



Traditional Institutions of the Hmar Tribe in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India is a home of several ethnic tribes and a number of sub tribes having distinct identity, culture and way of life. The different tribes co-exist peacefully in spite of their cultural diversifications. The Hmar tribe is one of the significant ethnic communities who have their own identity, culture, traditional institution and language. The Hmars living in the different states of Northeast India have their own set of administration system from a very long period of time. The Hmars are one of the earliest inhabitants of the region and they follow a simple and systematic form of governance. The village administration is supervised by the village chief and his councilors.

Keywords : Ethnic, Culture, Hmar Tribe, Traditional Institution, Administration.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Hmars are spread over a fairly large area in North East India. They live mostly in the hills of south Manipur, Mizoram, Cachar, North Cachar, Meghalaya, Tripura. Their habitants are also spreading in Burma (Myanmar) and Chittagong Hill Tracts. Although these areas are under different administrative set ups, they are geographically connected. In Manipur, the Hmars reside in the southern part, especially in the Churachandpur District and its adjoining areas. These areas except Tuthaphai (the Khuga Valley/Churachandpur) are hilly. Tuiruong (Barak), Tuivai and Tuithapui (Khuga) are some of the important rivers flowing through the Hmar area. The area is densely forested and is very rich in wildlife. These forests provide a good hunting ground for wild animals. In Mizoram, the Hmar live mostly in the northern area, especially in the Aizawl District. Dense forests, swift running river and streams cover the area. The area is very rich in flora and fauna. Oak, rosewood, sal and bamboo are the common vegetation. Besides, different varieties of orchid are also found. The area is rich in wild life too. In Assam, the Hmars live in the Cachar and North Cachar District. In Meghalaya, the Hmars live mostly in the Jwai District. In Tripura, the Hmars mostly live in and around Darchawi, a village on the Mizoram – Tripura border.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Hmar History (1956) by Hranglien Songate discusses more about the traditional and political history of the Hmars in Mizoram and other Northeast states of India. The author deals with the unwritten oral traditional history, myths and legends prevalent among the Hmars from time immemorial and their migration and settlements in different places in the present Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and Tripura. It also deals with the origin of the Hmars, their original habitats and how they scattered in different parts of Northeast India.



The Hmar of Manipur: An anthropological Exploration (1992) by V.P. Sharma deals with the background of Hmars living in Manipur and other tribes who are very close to them. The findings, observations and conclusions contained in the book reveals better and more comprehensive understanding of the Hmar ethnicity, culture, language, religion, economic disparity and geographical condition.

In Search of Identity: Hmars of the Northeast India (2008) written by Lal Dena is a collection of occasional papers published in some books and presented at regional and national seminars. The book discusses the origin of the Hmars, including their social and political development, leadership pattern, literary development, the Mizo integration movement etc. It also highlights the coming of Christian Missionaries to the Hmars and their conversion from the belief of animism to Christianity within a short period of time and the growth and development of different Churches among the Hmars.

Oral Traditions of the Hmars (2011) by Vanlal T. Bapui deals with the oral traditions of the Hmars which are handed down from generation to generation. The book is a review of unwritten records of oral traditions and is also helpful to understand Hmar origin and their migration in different periods of time. The author comprehensively discusses various Hmar traditional or non-conventional sources including folklore, folksongs, beliefs, superstitions, ceremonies, hymns, rituals etc.

Problems of Hills Areas in Northeast India (2012) edited by George T. Haokip discusses widely different ethnic communities with their problems such as ethnic crisis, identity, socio-economic and political. The book gives us understanding about the crucial issues of Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups in Northeast India. The study also helps to understand the trends and dynamics of ongoing ethnic movements in Northeast India and their role in



fostering democratic values in the region.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the main objectives of the present study;

- i) To identify and highlight the different traditional institutions of the Hmar tribe.
- ii) To explore and understand the tenets as the various norms and structures that existed in the traditional Hmar society.

METHODOLOGY

The primary methods for the study are descriptive and analytical in nature. The random sampling method has been adopted for sample design. For the purpose of present study, data have been gathered both from primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected through the interview and direct methods. The secondary sources of data have been gathered from different books, journals and various online articles.

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE HMARS

In course of their long migratory movement and sojourn at different places from Sinlung to their present habitat, the Hmars in North East India, had evolved a very stable and time-tested traditional institutions which can withstand the challenges of modernization and globalization. In spite of the many changes that had place in Hmar society during the last few decades in the wake of the introduction of modern education and the coming of Christianity, most of these traditional institutions have remained intact and continued to serve the present needs of Hmar society. Let us highlight some of these institutions briefly.

a) Khawtlang Roreltu (Village Council)

One prominent traditional institution which emerged in course of their onward migration was the Khawtlang Roreltu headed by a lal (chief). Every person could not



become a chief. Only those persons who had the capacity to lead the people in their struggle for existence and constant anxiety in times of war, ability to command obedience from others, a certain charisma and readiness on the part of his followers to conform to the rules laid down by him, emerged as chiefs. Also such persons who conquered new territories and built new villages were eventually recognized as chiefs. In each chiefdom, there was a village council. The specific character, composition and methods of functioning of the council deferred from clan to clan or from village to village. The chief was the supreme head of the council. Below the chief were the chief councilor (muolkil mitha) and councilors (khawnbawl upas). In the absence of a chief, the chief councilor took the place of the chief and presided over the meetings of the council.

The councilors who were selected by the chief himself were normally a wealthy and influential group of persons, kinsmen or close friends of the chief. They were rewarded with the most fertile jhum-land and also exempted from forced labor. Thus, the chiefs and the councilors in a sense constituted a privileged group in a traditional Hmar society. The village council combined in itself both judicial and administrative powers. It settled disputes and cases, both civil and criminal. Before it heard any dispute, the complainant was under obligation to offer rice-beer (zu) to the councilors and if he won the case, the other party was to reimburse his expenditure and was also to give a pig to the village council as salam (a kind of fine). The Hmars have elaborate customary laws. The lal-ship and khawnbawlship were hereditary and the right of inheritance went to the youngest son of the family. But certain clans such as the Leiris, the Khawlums and the Changsans give inheritance right to the eldest son. The village council was to administer justice and order according to the customary laws. During the colonial rule, 1891-1947, the chief and his councilors still constituted, as they did during the pre-



colonial period, a privileged group but their authority and power was greatly undermined. This is not to say that their hold over the people was relaxed. It was a colonial strategy to recognize and use them as intermediaries between the people and the colonial government. The traditional authorities were utilized by the British as their agents for holding and administering the hill territory and the government integrated them into the colonial system by giving them some local administrative responsibilities in the village courts. In so far as traditional laws and customs were concerned, the village council assumed dual judicial roles: first as interpreter of customary laws and secondly, as a judge within the chieftdom. The legitimization of only a handful of traditional leaders who constituted a microscopic minority of the population, rendered them negligent of the need to worry much about the support of the people. Apart from these responsibilities, the chief and his councilors were also assigned the task of collecting hill house tax of Rs. 3 from each household and enforcing the pothang system. The traditional leaders were effectively used against their own people and they collaborated with the colonial authorities in exploiting the people by depriving them of the fruits of their labor and production. The moral basis of leadership was thus more or less destroyed and the leaders tended to lose sight of their obligations to society for the privileges they received from the colonial rulers.

b) Sungkuo le Pahnam (family and lineage segmentation)

Like any other human society, the basic unit of Hmar society was the family. The family was patriarchal. The head of family was the sole authority in so far as the family and its relations with other families or clans were concerned. He represented the family and its dependent members in any important public meeting. The mode of production and consumption in a family was elementary in the sense that the whole family had a common jhum land, worked as a single unit and shared the products jointly. In a Hmar



society, there was both conjugal and extended family which normally consisted of male members of a lineage of two to three generations. In such a family system, the married males moved out to start a new separate household only when they had marriageable children. However, the stability of the extended family also depended to a great extent upon the nature of relationship and interaction between the male members of the family. It appears that the emergence of pahnam (clan formation) and pahnam siper (clan segmentation) might have already started before the Hmars left Myanmar for India because their migration was usually undertaken along clan consideration and settlements were made on the basis of clan. Therefore, in every typical Hmar villages, different vengs (segments or localities) like Lungtau Veng, Leiri Veng, etc, had emerged. When the Hmars finally came to settle in different parts of North East India, almost all the villages, particularly in Mizoram, bore the names of Hmar's clans like Biete, Darngawn, Keivawm, Khawbung, Khawzawl, Zote, Thiek etc. There are now about 22 major pahnams (clans) which are sub-divided into more than 200 hnam siper (sub-clans) and of these, the most numerous ones are Thiek, Zote, Lungtau and Darngawn. As it has been pointed out, the process of clan formation and its segmentation had already started after their settlement in and around Shan state in Myanmar.

c) Buonzawl (Bachelors' dormitory)

One of the most important traditional institutions of Hmar was Buonzawl which was also known as Zawlbuk among other kindred tribes of Mizo. Buon means literally wrestling and Zawl an open space which was used for recreation such as wrestling matches and dances. There were raised platforms on all sides of the wall inside the dormitory. All the male youths of the village who had attained puberty were to sleep in the Buonzawl at night and each tlanglak (a young teen age boy) in the village was under obligation to supply firewood for the Buonzawl. The Valupas would narrate the



heroic exploits of their forefathers and folk tales thereby teaching traditional value systems like *tlawmngaina*, bravery and the likes. In times of emergency like tribal war or natural calamities, *Buonzawl* served as a mobilizing centre for joint actions and in pre-colonial Hmar traditional society, *Buonzawl* can also be considered as a defense wing of village administration. It was later developed into a kind of institution where youngsters were given rigorous training in the art of tribal war, wrestling and village administration. In other sense, *Buonzawl* was an institution where disciplines and moral codes were imparted to the youths of the village.

d) *Inneina* (Marriage)

In a traditional Hmar society, there were four types of marriages: *sawngpuia*, *innei* (marriage with the parental approval), *chawngmolak* (a marriage of a girl before she reached maturity. In such case, the girl would not sleep with her would-be husband but only with her in-laws. When she reached marriageable age, the marriage was treated as *sawngpuia innei*), *arasi hnuoia innei* (literally meaning marriage under the witness of stars- an eloped marriage without the parental approval); and *intlun* (meaning self-offering to the house of man or woman for marriage). In traditional Hmar society, marriage was not restricted to any clan. The preferred marriage, however, was matrilineal cross-cousin marriage and some people held a prejudice against patrilineal cross-cousin marriage. In the past, the choice of a mate was a matter of strict parental control. But as mentioned before, there were also some instances of eloped marriages and the marriage which could not be separated by the opposing parents or relatives was called '*pathien samsui*.' One should not ignore the fact that the Hmar society was an open society where there was free-mixing between men and women. What was very common and rather the institutionalized way of approaching a girl was wooing (*inleng/nunghak-leng*). For instance, the boy, soon after his evening meal, would woo a



girl. Boys would sit around a girl gossiping, cracking jokes and discussing topics of common interests till late at night. When the boy or the boy's parents made their choice, this choice was first made known to the girl's parents. This pre-negotiation stage was a very important period because decision as to whether marriage was possible or not had to be taken. Once this stage was over, the boy's parents would call their laibung (kinsmen) and here affinal kinsmen played a crucial role in working out the details of the marriage. Some selected kinsmen and the boy's sisters' husbands (makpas) would act as the go-between (palai) and go to the girl's parents with a white cloth (inhawn), which was regarded as an instrument of peace and rice-beer (zu) and after the makpa served ricebeer to the girl's parents and their kinsmen, formal negotiations followed and the bride-price (nuhmei man) was decided. The amount of bride-price differed from clan to clan and this bride-price cannot be interpreted as a commercial transaction. The bride-price was normally classified into various shares: (1) manpui-(if received in kind, it consisted of mithun, gong etc.) and this went to the bride's parents; (2) panghak (some portion of the bride price given to the bride's parent's kinsmen); (3) pusum (a portion given to the bride's maternal uncle (pu); (4) nisum (a portion given to the bride's father's sister); and (5) zuorman (a small portion given to the bride's friends and cousins). The bond of matrimony was extremely loose; a boy seeking divorce should simply give sekhat amounting to Rs.40 only which is called makman to the girl's parents. If a wife initiated divorce, she had to return the bride-price and this practice of returning the bride-price is called suminsuo. The Hmars practiced monogamy and there were very few instances of polygamy. Premarital or extra-marital sex was not uncommon. A child born of an unregulated relationship was called sawn and the boy was to pay fine called zawlei man to the girl's parents and salam (a fine of a pig) to the village council. If he married the girl, he would be exempted from these fines and only had to pay the usual bride price as fixed by the



girl's parents and their kinsmen.

e) Sakhuona (Religious institution)

The traditional religion of Hmars can best be characterized as animistic. Lack of consciousness and also the inability to comprehend the objective forces of nature made them develop certain superstitious ways of beliefs and worship. They worshipped some peculiar objects or supernatural beings, which exercised tremendous influence over their behaviors. The mode of worship and sacrifices were determined by the objects to which sacrifices were to be made. There were various complicated methods of sacrifices and the person who could master all these methods eventually emerged as a priest (thiempu). The source of the authority of the priest was the assumption that he could control certain natural phenomena - epidemics, floods, droughts, famines, diseases, etc. all of which loomed large and affected the means of their livelihood and production. The Hmars believed in the existence of a benevolent and supreme one called pathien (god). Surprisingly enough, almost all their prayers and sacrifices were offered to other evil spirits and not to the supreme god. Because the Hmars believed that evil spirits were the main cause of their illness and sufferings. According to Hmars, there were various spirits which were known by different names:

- i. khawchawm (which used to kill domestic animals);
- ii. khuovang (name of a guardian spirit);
- iii. zasam (a dreadful spirit which lived in the forest);
- iv. phung or khawhring (which caused sudden dizziness and miserable sickness);
- v. lasi (good feminine spirit which blessed the hunters and often married them).

The priest was supposed to know which spirit was causing trouble and illness and what



type of sacrifice was necessary. The most important duty of the priest was thus to perform sacrifices for sanctification of the village from the influence of these evil spirits. Another interesting feature of the Hmar traditional religion was the belief in life after death. It was a popular belief among them that the soul passed through different stages. First, immediately after death, the soul hovered either over the village or in the firmament for some time. The soul of a man who died an unnatural death used to disturb those members of the bereaved family and the people who were involved in the death of such a person and this phenomenal reappearance of the deceased in spirit was called 'thlahrang'. The dead men's abode (mithikhuo) was believed to be underground. The Hmars believed that children's souls found it extremely difficult to adapt to mithikuo and their parents had to prepare special meals which were placed by the priest on the grave for a fixed period and this rite was called pakhuo. In the case of a grown-up soul, the priest performed thitin (dead-departing rite) accompanied by a feast and placed colorful clothes, skirts and feathers of birds over the grave and only then, the soul finally entered the mithikhuo. The third stage was pielral which was considered to be the 'abode of bliss.' Only the soul of a thangsuo, a person who performed heroic deeds, for instance, by killing certain dangerous animals or who cultivated and harvested an exceptional quantity of rice/paddy (silai zawn or kak zawn measurement of the height of bupang where paddy was temporarily stored at the farm hut) and who celebrated the occasion by throwing a feast of inchawng with one or two mithuns, could reach pielral. So those persons were publicly honored with tawnlairang (special head gear) and puondum on the great occasion. The distinction between man and man, that is, between the slave and his master still persisted and the former continued to serve his master in this spirit world. There was perhaps no prescribed length of period each departed soul had to spend in each of the three stages. It would, however, appear that the soul of the wicked man could not pass



beyond the mithikhuo, but the souls of a thangsuo and those who suffered in life for no fault of theirs were entitled to enter pielral.

f) Lawmpui (Community labor)

Another striking traditional institution of Hmar society was the practice of lawmpui (something like community labor and mutual assistance). Various stages of food-production which normally involved community labor were the following: clearing forest/ jungle tracts for cultivation; digging and sowing of seeds; weeding, harvesting, thrashing and storing. In all these stages, the Hmars would either join in community labor or help one another. The most popular form of community labor among the Hmars was butukhuonglawm which was organized at the time of sowing. There were times when as many as a hundred persons would work together. They would start from the furthest fields and move gradually to other fields one after another. They sang as they sowed and made a festival out of it:

Thinga ka tuk, thingah ka thlak,
Lunga ka tuk, lungah ka thlak;
Ka chung khuongruo sur a ta,
Ama'n khurbi zawng de ni.
Hit I on tree's root, drop it I on it,
Hit I a stone, drop it I on it;
When rain falls from above,
Find will it its own roots.

The functions of lawmpui were mainly concerned with the economic activities of the village. Compulsorily, all the able-bodied unmarried persons of the village joined this lawmpui, irrespective of age and sex. Any household or even the chief could requisition the services of the lawmpui. In return for such services, the lawm members were given



food and drink. This organization served a training ground for young men and young women to learn a sense of duty and dignity of labor. Along with this lawmpui, there was also inlawm consisting of few close friends, young women and young men. In turn, the lawm members would go to their jhum fields and this kind of inlawm was usually practiced during weeding or harvesting. This inlawm was one of the happy occasions in the life of young people. The lawm members would wait for their lawms at tinhmun (a place at the outskirts of a village) and then they would go together to the jhum fields. Sometimes romance developed among the lawm members leading to their marriage.

CONCLUSION

No human society is static and Hmar society is no exception. As a result of contact with external forces like contact with colonial administration accompanied with the coming of Christianity and modern education, many of Hmar traditional values were being replaced by modern values in the form of materialism and consumerism. Though the institution of Buonrawl was being replaced by modern educational institutions, the Val Upas still play a dominant role in Hmar society. Even the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, the institutions of khawtlang roreltu, now called Village Authority, man le muol (bride price), customary laws, clan structure and laibung inpui (kinship institution) have still continued to serve the increasing needs of present Hmar society.

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