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## **Hao Naga Culture of *Marān Kasā*: The Vanishing Material Culture**

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**Abstract:**

*The Hao (Tangkul) Nagas is one of the largest groups of people among the Nagas living in the state of Manipur (India) and in the North Western part of Myanmar. Before their hills were Christianised, the Hao Nagas took pride in hosting the “feast of merit” called Marān Kasā in Tangkul language. Today, we find the observance of this feast in some Hao villages. Erection of a wooden monument called Tarung Kashun occupies an integral part of the feast. The culture of Marān Kasā is one of the costliest affairs in their village life. Not all, but few individuals within the village were capable of hosting this costly affair in the pre-Christian period. The arts carved on the Tarung (wooden monument) have its meanings and significance. The advent of Christianity in 1896, adoption of modern education and western culture has brought drastic changes in their lifestyle, faith, profession and outlook on the worldview. Today, these changes question the relevance of much of their culture including the culture of Marān Kasā. This research article is a humble attempt to present the culture associated with Marān Kasā including the selection of Tarung and the village feasting. It claims that the culture of Marān Kasā is no longer an individual affair as it was in the pre-Christian period; this has now become an affair of the village or locality at large. In other words, today the village or locality as a whole hosts the “feast of merit”. In this work, the terms Hao and Tangkul are used synonymously.*

**Keywords:** Christianity, Feast, Hao, Modern Education, Marān Kasā, Material Culture, Wooden Monument

### **1. Introductory Note**

Material culture research is a relatively new enterprise among Indian folklorists and culturalists. Well known Indian folklorist Jawaharlal Handoo (2000:14-15) opines that the term material culture is also known as “physical folklore” which is in contrast to verbal art or oral folklore, and this aspect of folklore and folklife is visible rather than aural. The concept of material culture in the study of folklore compels an “assessment of physical evidence as well as social and intellectual on the formation of cultural traditions” (Bronner 1996:976). The study of material culture incorporates a range of scholarly inquiry into the uses and meanings of objects. The field of material culture studies affords a multidisciplinary vantage point into human-object relations (Woodward 2007:4). Some of those disciplines include Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Design, Folkloristic, Psychology, and Sociology among others.

In simple sense, the term material culture refers to the relationship between artefacts and social relations regardless of time and space. It is a “study through artefacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time” (Prown 1982:1). It refers to “all human alterations to the natural environment” (Watts 2007:261). Vlach (1997:540) defines material culture as a “mode of cultural expression in which technological means are used either to produce artifacts or to modify segments of the natural landscape”. Material culture studies seek to understand one’s culture through its physical world. It “permits folklorists to see the daily texture of a way of life otherwise obscured by cultural distance, temporal remoteness, or both” (Watts 2007:261).

According to Dorson (1971:2-3), “material culture responds to techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generations and subject to the same forces of conservative tradition and individual variation as verbal art”. It emphasizes “how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meanings to human activity” (Woodward 2007:3). Modern material culture offers “a unique source of knowledge about ourselves and our ties to the past. Modern material culture shapes our lives in many ways, and understanding how it does this is important to learning about our past and anticipating the future” (Rathje 1979:29). Material culture is something portable and perceptible by touch and therefore has a physical, material existence that is one component of human cultural practice (Woodward 2007:14). Handoo (2000:16) rightly pointed out that folk arts and crafts are objects of material culture that simultaneously give pleasure and serve some political, social and economic end. Most, if not all, arts and crafts are not without meanings or motifs that are found continuity in the history of tradition-oriented societies for generations.

## 2. A Note on Material Culture of Hao Nagas

Culture of the Nagas means the ways of their life, the inherited behaviours and thoughts of their fore-parents, passed on to the new generation, through oral traditions, and day to day practices and conservative life styles - in the form of customs, traditions, norms, values, beliefs and conventions; acquired through the process of time, change, innovation, evolution and growth; contact, diffusions, integration, imitation and acculturation (Thong 2011:57). Mention may be made here that there are relationships between material culture and social custom in the case of the Hao Nagas.

In the remote past, the Hao menfolk wore only loin clothes and nothing else, and womenfolk wore a piece of cloth like skirt above the knee and the breast were practically left bare. Before the attainment of puberty, children go naked. In course of time, they have changed their dress code. Before the advent of Christianity in the Hao hills, menfolk used two type of dresses to cover their loin, namely *Marao* and *Raokha* in Hao or Tangkhul language. They wore *Marao* and *Raokha* at the waist to cover the loin. Womenfolk wore a type of skirt called *Kashan* in Hao or Tangkhul language, and a piece of cloth which is used as a bodice called *Sihup* in Hao word. There are different types *Hao Kachon* (Hao shawls) separately for men and womenfolk. Weaving was once considered as the most important village industry among the Hao Nagas. Today, we are witnessing the revival of weaving culture among the Hao Nagas.

Like other Naga groups, the Hao Nagas are lover of ornaments, adorning their bodies with artistic ornaments. Dresses without ornaments are incomplete especially necklace, bangles and earrings (Shimray 2000:16-17). Some of their ornaments include *Kongsāng* (Hao common necklace), *Mayong Chā* (necklace for warriors), *Nāpak/Nākui* (crystal necklace), *Nāhui* (female earring), *Hār* (armlet), *Kazao* (bangles), *Huishon* (interlaced rings), *Mayong Pāsi* (headgear worn by menfolk), *Vāgui* (one type of ornamental headgear worn by menfolk), *Khom Masim* (one type of women's ornament wear around the waist), and *Zeithing* (iron sceptre for womenfolk) among others. Most of their ornaments are made of metals, bones, cowries, shells, cane, leather, orchids, wood, strings of beads, cornelian stones, boar tusks and horns, brass and copper, lead and silver (Thong 2011:73).

Agricultural farming was, and is still, the main source of their village economy for vast majority of the Hao population. Almost all of their feasts and festivals were, and are in some aspects, linked with their seasonal agricultural activities. Most of their agricultural implements are made of wood, bamboo and iron which in fact is a primitive type of implement. Some of their tools and implements include *Hao-tin* (Hao spade), *Khaipāk* (dao), *Ngahā* (axe), *Malā* and *Kachāk* (two different types of bow), and *Kazei* (spear) among others. They have varieties of hand-woven baskets such as *Sopkai* (a basket for carrying firewood etc.), *Shung* (a basket for carrying paddy rice etc.), *Yāngkhāk* (a type of basket smaller than *Shung*), and *Ruk* (a basket without a yoke) among others. Like other Nagas, the Hao people also use *Yāmkok* (a winnowing fan made of plaited bamboo), pounding table and wooden pestle.

Concerning their food habits, rice, wheat, maize, yam, millet and other cereal crops are commonly in use by the Hao people. The Hao Nagas consume both the domesticated and wild animals, birds and fishes of different species. Not long ago, there was a time when all the Hao population for their consumption brewed rice beer. Drinking rice beer was once considered as part of their daily consumption. Before the Christianization of the Hao villages, there were no feasts, sacrifices, festivals and ceremonies without drinking either rice beer or (and) rice wine. Drinking rice-beer was not against their culture rather it occupied an integral part in their day-to-day life. Today, in some section of their hills especially among the Roman Catholic Christians, we observe the continuation of brewing rice beer and rice wine primarily for their consumption.

The Hao Nagas have a unique style of housing system. Usually, their folk housing is partitioned into three rooms or parts with one main door, the entrance door at the front side of the house. The front or first room of the house is used for accommodating domestic animals, for keeping agricultural implements, tools, etc. The middle room is the biggest in size which is a family hall, "serving multifarious purpose" (*Ibid*:70). The innermost room is the smallest in size where they kept their costly ornaments, materials and other valuable things. Their folk houses are broadly categorised into two – *Lengcheng Shim* (wooden house) and *Ngashi Shim* (thatch house). The *Lengcheng Shim* is regarded as a rich man house; whereas, *Ngashi Shim* is regarded as a poor or common man housing style. *Lengcheng Shim* are of two types – (a) *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui* (crossed wooden horns at the front of the house above the roof) and (b) *Lengcheng Shim* without *Lengcheng Kui*. *Lengcheng Shim* without *Lengcheng Kui* can be constructed by any man provided he has the strength and wealth to construct it.

However, the *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui* can be constructed only by the village Chief and the clan heads of the village. In order to construct a *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui*, he must have *Samkok* (a Hao wooden bed made of one single log), construct a resting platform called *Onrāh*, host a "feast of merit" called *Marān Kasā* that involves erection of *Tarung* (wooden monument). *Samkok* is kept inside the *Lengcheng Shim* and used it as a family bed, *Onrāh* is constructed in some public places in memory of a departed family member, *Tarung* is erected at (in front of) the house, and *Marān Kasā* is hosted for the whole village which is one of the grandest feasts for the Hao people. The feast is hosted on the day of erection of wooden monument(s) by the host. All these are done at high costs. This type of house is usually carved or decorated especially at the front side of the house with spears, human skull, buffalo or mithun head, footprint of leopard, hornbill, fowl and others folk arts. All these folk arts have meanings; reflecting on the "status and trophies" that the host and his family members have achieved and attained during their lifetime.

## 3. Culture of Marān Kasā

The word 'Feast' refers to a celebration with foods that is observed by a group of people or a family only for the special occasion. Feast is a "ceremonial meal that reaffirms social solidarity while providing culinary gratification to an assembly of individuals. Feast is the sensuous and symbolic display of food and a quintessential metaphor for a surfeit of consumption" (Socolov

1997:285). It also has religious connotations. Huteson (2006:952) wrote, “As feasts evolved, rituals became attached, which signified the type of feast being held. Soon, these feasts became more complex, expanding into festivals involving specific etiquette, which molded community behavior”.

Many anthropologists and writers use the term *Marān Kasā* and “feast of merit” synonymously. It is during this *Marān Kasā*, the host of the feast erected the wooden monument(s) called *Tarung*. Some section of the Hao villages especially the Northern part of the Hao territory erect stone monuments or monoliths instead of wooden monuments. The culture of *Tarung Kashun* (erection of a wooden monument) is an expensive affair, which is why it is also regarded as a rich man affair. Basically, the Hao Nagas’ customary practice of *Marān Kasā* is hosted to showcase their generosity, richness or possession of wealth. In the pre-Christian period, the selection of a wooden post from the forest involved a strict code of religious conduct. Among the Hao Nagas, the host of the feast performed certain rituals before and during the observance of the “feast of merit”. A ritual is a particular type of tradition that marks events, beliefs, and socio-cultural and religious values of the community. Sims and Stephens (2005:95) wrote, “Rituals are performances that are repeated, patterned, and frequently include ceremonial actions that incorporate symbols, action, repetition; and perhaps most significant to our being able to recognize rituals, they have a frame that indicates when the rituals begins and ends”.

The Hao Nagas, being a patriarchal society, allow only the menfolk to host the “feast of merit”. According to their custom, the host of the feast selected a tree from the forest through a proper ritual performance to their *Ameowo* (god of Hao religion). The host left some indications or marks at the tree in order to show the villagers that he, the host, have chosen the tree. The host placed an axe leaning at the trunk of the tree for a night. Based on their folk belief, it is a good omen if the axe is found in the same place in the following day. In other words, it is a sign given by their *Ameowo* that the chosen tree can be used for the “feast of merit”. Contrariwise, it is a bad omen if the axe is found fallen. Thus, the tree cannot be used for the feast.

Once the *Ameowo* “signaled” a good omen to the host to use the chosen tree for the feast, the host and the villagers geared up for the feast. During the process of felling the chosen tree and in the process of transportation of the tree, the host offered rice beer, rice wine and food to all the villagers who participated in the collection of the tree. From the forest to the house of the host, the participants had to carry the wooden monument on their shoulders. During the course of carrying the wooden post or monument, they sing *hohoing* (a kind of vocal music of the Nagas). Based on their folk belief in the pre-Christian period, there were times when the tree “refused to leave” the forest by making it extremely heavy so that the participants would not be able to carry further. In such a situation, the host and the participants begged the tree through folk songs and invocation, asking the tree to come and live with the host of the feast. The following folk song was recorded from A.S. Haora Zimik and A.S. Kazaching Zimik of Ramva village, Ukhrul district of Manipur.

#### 4. Lyrics of Folk Song

*Yarnao thingrei vākhāngsei*

*Thiphāng yeonārāya yāruwo*

*Thingreihq Ungleilau*

*Seijang khamei vākhui hangminei*

#### 5. Free Translation

Fellow friends, let us go and carry the wooden post

Leader, branches of the tree are swaying

Worthful tree, come and live with us

We will offer you mithun’s tail

According to the folk story as narrated by the two elderly men above-mentioned, the host of the “feast of merit” invited his fellow friends and villagers to partake in the collection of the wooden post from the forest. During the course of their work, the tree became so heavy and thus the participants were unable to carry the wooden post further. The branches of the tree swayed which made them to lose balance. Based on their belief system, that was a sign of “refusal” from the tree to leave the forest. The folk song further mentioned that the host “begged and requested” the wooden post to live with him, promising that he would offer the tail of mithun, a semi-domesticated animal. Based on the narration, the tree accepted the request, and thus the host and the villagers carried home the wooden post without any further disturbance. At last, the host erected the wooden monument called *Tarung* at his residence.



Figure 1: Wooden Monuments of Hungpung village's Chief, Ukhrul District, Manipur

Usually, the Hao Nagas host the *Marān Kasā* ("feast of merit") during the *Luirā Phanit* (seed sowing festival). No feast is hosted without slaughtering animals especially a buffalo for their consumption and for sacrificial purposes. According to their custom, the number of slaughtering buffalo depends on the number of the wooden post to be erected during the feast. One buffalo to be slaughtered for every erection of a wooden monument. In the pre-Christian period, the *Khalāknao* (rice men or well-to-do family) of the village erected as many as five *Tarung* (wooden monument). Apart from the respect and honour given by the villagers, the custom of erection of *Tarung* was also seen as an act of generosity. For the Hao Nagas, individuals' status and honour are more important than wealth and other valuable possessions. This is one of the reasons as to why the Hao Nagas took pride in hosting the "feast of merit".

Today, the culture of *Marān Kasā* has undergone drastic changes in the selection of tree, ritual performance, process of collection of *Tarung* from the forest, and in their feasting and other cultural practices associated with the "feast of merit". Unlike the pre-Christian period, the Hao people no longer perform rituals during the selection and collection of tree from the forest for the feast. Invocation is no longer addressed to *Ameowo* (god of Hao religion), but they now invoke to the Christian God. It is observed that they continue hosting a feast during the *Luirā Phanit* (seed sowing festival), but almost all the Hao villages discontinued drinking rice beer and rice wine during the feast. Some sections of the Hao population especially among the Catholic Christians continue to brew and use rice beer and rice wine during the feast as well as in their everyday use.



Figure 2: Wooden monuments erected by the Hungpung Awungshi Organisation (HAO), Hungpung village, Ukhrul District, Manipur



Figure 3: Wooden monuments erected by the villagers of Tashar village, Ukhrul District, Manipur

Concerning the economic aspect of this culture, the once individual affair has now become an affair of the whole village or locality at large. Today, the whole locality or village shoulder the responsibility and bear the expenses of the feast. The venue for the erection of *Tarung* is usually chosen in a public place or at the residence of the village Chief of the hosting village. Unlike the past, no Hao village erects *Tarung* more than one wooden monument at the time. In the early part of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hao villages like Tashar and Hungpung (in 2004) erected wooden monuments during the seed sowing festival. In 2013, Shokvao village, one of the Hao villages, hosted and erected one *Tarung*. In 2014, Ramrei village, one of the Southern Hao villages, hosted and erected one *Tarung* at the residence of their village Chief. As it was in the past, singing *hohoing* and *Hao Laa* (Hao folk song) continue to occupy an integral part especially during the process of collection of *Tarung* from the forest.

## 6. Concluding Note

In the last two-three generations, almost all the Hao (Tangkul) culture had undergone drastic changes. Nothing remains static or permanent, but change seems to be the only permanent thing at the test of time. Many factors are responsible for such changes in the Hao cultural life. Their impacts on the Hao culture are very much visible. Some of these factors include the advent of Christianity, introduction of modern education, adoption of western culture, and their interaction with other communities among others. The changes in their material culture are the most tangible and remarkable one. Such changes have both advantages and disadvantages on the life of the Hao people. The successful movement of Christianization of the Hao people has helped them to live as “one people”, considering the teachings of Jesus Christ as their guiding principles of life. The introduction of modern education has helped them to employ in various jobs in both the private and public sectors. Infrastructural development in their hills is one other tangible change. All these changes have made them to live more convenient and easily accessible to the modern world. Introduction and addition of many nutritious food and fruit items in their food habit have made them healthier. However, the replacement of their cultural items, instruments and tools with the modern industrialised items, instruments and tools has resulted to the vanishing of much of their material culture including their ornaments, folk arts and crafts, and their culture of folk housing and erection of wooden monuments. We claim that the culture of *Marān Kasā* can no longer be termed as the “feast of merit” as it was in the pre-Christian period. Today, it is no longer a “feast of merit” because the observance of this culture or the erection of wooden monument is not to showcase the “merits” of any individual, but to preserve and promote their culture of *Marān Kasā*. If care is not taken, the vanishing material culture – the culture of *Marān Kasā* – is likely to vanish completely.

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