

Marriage Practices of the Zou Tribe in Manipur-Continuity and Change

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ABSTRACT: *The Zou tribe is one of the recognized tribes in Manipur settling along the Indo-Myanmar border. They are the indigenous community found mainly in Chandel and Churachandpur District, Manipur. The traditional customs, practices and other related issues of this small tribe have not been explored systematically. Unfortunately, this tribe has escaped the attention of social scientists in general and sociologists in particular. The Zous like other tribal communities in the northeast India have maintained their age-old customary practices. This paper aims to discuss the traditional marriage system of the Zou tribe and its continuity and change.*

Key words: - *Zou, aaisan, neita, bride-price, Christianity, continuity, change.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of Communities and Groups has been the focus of attention of Social Anthropologists and Sociologists in the 19th century. It is particularly so in the developing societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In India also we have a great tradition of investigation into the lives and practices of numerous smaller communities living in different parts of the country. In fact even during the British rule, administrators and anthropologists provided a systematic account of society and culture of smaller Communities usually known as “Tribals” in common parlance.

Moreover, in Sociology this trend was reflected in the growing importance of ‘Village’ studies whereas in Social Anthropology it was articulated in the form of ‘Tribal’ studies. As a matter of fact, in both these disciplines the trend has been to provide a holistic picture of society within the framework of continuity and change. It is this trend which has provided a motivation to go for a preliminary enquiry into a vital component of smaller communities of Northeastern India. Thus the present inquiry aims to study the nature of Marriage Practices: Continuity and Change of a small community known as ‘Zou’ tribe [1] found mainly in the State of Manipur.

II. THE ZOU TRIBE

The Zou belongs to the Kuki-Chin-Lushai group of Mongolian race which in turn is classified by historians under Sino-Tibetan families. The Zous were recognized as Scheduled Tribes of Manipur in 1956. They are mostly concentrated in Chandel and Churachandpur District of Manipur with a total population of 24,294 (Census 2011). They are a distinct tribe having their own culture, customs, tradition, religious beliefs, traditional folklore, clan affinity, traditional dress, descent, rule of succession etc. They speak Zou dialect, which belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Kuki-Chin group [2]. They are a patriarchal society. The husband is the head of the family, a daughter moves out of her family at the time of her marriage, and children belong to the husband. The eldest son is entitled to inherit the properties of his father at the time of his father’s death: but the father has the right to distribute his properties to the other sons before he dies. In case the father dies before making any decision, his family household council in the presence of the children can distribute the properties to the children of the deceased father. On the other hand, the matter is also the prerogative of the eldest sons. Oral tradition and culture reveal that they are engaged in subsistence economy known as *Jhum* cultivation. But owing to natural migration and habits of migration (scattered) in different region or areas, the people have relaxed the rigidity of their values and traditional practices. It may be noted that their life is almost regulated according to the changes of times and values. About a century ago they were fierce head-hunters, but half a century ago they have become Christians still retaining the good qualities of their own culture and tradition. [3]

III. MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Marriage is an institution or complex of social norms that sanctions the relationships of man and women and binds them in a system of mutual obligation and rights essential to the functioning of family. It is one of the universal institutions. It is established by the human society to control and regulate the sex life of man and women. Marriage is a “rite of passage” whereby an unrelated man and woman begin their own families of procreations. Its purposes, functions and forms may differ from society to society, but it is present everywhere as an institution. [4]

The traditional culture and customary practices and other related issues of the Zou communities have not been systematically studied. The Zous like other communities in the Northeast India also have maintained their age old customary practices which they have been observing from time immemorial.

It is also pertinent to mention that the Zou youth performed a kind of traditional belief called 'Aisaan' (divination) before they get married [5, 6]. It is a kind of fate prediction in the form of 'aisaan' whether their marriage will be a success or not. There are many such kind of beliefs. Some of the common practices may be mentioned as under:

1. **Deituahsan: - Deituah** is a type of creeper with tuber, somewhat like the sweet potato. The Zou youth would dig out the tuber and hide it inside their pocket. At dusk, while carrying that tuber they would loiter in and around the village and whosoever and whatsoever they come across they would throw the tuber at the person or object. If the person happens to be an unmarried girl, she would become his wife or if the person is an already married man or woman or a boy he would be married to a girl from within their clan or if it happens to be a dog, his wife will be a girl who possessed evil spirit (*Kaunei*) and if it is a pig, his wife or husband would be a lazy person. While roaming around like this, if he happens to stumble, he will have an illegitimate child (*Zawlta*)
2. **Kumthei-saan: - Kumthei** is a type of insect that looks like locust. Usually they catch this *kumthei* while they are in the field and recite while releasing the *kumthei* saying that if he is to marry a girl from another village, fly beyond the rivers, if he is to marry within the village fly around him, and if his marriage happens to be a problem fly on the twig of the vine or creepers. Likewise, a girl performs this saying, "if he is to divorce (*numei nuakia*) come fly near him. If her husband is going to die at war let the eagle from heaven fly and catches the *kumthei*."
3. **Sii-saan (sesame):-** . The village girls roast the seed and pound it with mortar pestle. While pounding, challenging the youth they said, "Don't hang below, don't hang above, if someone does not dare to grab it, I'll called them dogs and cats." It is a belief that if the youths try to grasp their *aisaan* is considered to be true. After pounding the sesame they made a marble shape out of it, pierce it with a sharp stick and wrap with bamboo leaf and place it on a small swing basket which they hang it on the edge of the roof above their bed. They utter incantation like this:
 - (i) "I hang sesame, I hang sesame, I hang it like a bunch of dry leaf."
 - (ii) "I hang sesame to reflect in my dream. Let a dear partner's spirit hover on it. Having said this they sleep off."

When they woke up in the morning they went and checked the sesame beads. If the sesame beads were stolen, the person (s) who hangs the beads will die before getting married. If the sesame beads get dried up, his boyfriend will die. If it cracks they will not have any children. And if nothing happens to the bead it is belief that they will lead a happy married life.

4. **Bu-saan:-** During rice cultivation, the young girls would select about twenty grains and peel-off the husk and sow them saying, 'Please produce a number of seedlings so that we can know how many years we would be staying in our parent's house.' When the grains germinate, if it produce five stems means they will get married after five years and if it produces ten stems it means they will get married after ten years.
5. **Mang-saan: -** It is common for the Zou youths to rely on their dreams and predict their marriage. Let us highlight a few of them:-
 - (i) Before they go to bed they would tie a thread on their thumb and big toe with the recite that in future let the one who would be my wife/would be my husband will come in my dream and untie the thread. Hence, the person who unties the thread in their dreams will ultimately become their wife/husband.
 - (ii) Another way was that, before sleeping, they would take out the yolk of an egg and fill it up with salt and drank it. Then without drinking water or without talking to anyone they'd sleep off. If any person gave them water in their dream, that person would be their wife or husband.

In the Zou society, marriage is considered as an important institution in an individual's life for procreation and the continuance of social unit. They performed marriage not only for fulfilling their biological needs but also for social, cultural, and economic necessities. Before the advent of Christianity, the Zous generally observed one general standard so far as marriage was concerned. Marriage was taking place within their restricted local groups and sometimes guided by their elders. The Zou generally follow the choice of marrying outside their clan (clan exogamy) and marrying within their tribes (tribe endogamy). But in some cases, there is no such kind of restriction unless if the boy and girl are not too close i.e. families or clan lineage. Widow re-marriage is allowed by custom but in actual practice it is not much prevalent. A man may go for a second wife in case of barrenness, infidelity, prolonged incurable sicknesses, or physical disability. Infidelity

will end up in divorce. Practices of polygamy and keeping concubine were heard but very rare. Generally the Zous practice monogamy. Child marriage is not permitted and was not found in Zou society. [7]

The Zou tribe generally follows what is called as '**Patrilineal cross-cousin's marriage**' which is their first choice known as *Neila*. It is generally observed that the traditional marriage system of the Zou tribes is regulated either by (i) **Tong Mou** (Arranged marriage), (ii) **Neila** (Cross cousin Marriage), and (ii) **Elopement Marriage** [8, 9]. The above (i) and (ii) marriage practices were solemnized through a formal procedure without which no marriage is permitted. The first two forms are also known as **Tong Mou (a bride selected by parent)**. Customarily marriages between parallel cousins are not permitted. Marriage process started with the parents of the boy or through their household council member called *Palai (Agent)*. Among the Zou society, a married person occupied a position of honors and is considered a responsible person. A married person was entitled to all social privileges and was allowed to participate in all social functions. It was found that the Zous still find it proper and desirable in continuing these practices. Marriageable age is not definite but according to some elder people, for boys are 18 or 20 years and girls 15 or 16 years. [10]

Generally in the Zou society, when a boy was found to be eligible and matured for matrimony, the parent's first choice was to approach his maternal cousin whether a suitable girl called '*Neita*' matching the boy was available. The search for *Neita* was considered to be a boon for the family. If they found any suitable *neita*, the boy's parent first went to the girl's parent or through their household council members along with a '**jar**' of rice beer or tea and start negotiation. If the girl's parents agrees to the proposal and amicably settled for marriage, they can accept and drink the **Ju** or tea, hence, the customary bride price of the girl and a date for marriage was fixed. In case if the offer is rejected, the **Ju** is returned to the boy's parents by the girls' family. As a sign of agreement, the boy's parents used to pay one traditional cloth as '*Thatanman*' to the girl's parent over a pot of rice-beer called '**ju**'. '*Thatanman*' has now been converted to modern cash system at Rs.2/- and subsequently to Rs.20/- and failure to fulfill the engagement or agreement by either of the parties is liable to a fine of one *Mithun* (Sialpi). '*Neita*' could not question or express her unwillingness against her parents will nor object the decision of both the families [11]. '*Neita*' engagement could even take place during childhood but the actual marriage ceremony was to be taken after they attained the marriageable age. In case, if '*Neita*' is not available another suitable bride is arranged by the parent's known as '**Tongmou**'. The process is all the same with '*Neila*'. In short, '*Neita*' means maternal uncle's daughter whereas '*Neila*' is the practice of marrying maternal uncle's daughter. '**Tongmou**' means choosing a girl from known families within the village or neighboring village especially from the boy's mother side.

Another important aspect of Zou marriage is the practice of what may be called **bride price**. The bride price and rituals of marriage vary from clan to clan and from area to area. But they still follow some form of general standard which both the bride and bridegroom's parent inherited from the past such as '**Mou man**' ('**Mou**' means '**bride**' and '**man**' means '**price**') and **Mou vanken** ('**Vanken**' means **material (s) or articles that the bride brought with her at the time of her marriage**). The exact concept of dowry does not find a place among the Zou society [12]. It is considered as a valuable prestige issue rather than the sole price of a commodity.

Traditionally the Zou **bride price** is five mithuns including some article (s) or items like hoe, rug, axe, basket with string etc. The following are the customary practices followed in the process of paying a bride price i.e. **customary groom's expenditure** [13, 14]

1. **Tha-man or Thataan-man:** - This is the first payment paid to the girl's family on the first day of negotiation. Earlier it was a traditional cloth which was converted to cash at Rs.2/- subsequently increased to Rs.20/-. This shows that once the parents accepted **Tha-man or Thataan-man**, the bride comes under the whole responsibility of the boy's family in case of death or any other eventuality.
2. **Manpi (Principal Price):** - This is the principal price to be paid to the bride's parents, witnessed by member of the both household family council members. The general traditional norms of **Manpi** are five healthy *Sialpi* and at present is equivalent to **Rs.5000/-**. In real practice it can vary depending on the negotiation between both parties and an amount less than Rs.5000/- can also be charged. The practice of paying *Sialpi* (a full grown mithun) should not be counted as a binding customary law. Now-a-days it is substituted by cash with its equivalent market price. On the day of giving **Manpi**, the bride's parents were to slaughter at least two domesticated animal such as pig or cow i.e. known as **Tunsah thah**. During the ceremony of '**Tunsatha**,' equal member of men (say five each) from the groom's side and from the bride's side as witnesses to the marriage bond take meal together. (The meal consisting of selected portions of meat). This is known as "**Sabaa Nehna**." These members are responsible for any eventualities of the married couple in the future. These customary practices continue till today and considered one of the most important components of the marriage practices. Another important component of the practices is that the boy's family has to take some mark or particular portion of the meat as customary practices. This is known as '**Sahphui Puoh Sahhap Puoh**.'

3. **Pu Sum:** - The word **Pu** stands for maternal uncle and **sum** stands for money. Earlier Rs.2/- was paid to the bride's maternal grandfather but now increase to Rs.20/-. It is payable to the bride's **Pu**, who is her mother's father or in his absence it is payable to her mother's brother.
4. **Thallouh Sum (Bangkuopa):** - The words **Thallouh or Bangkhuopa** stand for a person who is designated and represent to speak on behalf of the family members during the marriage negotiation. This is paid to the nearest relatives of the bride's family who was designated as **Thallouh** in the household council of the bride's. Earlier it was Rs.2/- which was subsequently increase to Rs.20/-. .
5. **Thusa Sum (Bee Sum):** - **Thusa or Bee Sum** is the head of the family clan. In simple words he is known as the advisor of the household council. **Thusa sum** is paid to the head of the bride's family clan called **Tulpipa**. Earlier it was Rs.2/- and now increase to Rs.20/.
6. **Thian Sum:** - Meaning of the words **Thian** is a friend. Earlier and even now, when marriage takes place, the particular friends of both the bride and the groom become helper-cum-witness or best man or bride's maid for the new couple. **Thian sum** does not form a separate subsidiary price and cannot be claimed as a matter of right customarily. This is paid to the maid of the bride. It was usually paid Rs.2/ and increase to Rs.20/. **Thian Sum** is not compulsory; it may or may not be paid depending on the circumstances.
7. **Sabeng Puohman:** - The word **Sabeng Puahman** is the price of carrying the basket of meat. This is paid to the chosen person from the bride's relatives or best friend's, who carried the basket of meat from the bride's house to the groom house on the day of **Tunsa thah**. Usually it was one Zou traditional shawl known as **Sabeng Siin** and Rs2/- which is increased to Rs.20/ or in kind and more depending on the negotiation between both parties.

Customary bride's expenditure: - The traditional practice of **Mou Vanken (article(s) brought by the bride)** is strictly followed when marriage takes place. The bride is supposed to bring the following articles to the groom's house on her marriage day:-

1. One lives **Mithun** or its equivalent in cash.
2. One rug-hand-woven called **Phoipi**.
3. A basket made of cane or bamboo called **Beng and Nam (a plaited band of cane to carry the basket)**
4. One axe without handle called **Heita**.
5. A sickle with handle called **Koite or Tangkuai**.
6. A small spade (**hoe**) with the handle called **Tuuta**.
7. A jar of rice-beer called **Vaizu beel or Zou-zu beel**.
8. One **Leelpi** (a large basket) made of cane or bamboo with a close-fitting conical lid or cover.
9. One wooden box.

The Zou mostly depend on simple method of economy so the **Mou vanken** was arranged in line with their economic way of life. Apart from the above items, the bride can also bring other utensils and other material items depending on her family's wishes and also depending on her family condition.

Sialkhumsa: - This is the last feast arranged by the bride's family slaughtering a pig or a cow. This is one of the most important processes of the Zou customary marriage practices. During this feast, the groom's parents have to pay the final bride's price due to them. **Sialkhumsa** is performed only after the couples have their last child.

Apart from the above mentioned marriage practice, they have another important system. Mention may be made that:

1. **Zu-um koih** (putting a jar of rice-beer): **Zu-um koih** is pre-engagement condition arrived at by mutual agreement of both parties of the boy and the girl's family. It is a traditional method that a jar of rice beer and Rs.2/- is paid to the girl's parent. It is now increase at Rs.20/-. In case if the boy or the girl broke pre-engagement, they are liable a fine of one mithun and have to repay a jar of rice beer.
2. **Neitan man:** - '**Neitan man**' is the pre-engagement of **Neita** with a pot of rice beer by the boy's side. Violation of this engagement by whichever side is bound to a fine of one mithun besides return of the pot of rice-beer.
3. **Ukan man:** - The words **Ukan man** mean the boy side have to pay the price of marrying the younger rather than the elder sister. Customarily, the younger sisters never marry before her elder sister. In case the younger one gets married earlier than the elder sister, then the boy or husband is bound to pay a fine of one mithun or equivalent of its price to her elder sister. The practice of paying the price of **Ukan man** is solely depending on the elder sister. She has the right to claim higher or lower price.
4. **Mouluo:** - The word **Mouluo** (Levirate) means marrying of elder brother's widow. If a man marries his elder brother's widow, he has to pay one mithun to the widow's parents. But in case mutual understanding exists between the man and the widow's parents, the condition of paying one mithun can be cancelled.

5. **Numei Phungkia:** - This means that if a married woman after her husband's death abandon or left her husband's home, she is not permitted to inherit any property (including children) of her deceased husband.
6. **Kikhul (Divorce):**- Divorce is possible among the Zou society. A man can divorce his wife on ground of infidelity, impotence, madness or insanity and adultery. Hence, if divorce is to takes place between a husband and a wife, they are bound to follow the following procedure(s):-
 - (i). **If a husband divorces his wife [15], he is bound to pay the following fines:-**
 - (a) **Sialpi leh Salam:** *Sialpi* means a full grown Mithun and *Salam* means fine equivalent of killing one pig. In short, the husband has to pay one mithun and have to arrange a feast by killing a pig to the girl's parents.
 - (b) **Innpi sap:** Here *Innpi* means house of the girl's parents and *sap* means fees. The husband is bound to pay Rs.2/- as a fine to the girl's family. The amount was increase to Rs.20/- or more depending on the negotiation.
 - (c) He has to return all the belongings of the girl which she had brought along with her at the time of her marriage.
 - (d) He has to clear any dues of the marriage price if the wife is with a child called *Sisanpal (Sisanpal means if the girl bears a child)*.
 - (e) If the child is still small and goes with her mother and will be with her mother till he or she attained the age of three, for that the husband has to pay one mithun to take back the child.
 - (ii). **If a woman divorces her husband whether she bears a child or is without a child, (called Sisanpallou) she is subjected to pay the following fines:**
 - (a) **Sialpi leh Salam:** The girl has to pay a fine of one mithun and kill one pig.
 - (b) She has to refund all the bride price and other subsidiary payments to her husband.
 - (c) She will forfeit all the material she had brought to her husband's house (*called Mou Vanken*)
 - (d) She is bound to pay Rs.2/ as *Innpi sap* as a fee to her husband's family. The amount has now increased to Rs.20/.
 - (e) She can't claim all the expenditure she incurred during the marriage ceremony or feast.
 - (iii). **Ki-aagual khen:** - If a husband and a wife separated through mutual agreement and understanding, it is called **Ki-aagual khen** and no fines or liabilities are imposed either by the parents.

Divorce, however, is not found much in the traditional society. But it is now frequent among the Zou society with the impact of modern values system. Any type of divorce is regarded as unspiritual and unhealthy, though it continues.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study investigates that some of the major aspects of marriage practices still continue to exist among the Zou society but changes are also visible when we closely look into it. These practices have come under the active influence of some major exogenous factor that has considerably transformed the marriage practices. The effect of these exogenous factors on the continuity and change of the Zou Marriage Practices can be observed as follows:

Traditionally, the practice of '*Neita*' and '*Neila*' was the most dominant system among the Zous but now only the conservative families continue to practice it. By now the boys and girls have immense freedom in selecting their partners. But after the advent of Christianity, marriage has become a matter of love and choice and anyone can marry whom he or she chooses. There is no hard and fast rule to observe the rigid customs and traditions. Under the influence of Christianity, inter-tribal marriage is taking place and the Church is definitely encouraging such trend. But some cognate tribal communities are still strictly adhering to traditional way of marrying within the tribe. However, all those who are still thinking in terms of adhering to the traditional practices insist on sustaining it the traditional norms [16].

The Zous societies are in transition. They embodied both traditional values and modern values. They have undergone what M.N. Srinivas term as "**Westernization**" which is defined by him as change brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of British rule [17]. The age of marriage now-a-days for both the boy and girl has been taking upward trend. This is because of social, economic, and educational factors. By waiting for some more years one could get a better partner, or marriage should take place after both the parties completed their education. At present we can observe that economic factor is more compelling than other factors. One should get married after obtaining some job or settling down in some sort of gainful occupation. A man in service would like to marry a girl who is also in service so that both become earners.

With the advent of Christianity and modern education the practice of rice-beer (**Ju**) was replaced by tea. **Mithun**, the main important component of bride price was converted into market rate and also can be replaced by a cow or a buffalo. So principal price is now changed into one Cow or Buffalo instead of one **Mithun** or Rs.5000/- and the rest is counted as Rs.1000/- or less or more depending to both parties. But in actual practice, the amount was not paid exactly to the price of the mithun, depending on both parties [18]. Christianity came along with the introduction of western wedding gown (bride-gown) which was not known in the past as a way of marriage practice in the modern Zou society. Marriages are performed in the Church with the bride in full western regalia and the bridegroom in suits of the latest cuts [19]. In the traditional system the priest who performed the marriage ceremony garland them with '**aa-neel**' (cocks soft feather) and sprinkled wine over them [20, 21]. But the present system of marriage is performed by a Christian pastor or priest. The marriage ceremony or communities feasting have no charm of the past. Cakes, biscuit, cookies, bread, tea, soft drink, or cold drink have replaced some of the traditional practices of feasting and drinking which are expensive and a burdensome for the community economy [22]. Every marriage couple now considered it as a mandatory to wear a gown which in turn incurred a heavy expenditure for the groom family. **Mou Vanken** was not only confined to the traditional system but the '**item**' increased to suit the modern style of living. Marriage was solemnized at the church after completing all the traditional practices of negotiation and agreement made between the two parties. They preserve the best part of their traditional culture through their indigenous local Church [23].

However, some of the marriage practices are sacrosanct and they are inseparable from their moorings and continue to exist. Thus under the pressure of internal and external forces, the Zou marriage practices have changes in many ways. But the details of the formalities as practiced may not be observed in modern society. Nonetheless, the norms of customary practices are shaped and reshaped by the ever changing socio-economic structure of the tribal society. In consonance with the modern society, The United Zou Organization (The Apex Body of the Zou Tribe) [24] amended The Zou Custom Book (Zou Tawndan) from time to time which is bound to be followed by all the Zou people and strictly adhered to it.

V. CONCLUSION

The Zous have been observing their customary practices which have survived from time immemorial. They still attach great importance to the set of norms of human behavior to which they are accustomed to. Such norms are sanctioned by the people themselves. The importance and significance of marriage among the Zou society have not been altered much. Though they have embraced Christianity, the traditional marriage system neither is partially Christian nor is totally traditional but a juxtaposed of two cultures. Though the proceeding and forms of Christian marriage has taken place they still practices their traditional customs such as incest taboo, bride price, marriage feast, **mou vanken**, etc. We can observe that there is an '**item**' change seen in every process of their marriage practices. The '**structure**' and '**system**' is still in concrete situation and occupied the main dominant euphoria among the modern Zou society. Nevertheless, after India got independence, with the influence of western culture, with the advent of Christianity and with the influence of modern education, the Zou society is progressively different from what it was earlier.

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