend's house. When the matter was brought to light to his parents, the boy's parents has to go within 3 or 4 days to discuss the matter with the girl's parents. If the girl's parents agreed on the request then the marriage was sealed. But there will not be any grand feast or holy marriage. During the time of negotiation, the couple is prohibited from going out of the house for certain days. While if the girl's parents rejected on the matter then the girl's parents take away their daughter. Among the Mao tribe there are laws or rules that the boy parents have to pay fine for their daughter having eloped. The matter is finished with the taking away of the girl from the boy house. This type of acquiring a mate is called Kape Kolo (Elopement).

6. Discussion

The present study shows that the traditional marriage practices are no more practiced among the Mao society. The boys and girls have immense freedom in selecting their partners. With the advent of Christianity, marriage has become a matter of love and choice. The rigid customs and traditions are no longer observed. Now-a-days the age of marriage both for the boy and girl has been taken an upward trend. This is because of social, economic, and educational factors. More over there is pressure from the family and the society

to get married after they obtained a descent job for their prosperous married life. The present fashion among the Mao is that a man in service would prefer to marry a girl who also is in service so that both become earners.

The Mao traditional marriage system was simple but now with the coming of Christianity and modern education the marriage system of Mao has totally changed to the extent of wearing western wedding gown (bride-gown) which is at the cost from forty thousand to lakh of rupees replacing their rich traditional attire. The marriage is performed in the church with the bride in full western regalia and the bridegroom in suits of the latest cuts. Even though wearing the western dress by the couple is not mandatory, most of the Mao people whether farmers or officers choose to wear the western dress rather than their traditional attire. The traditional practice of giving small token of love to the bride by her family has change to the most expensive gifts like bed, sofa sets, T.V., etc which is totally new to their society. The present trend among the Mao people has greatly hampered the economy of the family mostly to the family with low income. There is a kind of competition in the society in spending huge budget on the decoration of the church and the stage for the wedding. The most affected is the low income families who try to imitate other in order to put up their family status in the society.

With the advent of modernization, the tradition of serving Hayi (rice beer) to the guest is replaced by tea. The groom spends a huge sum of money for feasting and celebration. This was not done during their forefather's time; it was done by serving hayi (rice beer). The present trend of the Mao's is that after the solemnization of marriage in the church, the bride and bridegroom are called on the stage and cake cutting function is held. In this function the items served are cakes, biscuit, cookies, bread, tea, soft drink or cold drink for the guest. This has become the present tradition among the Mao tribe and other Naga tribes of Manipur who have embraced Christianity.

7. Conclusion

In fact, the coming of modernization and Christianity has brought about positive and negative impact in the lives of the Mao society. The positive impact, gave awareness in different aspects of life and concern to move forward in this modern world. It liberates their mind from the rigid customs and tradition and brought about a new outlook among the Maos. The modern civilization has enabled them to live in tune with today's world. With the influence of western culture, advent of Christianity and modern education, the Mao society is progressive.

On the other side, there is also a negative impact in the life of the Mao society. It changes their mind to embrace the modernization and practice the Christian doctrines by doing away the rich indigenous cultural practices which is acknowledged by other society. The Mao people have almost all converted into Christianity. Those who are not converted too are on the verge of conversion for certain circumstances. They believe that there would be no one to perform the rites and ritual when they die and so it is better to registered in the Christian denomination. Another reason for Christianity is also to get admission for education. Many Mao modern youth are now refused to accept and value their rich culture. Mao culture and tradition has fallen apart as they stopped valuing the importance of their rich culture and tradition. If the Mao society do not give due importance, the rich culture and tradition will be forgotten and lost forever. It is the need of the hour for the Mao people to wake up and do something good to uphold their culture and tradition once again.

8. Acknowledgement

I am deeply indebted to Mr. Salew, Chief of Makhel and Mrs. S. Katini Alphonsa Phimu, Assistant Professor, Don Bosco College, Maram, Manipur for sharing their valuable ideas and information.

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