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Youth Dormitory in the Life of the Liangmai Naga, India

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Abstract

Youth dormitory or the bachelor house has been a prominent feature in Naga villages in the earlier days. Liangmai Naga calls the boys' dormitory, Khangchiu and the girls' dormitory, Liuchiu. Dormitory was usually situated in the middle of the village. It was the focal centre of various village activities- political, economic and cultural. However, the significance of youth dormitories has been declining with the advent of Christianity. In this paper, I would like to focus on the role of the youth dormitories in the life of the Liangmai. These were the primary institutions, binding the community together for generations. The dormitory has been the centre of training and perpetuation of traditional Liangmai music and dance. They have been the reservoirs of the rich culture and tradition of the Liangmai. Decline of this institution in the present is altering the whole social system. Weakening of social bonds and flouting of traditionally accepted social norms, ethics and morality are the results of the decline of the youth dormitories among the Liangmai Naga.

Key words: Youth Dormitory, Khangchiu, Liuchiu, Music, Dance, Christianity.

Introduction

The Liangmai Naga is a sub-tribe of the Zelianrong Naga, residing in the two states of Nagaland and Manipur in India. The elders of the community report that before the advent of the British, the Liangmai was one of the most outstanding of the several Naga groups, particularly in their music and crafts. Today they are regarded as one of the mildest, peace loving groups among the Naga. The people who were called Kacha Naga by the British are also known as Liangmai and Zeme. Liangmai have fine attributes. . They are known for their simplicity and hospitality. They are honest, courteous and cheerful. Life in the rugged mountains gives them a strong spirit of independence and self-reliance. Now, Liangmai is one of the 33 recognized tribes by the Government of Manipur. Liangmai, as a separate tribe, was recognized by the Government of India on 22nd December, 2011. In India, the bachelors' dormitory is found among a large number of tribes. According to Kamei, "Dormitory has been described as Morung by western Anthropologists and it has become a universal word. Khangchiu, a Zelianrong word for bachelors' dormitory has occupied a high degree of social magnitude in traditional Zelianrong society. It is a place where youth are shaped into responsible adult members of the society. It also sustains and provides a pure and uncorrupted life among the members of the society" (2013:01). In fact, it was considered the life-vein of Liangmai social and cultural activities. Gangmumei also mention that, it met the educational needs of the young men, served as the defence of the village and provided the manpower requirement to organize public works, religious ceremonies and cultural festivals including dance and music. The youth in the dormitory were trained to cater to these needs of the society (2004).

Materials and Methods

The paper is based on the fieldwork in Liangmai village by using research methods like observations and interview method.

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Human beings are special creations amongst all other created beings. They have the wisdom and skills that other beings do not and cannot have. Qualities like creativity, artistic and imaginative abilities are the domain of the humans. The dormitories of the youth, under many forms and innumerable names have existed in a very wide region of the world extending from the Himalaya and the Formosa in the North to Australia and New Zealand in the south; and from the eastern pacific and Marquesas to the west coast of Africa. Thus, this social institution is found among diverse ethnic groups classified under Dravidians, Indo-Mongols, Malays, Papuans, Polynesians, Australians, and Africans. The Khangchiu or boys dormitory is a primary institution of the Liangmai society. All the male members in the village were its members. It was a tradition for the Liangmai that all the boys after they attained puberty were required to start living inside the khangchiu. A similar dormitory system Liuchiu operated for the girls as well. The Khangchiu or Liuchiu is housed at the residence of a prominent elder of the village though they have a separate room. Offering one's house or a part of it for the dormitory was a decision well appreciated by the community at large. Liangmai Naga informs that in the past as they settled as a village community, the first thing they did was to select the site to set up the dormitory. Liangmai village was never considered as a complete village without having a dormitory. In the dormitory system the new members were imparted practical education by the seniors in the dormitory to evolve as capable adults of their community. Dormitory plays a vital role in the grooming of the personality of the youth. Social, religious and cultural practices are evolved in these dormitories. Every village has one or more dormitory. Kamei opines that, there are two probable theories for the origin of the Khangchiu; one is that, in the ancient times, it was a common affair among the tribal people to raid other tribal groups. This led to inter-tribal feuds endangering the peaceful living of the common people. Inter tribal feuds commonly happened among the tribes for want of supremacy over the other. Therefore, killing of an enemy became a lawful deed among them (2013:01). In other words, one who brought home the head of an enemy was admired and respected as a warrior. Therefore, fighting between two villages became a common occurrence. For this factor, it did become a need for all young men to sleep together in one common place in order to defend the village from the enemy. The youth dormitories functioned according to specific rules and regulations. In the dormitory all kinds of traditional practices and activities, such as warfare and art of fighting by the use of weapons, dance, music, and song were taught to its young members. The seniors or *Khangpi* taught them to respect and obey elders, learn to become punctual about time etc., They also received training in making handicrafts basket making, wood carving, crafts made out of bamboo and cane, and learnt carpentry and other embroidery works. The overall organization of the youth dormitories catered to the welfare of the whole village and got full support from the political body - the Village Council.

In every village there are at least one or more youth dormitories, though, the number depends on the size of the village. According to Daimai, "there is a keen competition between the Khangchius for the welfare of the village. Whenever a Khangchiu achieves accolades for its performance, it throws a feast or gifts a *mithun* (*Bos Frontalis*) to the village" (1995:476). *Mithun* or *Buichang* is considered the pride of the Liangmai. They offer it to the village though the khangchiu will take care of the *Mithun* till it is sacrificed in the ceremony conducted in the village. So during any social functions in the village, they will kill that *Mithun* and give feast to the villagers. Ringthim opine that, there is a celebration festival known as *Matui* organized by the members of a particular Khangchiu. It may not be celebrated every year. It is usually celebrated when that Khangchiu has sufficient funds. Singing, dancing and feasting are the main features of this celebration (2009:47). During *Matui*, Khangchiu will give feast to the village and the parents of that particular Khangchiu member will offer or give rice beer as a token of love for the feast.

According to Daimai, the membership of the Khangchui is acquired right from the time of birth. Whenever a child is born, the mid-wife who is attending to the woman in labour reserves the baby for a particular Khangchui or Liuchui to which she is more attached. A Khangchui will gift a bamboo tiffin box (*tei muan*) for the newly born baby boy. Since that day, the baby boy was considered to be the member of that dormitory till he dies. The baby was believed to be in the care of the Khangchui. One did not go directly to the Khangchui. Before he is enrolled as an active member of that institution, he had to attend a junior dormitory called *Chungkhangna*. He had to be there for some years till he reached adolescence and move into the Khangchui (1995:476). Liuchui or the girls' dormitory was where the adolescent Liangmai girls came and stayed together. Like the Khangchui, Liuchui also had a leader called *Liuting*, who looks after the welfare of the members. The girl members also look after the welfare of the village by contributing voluntary services in the form of collecting firewood and water for the poor and deserted widows. The girls also take up a kind of training in certain trades like spinning and weaving etc. Like their counterpart in Khangchui, they also had to go to a junior dormitory known as *Chungkina* before they went to Liuchui. They had to obey the instructions of the leader.

Functions of the Youth Dormitories

One of the most important characteristics of Liangmai society was the community life and this was maintained in the youth dormitories. In the olden days, the Liangmai were a well-knit unit with social cohesion and solidarity, holding fast to the values of their community and capable of united action for any community cause. An egalitarian spirit was a feature of the community life of the Liangmai which owed much to the youth dormitory itself where all members-rich and poor, old and young, strong and weak- were treated equally. The dormitory taught the young people to value the importance of every individual in the community. Thus the spirit of companionship and a sense of caring, sharing, fellowship and goodwill was learnt, maintained and practiced in the youth dormitory which was looked up as an ideal of the Liangmai community. According to Roy, "the training and education that the child received in these institutions can be best described as habituation, imitation or perhaps unconscious conditioning along with the other kind of learning which is conscious and conditioned. With the result that when the children become adult responsible members of the society they react, rationalize, behave and think in a given space and time in a pattern, which when collected objectively would indicate the cultural pattern of the group" (2006:20). The well-being of all was the highest value in Liangmai society. A sense of belongingness and togetherness where an individual's self interest was subordinated to the importance of community welfare was the governing principle of Liangmai community life. Qualitative living was the hallmark of life inside the Khangchui. Working together in the fields, participating in the community feasts and festivals and sharing jokes over a mug of rice beer in festive moods were the common sights in the yesteryears. The strength of the communal life of the Liangmai in earlier days was kept alive and active through the Khangchui and Liuchui.

Security System and Bodyguards of the Village:

To guard the whole village was one of the most important duties of the members of the *Khangchui*. It was necessary because, under the shadow of the headhunting practice, Liangmai lived in a state of constant guard. Feuds between villages and tribes and regular raids for human heads were common because cutting off a human head was regarded by Liangmai as the greatest victory in their life. The sound of the drum was meant to alert the villagers to know that there was danger in the village and to give them a chance to seek safety. Knowing that the youth were on guard even at night, all the villagers could spend the night peacefully without fear. Thus, the duties and functions of the *Khangchui* members were directly related to the welfare and safety of the whole village community and they were respected and honoured by all the villagers.

Training centre in Cultural Skills, Arts and Crafts:

Through youth dormitory, all the members learn skills like arts and crafts. The Khangchiu members were taught the techniques of fighting skills for war, wrestling, games and sports, handicrafts, sex and moral education, religious philosophy and so on by the *Khangpi* in the Khangchiu. The folk music and dance, carving of figures on stone and wood and designs on clothes - the forte of the Liangmai was kept alive from one generation to the next through the Khangchiu and Liuchiu. The members were taught and instructed to develop character and attitude befitting an ideal Liangmai. They were taught civic duties, community ethics, and co-operative labour, responsibilities towards oneself and towards the society and were trained to become worthy citizens.

A centre for Community Service:

Liangmai are a community-oriented people and are very industrious. In olden days when there was no postal communication system, the boys from Khangchiu acted as mailmen carrying messages to other villages. All the services rendered by the Khangchiu members in times of need were done honorary. It was against the Khangchiu system to expect or receive any cash or kind from families or individuals for any kind work or service carried out by its members. Through these services towards the welfare of the village, young people developed a sense of discipline, responsibilities and duty towards their fellowmen and their community as a whole. The youth dormitory member had a moral obligation to ensure that every family in the village was cared for, whether they were orphans, poor or widows. Compassion, valour and discipline were the key words that defined the dormitory. The members collected firewood and distributed these among the senior citizens and the needy families in the village. Among the Liangmai, there is a day where the khangchiu and Liuchiu distributed banana leaf from *aguang (east)* by singing this song.

*Kagan jan, kagum ti jan,
jan che nte,
akih khang riguang lam khang,
phung rian ta lak, phung jan ta lak ge.*

(We bring vegetables, and banana leaves from the east and will distribute it to every household).

Banana leaf is considered a simple, hygienic mode of serving as plate and tiffins to keep the food. Therefore, Khangchiu was never a mere sleeping and enjoying place for the young people but it also acted as a charitable centre where values of love and concern towards one another were taught.

Promotion of Cleanliness and Discipline:

Keeping the village surroundings neat and clean was the responsibility of the youth dormitory who organized communal work in the village premises in order to promote cleanliness. Every member was expected to participate in the community work and failure to do so was not tolerated. Boycott by the peers was a common punishment to one who did not follow the rules of the dormitory. Youth dormitory was an institution where young people were taught about the importance of discipline in one's life. Obedience, discipline and integrity of every individual were the watchwords and the hallmark of dormitory life. All the boys, irrespective of their family status, were equally subjected to the authority of the Khangchiu. They were taught to respect Liangmai customs by behaving in a disciplined and orderly manner acceptable to the Liangmai traditional society. Youth dormitory was the most effective and important centre for training a youth to become a well mannered adult who has respect for others, exercises self control and knows how to control his/her anger. .

In the views of Pamei, there are human qualities which are always respected and these could be learned from the youth dormitories:

- *Chakhuang (respect)*: It is the respect a man gives to someone older to him. It is his gallantry and stoicism when he sacrifices his needs and interests for the well-being of the weaker ones and the elderly:-who speaks, eats and drink first and walks in front of him. Members in a dormitory are taught to be chivalrous towards women and kind towards the elderly (for example, carrying the load which an elderly is trying to carry himself). Those without *chakhuang* are considered coarse and uncultured.
- *Akhebo (guarding)*: The Liangmai village is an independent, egalitarian and classless community. Very often there were raids and inter-village feuds. Therefore, the village as a rule kept village sentinels, especially after the harvest to protect and keep vigil. According to the size and number of the *khangchiu*, young men were deployed in turns and shifts during the day and night. After the evening meal, they gathered in their respective *Khangchiu*. They split themselves up into group/s according to the size of the village. They patrol the entire length of the village crossing each other though out the night. They sing to keep themselves awake and to let the resting villagers know that they are secure and there is no danger. They called those songs as “*Kiluang pad bo lui* or *Akhebo lui*”. When the last cock crows they sing:

Maruinazo khuangtalou

Naleng kaban pite

Iniu khuangniza khuangomakge

Tingbanglamsou maruireng kadibouniu khuangchiu kakge

(O! Rooster! Crow no more/ I'll give you grains/ I am not crowing at my own will/ I am only singing back to the big rooster in the east). (2001:32).

By studying the role of dormitory system in the life of the Liangmai, one can say that this was an important institution for the Liangmai because the overall function of the dormitory was closely interlocked with the cultural, social, moral, economic and religious life of traditional Liangmai society. It was directly or indirectly related to the welfare of their community. It was the cradle of the social and cultural life of the Liangmai.

As Pongener opines that, the youth dormitory, “was the leading traditional institution of learning and the foundation of Naga culture. Therefore, it would be naive to believe or say that Nagas received no education prior to their contact with the western missionaries or before the introduction of modern education. Naga societies, though without a formal educational system, regarded education as operative at all stages of human life and very much in the interest of the cohesion of village communities” (2011:39). As noted earlier, the traditional youth dormitory system provides a kind of education which was beneficial and relevant for the Liangmai. In the absence of writing and documentation, folk tales, folk songs and folk dances remained the sole links between the past the present. The teaching and learning activities in the dormitory was carried out by transmitting the lessons orally from elder to the younger generation. Thus, the oral traditions were kept alive in dormitory from generation to generation. Their folk songs and tales contain the whole ethos of their culture and its traditions. That is why; all the members in the dormitory were required to be attentive in learning their folklore which was considered necessary to maintain the ethnic identity of the community. Regarding religion, Pamei opines that before the advent of Christianity the Liangmai had a common belief system defined as “primal religion” (2001:30). They also believed in demons and spirits. Their lives were dominated by the demands of the superstitions of animistic worship. Every tree, river, stream, hill, rock and lake has its resident spirit. They offer sacrifices and performed rituals to propitiate them. They offer sacrifices to appease the gods and the spirits that lived there. In the view of Dongre, youth dormitory “is a social temple, the centre of village-life, from which radiate many types of healthful and creative activity” (11). The Liangmai regarded *Khangchiu* as sacred and they

have a code of conduct and everyone is expected to must abide by it. The Liangmai are a deeply religious people. They pray to god, the Creator for his blessings for peace, well being, bountiful harvest and general prosperity and at the same time, they do not forget to thank him for all the blessings that he has showered upon them. The youth dormitory in the life of the Liangmai plays multiple roles during feast and festivals, rituals and any ceremonial gathering. Politically, Liangmai maintained their own village system and had autonomy in political affairs. There was no higher court than the traditional village council called *Apai*, which continues to exist despite the introduction of modern political bodies instituted by the Constitution of India. *Apai* was the highest political office of the Liangmai and exercised sole authority towards the welfare of the village as well as towards the Khangchiu. Liangmai were a self-sufficient society; they depended on agriculture and to some extent on cattle rearing, hunting and fishing. The Liangmai are a musical lot. They have a rich collection of songs. All those songs were learned from the members of the youth dormitories who were trained by the elders of the community. Their life was well marked by various feasts and festivals which were normally accompanied by folk songs and dance. When the khangchiu are planning to organize a feast call *Matui*, its members have to earn or work for money in order to host the feast. Firstly, the members of khangchiu need to ask permission from the *Apai* (village council) by offering rice beer to them. The members of Khangchui were bound to obey the advice of the village council. *Matui* is a festival of a particular khangchiu in which they give feast to all the villagers and the feast mainly comprises of food, rice beer and meat. Liangmai traditions are rich in folk music and by nature the people were lovers of folk songs. Singing of folk songs was a norm and an integral part of the Liangmai society and it was regarded as an authentic and authoritative medium of communication for the Liangmai with its own historical and cultural importance. Their folk songs contain the historical background, the community, the village and the clan. Besides songs, they too have varieties of dances which were accompanied by songs. Youth dormitories were not only the training grounds to learn tradition music, but were also the upholders of the music tradition which passed from one generation to the next.

The introduction of Christianity has brought about changes in different spheres of Liangmai society. On the one hand, spread of education among the Liangmai is attributed to the efforts of the Christian missionaries, there is no denying the fact that their passion for Liangmai conversion to Christianity took extreme forms. The Christian missionaries, unsympathetic attitude towards Liangmai culture, had far-reaching ramifications in their impact upon the Liangmai culture and heightened the division of their social unit. Differences arose between converts and non converts and the missionaries, many, at times played the game of divide and rule. Villages were broken, relatives were cut off, and families were broken. In many case, the converts were turned out from the village and even deprived of their rights. As Christians were separated from the non-Christian, the former had less opportunity to join in the customary and traditional functions or festivals of the Liangmai. Their ethnic culture was disrespected. As Elwin states that, folk songs and dances was discouraged by the missionaries for several reasons, primarily due to the fear that the Liangmai would be encouraged and inspired to go for human raids by singing their folk songs and dances which inspired them to go for head hunting of the enemy groups (1961:11). Further, the Christian missionaries see the folk music and dance as hindrance to the advancement of the gospel and conversion to Christianity because most of the songs and dances were associated with the spirit worship and sacrifices. They feared that immature or early convert would be tempted to return to the old practices by singing folk songs and dances. Pongener mentions that, the introduction of western hymns and restrictions made by the missionaries on singing folk songs and dances in any Christian gathering resulted in the decreasing use of folk songs in Naga society. The prohibition of the use of folk songs by the missionaries fostered such a negative attitude in the minds of the Nagas towards their own folk songs that today folk tunes are rarely employed in

Naga society (2011:68). It has been learnt that the traditional dormitory system has disappeared in recent years. Not a single dormitory was reported to be in existence in the traditional form even from the interior places of Liangmai villages. But now there is the Youth Club/Office, Students' Union office where all the activities related to the youths are performed or held. The disintegration of the dormitory system closed the avenue for the young people to learn their traditional songs, dances and folktales. The elders who were responsible to teach the young people in the dormitory could not pass on the moral lessons of their community as many of the youngsters now go to English medium schools to obtain education. If the Liangmai want to learn their culture, their tradition and beliefs, the only way to do so is to explore their traditional stories and songs which have been neglected for so long. The good things of the traditional cultural elements need to be rediscovered to keep their identity. The mistake of early missionaries was that they were in a hurry and in the process they failed to study properly and failed to appreciate the Liangmai way of life. They judged Liangmai society according to their own cultural beliefs and looked down upon the Liangmai. With the disintegration of the youth dormitory system the Liangmai are facing some challenges. The youth are at the crossroads and caught in dilemma between tradition and modernity. Factors such as globalization have brought about many changes in the life of the Liangmai. Change has been both negative as well as positive. While on one hand it is pertinent to reach out and become part of the globalised world, have access to modern education and modes of development and make a mark in this highly competitive world, on the other hand it is highly important to continue with the values upheld by the traditional institutions of one's community, values that aimed at making one a well groomed, well grounded and able member of his/her community and country at large. The ray of hope is certainly there, particularly in the form of the present Youth club and Students' Union – the mouth organ of the Liangmai youth. Efforts are going on to initiate the training of the Liangmai youth as per the traditions of the erstwhile dormitories through these Student Unions. As Pongener states that, the dignity of labour was the glorious heritage of the Nagas. Work and live was the motto for the lifestyle of *Morung* (dormitory) members. It was the duty of the elders to make sure that every member in the *Morung* was engaged in work, thus laziness was not known in Naga society (2011:138). But in the present society, many young people want to live a comfortable life but do not want to work which resulted in theft, burglary and so on. The disappearance of dormitory brings lost the dignity of labor, and so all sorts of social evils have arisen in the society. Pongener (ibid) mention that, the dimension of the spirit of hard work which was manifested in the *morung* can be transformed and utilized by the Nagas by offering seminars in tune both content and style with the taste of the young people.

Conclusion

There is a need for the Liangmai to implement a new strategy by organising seminar and workshop or teaching music and dance which was their essential cultural elements. By losing their folk songs and dances, they are losing even their dress and ornaments because every feast, festivals and social gathering and the status in their traditional society is related to dress and ornaments. Implementation of those elements will help the Liangmai to appreciate their culture and will create a sense of identity and to understand history of their own. The youth club or Student leaders can help by organising training sessions in making handicrafts which will help the community preserve the beauty of their culture in multifaceted forms of its traditional arts and crafts. Youth dormitories once absorbed the whole youth of a Liangmai society, i.e., the total potential work force and future generation of the society. But Liangmai people have faced tremendous pressure from external forces on their entire socio-cultural life. The youth dormitories are consequently fast disappearing. In his paper, *Declining Youth Dormitory: A Case of Culture Change among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh*, Sonowal quote that, "reports of several scholars, e.g.

Haimendorf, Roy Burman, Majumdar show that the youth dormitories in North East India have been replaced by modern youth clubs and student's unions among many tribes. It is also found that in North East India, the security forces and missionaries are largely responsible for their demolition. They also mention that though the institution of youth dormitory is disappearing, the core spirit of it is not entirely lost" (1997:307-313).

Fieldwork indicated the growing disorientation among the youths of the region as a result of the disappearance of certain traditional institutions including the youth dormitories. The people are losing their traditional art and craft and life ways as a consequence of the decline of the youth dormitory. The process of decline has been a gradual one. Changes were accepted by the people as an adaptive mechanism to the changing environment physical as well as cultural. The younger generation do not know their traditional folk songs and dances. Their songs and dances, which were their essential cultural element but they had ignored it for so long that today they even shy to performed it. Due to education and modernization, the younger generation is very unfamiliar with the traditional folk songs and dances. Moreover, exposure to western music has been transmitted to the people significantly shaping their own thoughts and ways of life. Apparently there is nothing wrong about the entry of western culture in the life of the Liangmai, but as per the responses of the Liangmai people it is conveyed that they regret the fact that their youth are gradually losing their bonds with their own roots. The revival of some cultural elements practise in dormitory like songs and dances can be implemented through educational programme and awareness through seminars, group's discussion and workshops on folk tune. Through this study we have understood that there are certain positive elements in the institution of the dormitory which the Liangmai can restore in the present. . The modern youth organizations/union can address the training of the youth in their traditional art and craft, in their music and dance. This shall not only preserve their pristine cultural heritage but also play the vital role of the socialization of the Liangmai children and adolescents in their own culture. The challenge for the Liangmai today is to live a life that which is rooted in the context of the local culture and shaped to the demands of modern living.

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