

Religion of the Kharam Tribe of Manipur

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This paper is to highlight the religious beliefs in brief of one of the smallest tribes of Manipur, called Kharam, based on their tradition, folk tales and the actual practices continuing to this day.

The Kharams are one of the earliest tribes but an unrecognised scheduled tribe of Manipur. They live only in the Senapati District of state at a distance of about 14 to 37 kms. from Imphal. Their population is 1087 living in five villages, namely, Kharam Pallen, Laikot, Laikot Phaijol, Tuiseiphai and Kharam Tampak. Of these, 128 are non-christian. Their literacy rate is very low with 15 matriculates (all males), no graduate and 9 government employees.

They are administered by the traditional village council, called *Kataar*, meaning elders, with *Kholakpa* as its chief or head. There is no hereditary system. *Kholakpa* is the overall head in all aspects of life.

Their society is divided into seven exogamous clans, namely, Saichal, Saiphu, Jeiche, Rakhou, Ranglaa, Mariem and Seilon. Marriage within the clan is prohibited. There are different organisations based on sex, clan, age and marital status. These are (a) *Kataar* group or village council (sex and marital status), (b) *Lomt-taang* (sex), (c) *Kalen* (sex and clan), (d) *Lapu* (sex and age), (e) *Lapi* (sex and age), (f) *Nungak rother* (marital status). Of these, the *Kataar* is the highest body. Anything relating to custom is administered by this group. Other than this, the Village Authority, administers under a chairman who is usually the *Kholakpa* of the village. The rest of the organisations are subordinate to the *Kataar* group.

They are agriculturists, practising shifting and permanent cultivation in some cases. All the rituals and festivals are annually performed especially in Kharam Pallen, the oldest and highest village where the traditional beliefs are more than in other villages.

Religion

The Kharams believe in a Supreme being called *Pathen* as well as in many spirits or deities. *Pathen* comes from *Pa* meaning 'father' and *then* meaning 'creator'. It literally means 'Creator of father' but it means the creator of human race. He is believed to be in heaven which is in the sky. He is kind, good, benevolent, holy, mighty and all-knowing too. It is a spirit in a human form. According to some, he has wife and a son. The wife is believed to be the most beautiful and more valuable than diamond. She is the queen or mistress of the flowers which are her servants. No sacrifice is offered to her or in her honour.

The son of Pathen, they believe, is very strong, sincere, truthful and keeps his promise. He is worshipped and invoked upon when a person suffers from fits or madness by offering to him any of the animals such as pigs, buffaloes, goats, mithun etc. He is known as *Pumkan*, meaning 'saviour of all'.

Besides Pathen, the Kharams believe in the existence of many spirits or deities commonly called *Raikho* which are mostly evil ones. All the harm, evils, sicknesses, deaths etc. are believed to be caused by these spirits or deities. They are believed to be everywhere taking charge of certain specific places or areas. Thus they are known as the deities of the village - east, west, north, south, the mountains, the hills, the water, the fire, etc.

Again, besides the above, they also believe in *Pakhangba* called *Bagnpa*. This belief originated from King Khagemba (1587-1652) who, the Kharams say, stayed in their village during a war.

The Kharams believe that every human being has a soul which never dies even after death. They believe that all the animals also have souls but as soon as they die, their souls also die. However, the souls of the animals which are used for religious purposes continue to live after their death.

They believe that a soul suffers or enjoys after death according to the deeds and actions done during one's life on earth. It is said that a soul goes to *Kathikho* meaning, 'village of the dead', where *Aarme* or *Khuisem* (a couple) passes judgement and not by Pathen. *Aame* passes judgement on the men and those on the women by *Khuisem*. According to one's deeds and actions, one is sent to *Neitaangnu* (heaven) or *Khurem Khuloi* (hell) or is retained at *Kathikho* where all the souls which are neither very good nor very bad are made to live. A soul of a very bad person suffers at *Khupem Khuloi*. It is believed that those who die of unnatural death are made to carry the luggage of the spirits or deities, whereas the latter carry about the souls of children who die before the age of three. When it thunders the Kharams believe that the souls of the children go ahead of the thunder to announce that they are thirsty and need water. Thus as soon as one hears the thunder water is poured near the house.

Religious Rites

There are different kinds of rites performed for the individuals and whole village. Those for individuals start from birth and ends after death. Those for the whole village are performed throughout the year. The *Kholakpa* or the chief, the village priest- *Kathem* and the relatives of one's mother perform these sacrifices or the rites.

As soon as a child is born, a name is given to it. It is believed that the evil spirits also wait to name it and if they give the name to the child before the human beings do, the child will have a short span of life. Then on the same or within a few days of its birth, a village priest offers an egg, rice, cotton and bits or the ancient coin to the village deity called *Khobie* at *Laamtol* ² along with rice-

beer. It is called *Inpuia*. The articles are offered to the deity as its food. Then on the fourth (for a girl) and the fifth (for a boy) day of its birth *Neitolsok* rite is performed by one of the male relatives of the child's mother. He makes a bow and an arrow and with cotton and a leaf (*Khaam*) tied to the former, it is hung over the bed of the parents to ward off the evil spirits. The child is accepted to the human society by tying a black thread at the wrist, making it wear a necklace of banana seeds and offering rice-beer to *Pathen*.

When one is married, the future is predicted with the help of a fowl by observing its legs as it dies. It is called *Aar ke ka-en*. Rice beer is also offered to *Pethen* and it is performed by the *Kholakpa*. When one dies the male relatives of one's mother play a great role digging the grave and leading the procession to the cemetery.

The rites pertaining to the village are performed annually. Some are performed at *Laamtol*, some at or outside the village gate and one at the residence of the *kholakpa*. The village priest and the *Kholakpa* play the main role in these rites.

The rites performed at *Laamtol* are *Khobiek Khodoi*, *Khong in ringtieng*, *Chemchoiteng*, *Koitei choiteng* etc. In all these, the blood of the pigs is offered and are killed with the help of a sharp bamboo by a *Taangwa*, the lowest post holder in the village administrative machinery. In the case of the first two, the sacrifice is offered to the village deity *Khobiek* while the latter two are to *Pakhangba* or *Baongpa*. In the case of *Khobiek Khodoi*, a man from *Saichal* clan plays the main role while in the other cases the village *Kholakpa* says the sacrificial prayers. Before any rite or sacrifice is to be performed at *Laamtol*, a person from *Saichal* clan cleans the spot with the help of four different leaves.

Khobiek khodoi is performed before sowing the seeds or after harvest for the welfare of the village. *Khong in ringtieng* is performed before the annual festivals to the village deity after the vest. So that there may be no harm done to the people on using the drums which have so far been left unused.

The origin of the *Chemchoiteng* goes to king *Khagemba* (1597-1652). The *Kharams* say that once king *Khagemba* stayed in their village and commanded them to construct a house - *Roisaang* near *Laamtol*. He told them to offer *Sareng* (special fish) to *Pakhangba* before using the metallic instruments. Thus *Chemchoiteng* rite was performed by offering a pig (as the fish was not available) before leaving the *jhum* sites and another rite - *Koitei choiteng* before harvest.

There is another rite called *Roisaang kalo*, performed following the construction of a new *Roisaang*. Pigs are sacrificed to the *Roisaang* deity (A *taangwa* makes fire every morning inside this *Roisaang* for the deity). Thus the sacrifices are offered at *Laamtol* to deities, *Khobiek* and *Pakhangba*.

Then there are other religious rites for the whole village performed by the village *Kholakpa* and the priest.

In December or January the *Kharams* perform *Meithal Kaap* festival. On this day, under the instruction of the *Kataar* group, *Ratha roina* meaning gathering and bringing of the souls of the

people from the jhum fields is performed. Then the evil spirit is chased out of the village after the shooting of the burning arrows at the village gates. The ash at the village gate is examined to find out any foot-print which is believed to be the foot-print of the evil spirit. Then the future conditions and the jhum sites for cultivation are known with the help of bamboos. After the burning of the jhum sites *Kaannei mindai* rite is performed to the god of fire-to cleanse the sin of fire which might have caused many deaths during burning. It is performed at the village gate by offering a pig.

There is a festival called *Saratha Kakoi* i.e. calling upon the goddess of paddy - *Sapi*. It is performed by Kholakpa at his residence on behalf of his people after the sowing of seeds is over. There is a great merry-making in eating, drinking and singing. The Kholakpa calls upon the paddy of all the sides of the village, the paddy eaten by animals, paddy which have been burnt or carried by water etc. to increase the yield in the ensuing harvest.

Besides these, there are other rituals or rites performed whenever there is some epidemic in or around the village neighbourhood. Animals such as fowls, dogs, pigs etc. can be offered to the deity which is believed to have caused the disease. Whenever such rite is performed, the intestines of the animal killed are hung at the village-gate to prevent the evil spirit from entering the village. Whatever is killed, must be eaten there and should not be taken to the village.

When a person gets sick, a village priest is consulted and accordingly rituals are performed to the evil spirits which are believed to be the cause of the disease by offering any animal.

There is another method of finding out one's future health with the help of split bamboos. If the sick person is to get well, the bamboos expand but if not, they come closer to each other. Thus whether the sick person will recover or not is found out.

The Kharams do not build any house where Pathen can be worshipped. However, some clans, namely, Raangla, Saiphu, Jaiche, and Mariem have alters in their respective houses while others construct it whenever the necessity arises. It was originally called *Kasermun*. 'Kaser' means prohibit or sacred and 'mun' means place. It means, it is a sacred place. It is called *Kasor*. It is an alter where sacrificial offering is made to the God of the ancestors - Pathen. It is usually kept where there is responsible person such as a married man. When he dies, the whole *Kasor* is removed and buried along with the body. Animals such as fowls, pigs, buffaloes, mithun etc. can be offered. Fresh rice-beer is compulsorily offered. The sacrifice must be offered only for one person by the head of the family. If a fowl is offered, the meat is not given to the girls who are of marriageable age. No sacrifice is offered for such girls but as soon as they get married, such ritual is performed at their husband's house.

Whenever food and drink are taken, they are always offered to Pathen first. When sacrifices are offered to the deities, Pathen is also given an offering on the right side. Again, whenever Pathen is worshipped and offered a sacrifice, some part of it is also offered

to the deities but on the left side. Thus right side is meant for Pathen and left is for the evil spirits. Whenever animals are sacrificed either to Pathen or to other deities, a genna is observed in the village. This observation is also followed when a tiger is killed.

Conclusion

Beliefs in the existence of Pathen, Rakho, a soul and a reward after death are the main guiding principles in the traditional lives of the Kharams. However, the traditional believers have decreased in number to a great extent and it may not be far off when such beliefs and practices will disappear altogether.

Notes & References

*This paper is the outcome of the primary data on the Kharam tribe of Manipur, an assigned tribe for research, Centre for Tribal Studies, Manipur University.

1. This is based on a folk tale "Kungori".
2. It is a place where religious as well as cultural activities are performed.