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“Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi”: The Annual Festival as a Site of Re-asserting Ethnic Identity

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Abstract:

Festival is one of the significant aspects in human history. Every community celebrates their own festivals with great pomp and show. “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” is the annual festival of the Singphos. This paper intends to identify the said festival as a site of re-asserting ethnic identity of Singphos, especially focusing on how it serves as a place of meeting with the “relatives” from their place of origin and how the event performance inter-related with drawing the lines of being distinct and different. In its overall analysis, the paper sums up that being a site of relating with the origin, drawing the lines of being distinctive, and at the same time being a site of promotion of that distinctive ethnicity, the festival has a great importance in social mobility of Singphos in the current setting. The data collected for the study includes interviews with participants of the festival and a collection of promotional materials (invitations, advertisements, news release and web materials etc.).

Keywords: Festival, Shapawng Yawng Manau, Singpho, Identity

1. Introduction

Festivals remained as an important part of every group of people since time immemorial. According to Robert Jerome Smith, “most, if not, of the societies of the world periodically set aside portions of time for celebration. These are moments of special significance to the group or community. They may be moments of transitions, from one season to another or from one stage of life to another; they may be anniversaries of historical events, of the legendary day of the birth or death of a hero or a god; or symbolic re-enactments of events in the life of a religious leader or the founder of a society. They may be moments set aside to honour some living person or some group, or occasions for communal work, with feasting and play added. These recurring moments of special significance, with the celebrations that fill them, are called festivals.....” (Smith, 159-1972). The objectives, functions and the overall structure of festivals vary due to diverse ethnic group or communities. The people throughout the world celebrate their own distinct festivals and exhibit their culture comprising dance, music, costume, rituals etc. R.J Smith rightly opines that “the festival is often the only occasion of the year in which the inhabitants of a region wears their traditional dress....include the decorating and carrying in procession of an image.....a feast and drink”(ibid,168-1972).

The tribal communities of Northeast India are blessed with rich cultural heritage. Festivals associated with various aspects of their life are celebrated with dance and music. The Singpho tribe is a Mongoloid stock that is mainly found in the upper part of the Tinsukia district of Assam. Apart from Tinsukia district they are also found in the Sivasagar district of Assam. The Singpho tribe has a total population of 6442 in Assam according to official source of Margherita Development Block, 2001 census. Arunachal Pradesh is the land of the dawn lit mountains and home for different scheduled tribes who are having their own language and cultural identities. Singpho tribe is one of the major scheduled tribe with distinct socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Arunachal Pradesh. They are mainly distributed in the Changlang district and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The 1991 census placed the Singpho population at 3575 in Arunachal Pradesh. Though an important tribe of the north-east, not much study and research has been undertaken on the Singphos. The Singphos are facing many social, economic and demographic problems. The rate of social mobility is not very high, education and health condition is not satisfactory, demographically they are scattered, they have a low birth rate compared to other tribes of north-east. Moreover, economically their condition is not sound. Traditionally, the Singphos depend on forest resources and agriculture for their livelihood.

The Singpho/Jingpho people of Arunachal Pradesh inhabit in the district of Lohit and Changlang district and the Kachin state of Burma and Dehong of Yunnan province of China. The Singphos, as mentioned by Dr. P.C Dutta, live in twenty four villages scattered in Changlang and Lohit district (Dutta, 1-1990). The word Singpho means “man”. Dr. P.C Dutta writes, “The real name of the tribe as Edward Gait has mentioned is Khakhyens by which name they are known in their original home in Hukong valley, between chindwin river in Burma and the Patkai hills” (cited by Dutta, 1-1990). Like any other tribe, the Singphos are divided into

a number of clans. According to P.T Nair, “The Singphos are divided into a number of clans, each under a chief or Gam. Each Gam maintains some sort of independence and they seldom unite, unless it is to punish some designing chief...the principal gams are the Beesa, Duffa, Luttao, Luttora, Tesari, Mirip, Lophae, Lutong and Magrong. They are divided into four classes: Shangai, Myung, Lubrang and Mirip” (Nair, 89-1985). Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. And their religion is a peculiar blend of Buddhism and their traditional religion. Apart from worshiping Lord Buddha, they worship some spirits. The important spirits as mentioned by P.T Nair are, “...the Mu Nat (the spirit above), Ga Nat (spirit below) and the household Nat or Penate” (ibid, 92-1985). Their traditional and Buddhist priests are known as Dimbasa and Chowsra respectively. The Singphos observe a number of religious festivals and ceremonies tied to the lunar calendar of Buddhism. These festivals are Sangken, poi puthikam, Nawa sang, Kathing Poi, and Maiko chimphai. Sangken is a New Year festival celebrated with religious zeal. It is celebrated in the fifth month of the Buddhist calendar, which falls in April. In this festival, otherwise known as water festival, the image of Lord Buddha is brought out and kept in a small makeshift house built by the villagers and washed ceremoniously with great devotion. The Poi-Puthikam or Buddha Jayanti festival is celebrated in the month of May. The Nawa Sang festival is observed in the beginning of the rainy season on a full moon day when the villages donate sweets, cake and other food items and other required articles for the monks for their day to day life. The Kathing Poi is observed on the full moon day of October-November, when robes for Lord Buddha and monks are woven, dyed and offered by the womenfolk, followed by a mass prayer and a community feast. Maiko Chimphai is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of February, when the youths of the village prepare a fire wood, locally called Maiko Chumphai, and in the early morning next day, the Maiko is set to fire, which is followed by a feast (Tripathy and Dutta, 2005).

However, the most colourful and enjoyable festival of the Singphos is “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi”. Shapawng Yawng is believed to be the forefather of the Singphos, who was the sixth son in order of birth according to the naming custom of the Singphos. Manau Poi means the festival of dance. Prayers in form of rituals for peace, prosperity and well-being of all are performed during the festival. Dance (manau) being the core of the festival, is the vital aspect through which people express their joy. The said festival testifies Singphos’ rich cultural heritage. This festival enriched the cultural ties among all the Singpho communities residing in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and abroad. It strengthened the unity and integrity of the Singpho community. This paper is intended to study the said festival as a site of re-asserting ethnic identity of Singphos, especially focusing on how it serves as a place of meeting with the Singphos residing in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and abroad, from their place of origin and how the event performance inter-related with drawing the lines of being distinct and different. In its overall analysis, the paper sums up that being a site of relating with the origin, drawing the lines of being distinctive, and at the same time being a site of promotion of that distinctive ethnicity, the festival has a great importance in social mobility of Singphos in the current setting. The data are collected through interviews, printed source and websites.

2. Findings and Discussions

“Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” is a colourful festival of the Singphos. This festival was celebrated for the first time in the year 1985 at Miao in Changlang District in Arunachal Pradesh. Since then, every year they celebrate this festival with great pomp and show under the banner of “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi”. The idea of framing social awareness within Singpho Society was drafted in the year 1984, during winter season and came into force in reality in 1985, in the name of remembering the progenitor-Shapawng Yawng. It was a proposal to celebrate it annually under the banner, “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” as a Symbolic Singpho festival. N.Jawja says that the discussion was held at the premises of Bordumsa club, which was attended by all the Singpho leaders, students and upcoming intellectual personalities. Almost all senior citizens, well wishers and other eminent speakers have expressed their views to form an organisation in the name of Singpho development society, as to play main role for social upliftment in all directions (30th Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi, 2014 Singpho Ethno Cultural festival).

The observance of this festival till date has indeed proved fruitful to certain limit towards the community. “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” has been approved and registered by the government of Arunachal Pradesh, in the list of local Holidays and a permanent date and day is fixed on 14th of February every year as festival day of Singpho community. Here is a list of Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi celebrated from 1985-2014:

Year	Venue	State
1985	Miao	Arunachal Pradesh
1986	Miao	Arunachal pradesh
1987	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
1988	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
1989	N-phum	Arunachal pradesh

Year	Venue	State
1990	N-phum	Arunachal pradesh
1991	Payong	Arunachal pradesh
1992	Payong	Arunachal pradesh
1993	N-nau	Arunachal pradesh
1994	N-them	Assam
1995	N-them	Assam
1996	Bisa	Assam
1997	Miao	Arunachal pradesh
1998	Bordumsa	Arunachal praesh
1999	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2000	Margherita	Assam
2001	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2002	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2003	Lekhapani	Assam
2004	Miao	Arunachal pradesh
2005	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2006	Ketetong	Assam
2007	N-nau	Arunachal pradesh
2008	Miao	Arunachal pradesh
2009	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2010	Bordumsa	Arunachal pradesh
2011	Bordumsa	Arunachal Pradesh
2012	Namgo	Arunachal Pradesh
2013	Miao	Arunachal Pradesh
2014	Bordumsa	Arunachal Pradesh

Table 1

According to the mythology of the Singphos, dance (manau) originated from the wild birds. The dance (manau) took birth among the human beings under the leadership of Ma Ding Yau (Mang Ding Yau). He learned the dancing steps from the activities of the birds. The Manau of the Singphos are of many types:

- Sut Manau: This dance is performed in the time of prosperity where many friends and relatives are invited to share wealth and prosperity.
- Ju Manau: This dance is celebrated by the Chiefs and rich man after the funeral of elder people and the families seek blessing for their prosperity.
- Padang Manau: This celebration refers to victory over wars.
- Kumran Manau: It is a separation dance.
- Thing Ram Manau: This Manau is celebrated to resolve conflicts among relatives.
- Ningthan Manau: This dance is performed to encourage the people while they go to war holding weapons.
- Thing Htang Manau: This is celebrated by the rich man for 8 days.
- Nau Sawt Manau: This is a celebration for general enjoyment.
- Kumrun Manau: This is a dance for get together and unity.
- Thingson Manau: This dance is performed when a family shifts to a new house.

Among all these manau poi (dance festival), “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” emerged as the most significant festival among the people. Manau generally takes place in the Manau ground. At the centre of the ground, Manau pillars are erected around which people perform. The two pillars in the middle of the set represent the idea of feminine gender called Dungwi and the other pillars beside each of the female pillars represent male pillars called Dungla. The rest of the shorter pillars are called Dung Noi (hanging pillars). At the foundation of these pillars there is a long plank fixed across the pillars from side to side called Dung Bye or Dung Tawn. One end of this plank is curved into the shape of the head of the hornbill and the other end is the tail. There are numbers of symbolic designs curved around the whole set.

The Singpho musical instruments consist of: Ching/Thong (long drum), Gong (Bao), Pi (flute) and Thongien (Konggo). “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” is started after unfolding of festival flag. The flag is emblemized with two cross swords (N’thu) encircled by Dungwi and Dungla. People begin with Gikhin Gunmding Manau which is a dance of unity. After that they start dancing all types of dances performing the actions of birds flying in peaceful manner, flying of butterflies and the movement of the fishes. On the last day Kumran Manau (separation dance) is performed as it is a day of departure. The male and female wear their traditional dress on the special occasion of Manau poi. Females decorate themselves with their traditional jewellery. The people prepare local cuisines, ethnic handlooms and display them on the venue. Exhibition stalls are organised where the community’s household items are displayed. Rendering folk songs and display of gongs also form the important activities of the festival.

All the cultures and traditions bear a true mark of identity. The cultural practice of a particular Ethnic group is its distinct identity because each and every community have diverse culture. If a culture is preserved and expressed in some important events it becomes an Identity marker of that ethnic group. “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” is an important site of re-asserting Ethnic Identity. N.J Miao & I.G Singpho says that Singpho have a rich cultural heritage which has faded away slowly in course of their living in the midst of blended cultures and different tribes and communities (30th Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi, 2014 Singpho Ethno Cultural festival). They felt a need of revivalism to preserve their culture. The festival turned out to be a great platform where the small community gets together in a particular place and enjoy altogether celebrating the great Manau poi exhibiting their traditions to the world. The objectives of the festival collected from the messages of dignitaries and news posted in media justifies the fact that Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi re-asserts a distinct Identity of the Singpho from the rest of the other Tribes of India in general and North eastern states in particular. The festival aims to foster and promote the values and knowledge of socio-cultural aspects of Singpho community across the globe. It is primarily organised to show the varied rich culture and customs. It is an effort to preserve and promote the age old cultural heritage of this small community. However, this festival has a unique aspect of event compared to other festival as they recreated a genre of Identity that draws a line of distinct and different from others, bringing the Singpho of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and abroad within the same “ethnic group”. One of the participants say, “It is an occasion of congregation through which, we meet our own community coming from far-flung countryside and across the country boundaries, their inhabitanancies and social geography”. The site has become a place of meeting with their Singpho brethren residing outside their geographic boundary by which a new boundary of ethnicity is drawn. Just as Ethnic boundaries are subject to contestations and change, Ethnic Identities need not be permanent. There is every possibility of new Ethnic Identities emerging and the old ones disappearing. Many such instances of changes in Identity and boundaries are visible in the North eastern region (Srikant & Ngaihte, 129-2011). The Singphos from different geographic locations are no more different from each other as “Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” facilitates them to share the same Identity. In this festival they are not recognised as Burmese or Chinese and Assamese rather they perform the Manau poi as one distinct ethnic group i.e. Singpho community.

“Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi” is a site of reimagining of the origin of Singpho community. In fact experts from Burma teach them their traditional dancing steps and moreover these are the leaders who lead the entire Singpho group gathered from different places on the ground. It also promotes their distinct ethnicity as they all perform the dance in group, wearing their traditional costume. The festival has a great importance in social mobility of Singphos in the current setting. In this globalised world people are engaged in different works and often get influenced by the globalising elements. But this manau poi gives an opportunity to every Singpho individual to gather in the manau ground to perform the dance and display their rich culture. The Singphos from Burma sale their traditional goods i.e. costumes and other items. It is believed that the traditional Singpho items of India have lost

its authenticity so people chose to purchase Burma goods. Official invitation is circulated to each and every households of the community. It brings all the people irrespective of their religion for mutual interaction bridging the communication gap.

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