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KHANGCHIU AND ITS DECAY IN THE TRADITIONAL ZELIANGRONG SOCIETY

The Zeliangrong,¹ one of the natives of North East India belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid racial stock (Grierson, 2000:477). The population of this ethnic group is found mainly in Tamenglong District of Manipur. These people are found scattered also in the neighbouring districts of Tamenglong District, namely Churachandpur District, Senapati District, Imphal West District, Imphal East District, Thoubal District and Bishnupur District. Outside the state of Manipur, they are found settling in Nagaland in its Paren District, and Kohima District, and in Assam in its Haflong sub-division of Cachar District and Hailakandi District.

The present study has adopted interdisciplinary method, particularly the application knowledge of both history and anthropology. The data is based on the available literary and oral sources.

The dormitories of the youth, under many forms and innumerable names existed in a very wide region of the world extending from the Himalaya and the Formosa in the North to the Australia and New Zealand on the south; and from the eastern pacific and Marquesas to the west coast of Africa. Thus, the social institution is found among diverse races, now classed as distinct, such as Dravidians, Indo-Mongols, Malays, Papuans, Polynesians, Australians, and Africans. "Taken by themselves, these barracks for the unmarried are sufficiently suggestive; but when we notice that they are but one of many peculiar social customs found surviving more or less among all these races, the case is doubly noteworthy, first as evidence of former racial affinity; second as an important factor in social evaluation generally" (Peal 1892: 228).

The bachelors' house is widespread among the hill tribes of South Asia (Smith 1981:124). In India, the bachelors' dormitory is found among a large number of tribes. Like other Naga and Kuki tribes, the Zeliangrong also has the dormitory system called *Then*. Dormitory has been described as morung by the western anthropologists and it has now become universal word. *Khangchiu*, a Zeliangrong word for bachelors' dormitory has occupied a high

degree of social magnitude in traditional Zeliangrong 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. In fact, it is the life-vein of Zeliangrong social, cultural and political activities. The dormitory does meet “the education needs of the young men, the defense requirement of the village and manpower requirement to organize public works, religious ceremonies and cultural festivals including dance and music. The dormitory was perhaps evolved to meet these needs of the people” (Kamei 2004: 253). At present when these requirements are met by modern schools and government development departments, this institution obviously dies.

Regarding the origin of the *Khangchiu* institution, there are two probable theories; one is that in ancient time it was a common affair among the tribal people to raid another tribal people for some factors. This led to inter-tribal feuds endangering the peaceful living of the common people. More dangerous than this cruel/barbaric act was an inter-clan feud which commonly happened among the tribes for want of supremacy over the other. Therefore, killing of an enemy became a lawful deed among them. In other words, one who brought home the head of an enemy (head hunting) 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 and wild animals. To face such possible attack, a collective action with prompt move was more desirable. This could be done when all the adult members of a village slept in one place. Hence, the *Khangchiu* institution originated. Secondly, when population was small, the entire village used to live together in one big house as an enlarged family because: (a) traditionally, a Zeliangrong village was located on top of the hill and had shortage of flat land enough for the building of houses. They, therefore, accommodated the entire village to live in, and (b) there they lived together for fear of attack from another village and wild animals.

In the opinion of T.C. Hodson, dormitories are a survival of communal houses which were the first stage in the development of homes when the whole village lived together (1996:75). J. Shakespeare suggests that the bachelors’ dormitory was designed to prevent incest (Hodson 1996:75). “It was instituted to save children from witnessing the primal scene and from being embarrassment from their parents” is the view of Elwin Verrier (1968:124). According to Zeliangrong belief, the male’s dormitory was an adaptation from the hoary past when, men and gods attended the house of the mythical God *Tingpurengsonnang* who was the patriarch of the dormitory. Men adopted God’s institution.

The origin of *Khangchiu* may be traced from China where Communal Houses were found among the tribes who dominantly lived in the South western

region. Besides the communal houses, bachelor's house was also maintained which was quite different from those of the communal houses. In the communal house an entire village lived together, whereas in the bachelor's house only adult members of the village lived (Leob and Broek 1947). It may be assumed that the dormitory of bachelors was brought down by the ethnic groups who migrated to the different parts of Southeast Asia including North East India where various ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples are found inhabiting. It was found mainly among the patrilineal ethnic groups and became a practice however, even among the matrilineal Indonesians. From the above statement, we therefore, may presume that the Zeliangrong people had brought the *Khangchiu* down from China many centuries ago. This also suggests the original home of the Zeliangrong.

Khangchiu is an inseparable socio-cultural institution of the Zeliangrong. All the boys who attained the age of puberty become the members of *Khangchiu* and it is shameful for boys to sleep with their parents when they reach years of understanding. It is compulsory for all the boys and male members to join it. It is a three tier institution in which there are three different categories, namely *Gaana* (*Shingkhang*), unmarried boys, *Gaanpi* and *Khangbon*. The *Gaana* forms the junior most of the three grades consisting of only unmarried young men. The next higher grade is *Gaanpi*, the members of which are of two different grades – senior and junior. The senior grade is known as *Ganpi-Kaijipmei* where *Kaijipmei* sleeps in his house and the junior-grade is called *Gaanpi-Chaphongmei*. The junior is usually un-married one and he represents the senior most of the unmarried young group, *Gaan*. *Gaanpi-Kaijipmei* consists of married men only. The next higher grade-*Khangbon* is the highest grade. Generally the members of this grade are all middle-aged men. According to customs and traditions, the *Khangbons* are the head of the organization of *Khangchiu*. They decide the affairs of the dormitory. Peace and prosperity of the *Khangchiu*, therefore, depends entirely on the ability, efficiency and leadership of the *Khangbons*. The bachelor's dormitory is not a "rival or parallel administrative unit of a village, but an institution within the village unit. A morung (*Khangchiu*) may aptly be called a microcosm of the village and like the village it has its own council" (Horam 1975:69). Unlike some other Naga and Kuki tribes, *Khangchiu* is housed in a particular house usually with a rich and influential owner who has a big house. It is a public spirited act to offer his house as the *Khangchiu*. In the Naga villages, "all unmarried young men live together in a great bachelor's hall or barrack-hut called morung, away from the married quarters and usually situated at the gate of the stockaded village, the defense of which specially devolved on them." (Hutchinson ed. 1984: 1180). As a general rule, this house is taboo to women. In the *Khangchiu*, no favoritism and discrimination is permitted. Every person rich or poor, high or low is treated equally. Differentiation on the basis of wealth and family position is frowned upon and formation of faction or group is not allowed. The primary aim of all such

organization is to form a classless society having unity and brotherhood (Anand 1967: 89).

The presence of large wooden gongs or log drums is another remarkable feature of the morung. In the past, it was used for announcing and celebration of victory, head-hunting, village feasts, funeral of men of eminence, sun and moon eclipses etc. During each of such occasion, these drums are beaten by a team of young men using drum-bells in a rhythm special to a particular occasion. These drums with an average dimension of thirty feet length and about twelve feet girth are made from the trunk of a tree which is hollowed out with a dao and axe and then singed with fire until a wall of about five centimeters thickness remained. The youth living in morung entrusted with the duty of guarding the village beat it to raise an alarm for fire, or sighting a tiger in the neighbourhood of the village. Though its primary function is that of a drum, it is treated with reverence almost like an idol. Sometimes, the blood of the animals sacrificed in the morung is smeared on it with chant. Among Chang, Yimchunger and Sangtam Nagas such drums are kept in morung (Rizvi & Roy 2010: 43-44). But, such long drum is not found among the Nagas of Manipur; they use only small drums.

Khangchiu is one common and very important institution of the Zeliangrong. It provides as a communal sleeping hall for the boys and other members of the dormitory. In the dormitory, all kinds of traditional practices and activities such as warfare and the art of fighting by the use of weapons, dance, music, and song are imparted to its young boys (Makuga 1994:23). They also get training in the art of handicraft like basket making, wooden craft, carpentry, bamboo, cane and other embroidery works (Gonmei. 1980:15). According to Asoso Yonuo, "They learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies living in it." (1974: 11). They act not only as a guard house for the defense of the village, but also protect the village in times of accidents, incidents, natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, draught, sickness, epidemic, etc. (Makuga 1994: 23) Other social services extended by *Khangchiu* involve constructing paths, and clean ponds in and around the village. The dormitory also acts as a centre of cultural activities. The festivals and ceremonies of the village or individual are organized by the *Khangchiu*. It renders services for the individual's households or village council during the time of marriage and other social occasions. The youths of the dormitory take part in fishing, house building, hunting, and in the fields at the time of sowing seeds and harvesting (Rao 1976: 137). The boys used to spend their time in the dormitory for doing different types of activities. Fire is burning (*Mhaipui Hana*) in the *Khangchiu* all the hours of the day and night and the supply of fuel for the hearth is the responsibility of all the junior boys. They all sit around the fire and learn everything mentioned above from their senior members. They return to their houses only for taking foods or whenever they fall seriously ill (Bower 1986: 82).

A person, who becomes the member of the *Khangchiu*, refines his culture; rectifies his manner; changes his attitude; polishes his code of conduct; develops his conscience; nurtures his thought and action; realizes his duties and responsibilities and later becomes a successful man in the society. A product of this institute becomes a worthy husband, leads a happy and prosperous life; brings up his children in the discipline of his institute and his generation will continue to shine in the same trend he follows. The institution of *Khangchiu* is what the proverb says, "Strike the iron, while it is hot." A boy goes to the *Khangchiu* while he is still young, where he moulds all that is necessary that a man is required to do during his life time. It indicates that *Khangchiu* takes the place of his parents to bring him up in the discipline of the civic society. It is indeed shouldered the burdens of his father, lessen the stress of his mother and together it builds the healthy society. V.K. Anand writes, "The morung plays vital role in preparing younger generations for posts in the village council. The morung is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and meeting place for village elders. It is as well the centre for social, religious and political activities. In short, it is the fulcrum of the village democracies" (1967: 89-90).

A *Khangchiu* is also a sanctuary and a criminal, whether of that village or a fugitive from another village cannot be touched while in the *Khangchiu* until the case against him is discussed and settled in the village council (*Pei*). J. P. Mills says, even a man "commits murder, the avengers, in the fury of the moment, cannot pursue him into a 'morung.' The men of the 'Khel' to which the 'morung' belongs must protect him at all costs till the case against him has been discussed and calm action decided on. Nor may any crime be committed in a 'morung'. Property can be left lying about in one with absolute safety, for to steal is tabu. Any stranger, too, entering a 'morung' must be treated politely, and can on no account be refused a night's shelter. High words and abuse are forbidden" (Mills 1980: 51-52). The *Khangchiu* is like any other institution, which has its own set of rules, and regulations and no outsiders can interfere in its administration. The one who violates the rules of the *Khangchiu* is liable to punishment like other villagers for breaking traditional or customary laws. Sometimes, as punishment one may be expelled from the dormitory for certain period of time depending on his offences and during which he is not allowed to participate in the socio-cultural activities of the village.

However, in spite of such a healthy institution, *Khangchiu* could not survive when Christianity penetrated in North East India and did invade the very core of the Naga social institutions. The Christian missionaries directly attacked the institution by forbidding the Baptist boys to sleep in the *Khangchiu*, and they further advocated that the *Khangchiu* is a heathen institution. The conservative Zeliangrongs blamed the Christian missionaries for the impairment of the *Khangchiu*, but the Mission denied the fact that there are many unconverted villages; however those villages also have given

up the institution of dormitory. The Christian missionaries alone were not held responsible for the disintegration of the *Khangchiu*, but the introduction of formal education and its impact led to the fall of *Khangchiu* in the non-Christian villages. Of the forces, this was the most powerful one because parents were prepared to send their children to school where the children would gain more. They felt they could control their children better at home than what the *Khangchiu* could provide. All these factors lead to the disintegration of *Khangchiu* institution. About the decay of *Khangchiu*, J. P. Mills writes: "Decaying 'morungs' mean a decaying village and well-used, well-kept 'morungs' a vigorous community. It is in the 'morung' that the old men tell of the great deeds of the past, and the coming generation is taught to carry on the old traditions in future. When the past is no longer gloried in and the future seems dark and uncertain, the 'morungs' fall into decay."

The fall of the *Khangchiu* institution started when the Christian missionaries entered into the Zeliangrong territory in the first half of 20th century. Probably, the early Christian missionaries were confused regarding the religion and cultural values. Therefore, they considered the institution of the *Khangchiu*, which is a cultural centre, as heathen institution and the use of this institution is against the doctrine and rules of Christianity. Hence, they uprooted the *Khangchiu* institution with the conversion of the traditional faith into Christianity; for fear that this institution would play against their religion (Nshonga 2009:83). About the fall of *Khangchiu*, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf says, "Gone are the days, perhaps never to return". The proper functioning of the *Khangchiu* has gone, but one cannot outrightly conclude that the system has been totally died out from the present traditional Zeliangrong society (1976: 46). It still exists, but it functions only during festivals (Kumar 1998: 2458).

NOTE

1. The Zeliangrong is the acronym of the *Zemei*, *Liangmai* and *Rongmei* who live in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. *Rongmei* is also known by the name Kabui.

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