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Social and cultural tradition of a backward tribe in North-East India- a sample analysis

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Abstract

Suantaks are one of the communities of chin-kuki-mizo, who belonged to the mongolian stock of tibeto-burman race. These people ore mostly found in the north-east India and chin-hills in Myanmar. They are not the smallest community of chi-kuki-mizos, but no research work has been done in this community so far. This paper is a part of a research paper, which is an attempt to explore the culture and tradition the people which remained unearth till toady. This paper will focus the uniqueness and distinction of the culture and tradition of the suantaks from the other communities by giving comparative analysis.

Village is the basic unit of socio-cultural and political life of the suamtaks. Usually, the suantaks set up a village on the top of the mountain. Naturally, the climate condition of the hill top is cold and pleasant and the climate conditions enhance healthiness to the people. The availability of firewood is another reason for the establishment of a village on the top of a hill. The practice of tribal raid or head hunting is one of the most important reasons responsible for the selection of a hill top for the establishment of a village. Usually, a village is established under a responsible person called Hausa (village chief).

Construction of house

The house of suantaks is simple. The floor of house is made of wooden plunk or bamboo splits. The roof is cover with thatch and the wall, bamboo matting. The floor of the house is three to four feet high from the ground. The house is higher in a floppy place so that domestic animals like pig, goat etc. Shelter at night and make themselves

safe from rain, cold and wild animals like tiger, leopard etc. Usually, the house faces east and north and rectangular in shape having a big verandah called *huangcha*generally used for keeping fowls, dogs, fire woods and grain pounding equipments. The outer portion of the wall above the main door is decorated with feathers of bird and the skull of the animals hunted. From seeing the skull of the animal one can detach that the owner of the house was a brave hunter.

Usually, the house is carried by a big pillar locally called *suutpi*. *Suutpi* is erected in the middle of the house to support *tung jam*. On the top of *suutpi*, a post called *tungjam,*is put in rectangular shape to support *inn-sun*.[1] thus, on the top of *tung jam*, ten or more bamboo (*inn-sun*) depending on the size of the house is put to enable to thatch the roof of the house. As mentioned earlier the top of the house is covered by thatch, hay or cane leaf. According to s.primtaipei, the design of the house is extracted from the design of the skeleton of python. The suantaks does not have separated kitchen. The corner of the house close to the wall in the front side is simply made one or two feet high and used it for cooking food. This is called *taking*. There is no separate room or partition for bed room. The floor of the house is simply used as bed room at night. However, the bed of the grandfather is made near the oven which also used for sitting. Above the oven, there is a hanging platform made of bamboo splits called *gapchung* which is used for drying meat and paddy during rainy season.

Usually, there are two doors, one in the front and the other in the rear. The front door is called *kawt-pi* (main door) used for entrance and exit. The rear door is called *tom-kawt*meant for casual exit for the family members.

Family

Family is the basic unit of a society. Usually a family is encompassed with a husband, wife, children, and grandparent of the children and sometimes with married sons, their wife and children. Patriarchal system is found in the suantak family. As a head of the family, the responsibility of the entire affairs of the family falls upon the father. In the suantak society, men and women are not equally treated in every sphere of life. Therefore, there is division of works between male and female in the family. The daughters are assigned to do lighter works like washing cloth, cooking, collecting firewood, grinding rice, fetching water and other necessary lighter household works. Sons are expected to do heavier work such as cutting jhum land, construction houses etc. However, works like clearing paddy field, seed sawing, and harvesting, etc. are commonly done by both men and women.

Position of the eldest son in the family

The eldest son in the family is also next to the father. Therefore, he is duty bound towards the family. From the time of adolescence, he is the assistance in all matters that relate to his father and the family. Even after getting married, the eldest son has to remain with the father. After getting married he bears the major responsibility in the family. The custom does not allow the younger sons to remain with the father after marriage. This is different from the custom of the hmars and the lushais. In the lushais and the hmar society, the youngest son has to stay with the father and the other have to separate.[2]

Separation

As stated above, that the younger son have to shelter in separate house after getting married, he has to leave his father. However, it does not mean the son has to leave his father's house immediately after getting married. Therefore, the younger son after sometime or a month has to leave his father's house. This process of separation of father and son is called *ki inn chawn*. It is the duty of the father and the eldest son to arrange the basic needs and necessary requirements for building a separate house for his younger son. Generally the house of the younger son is constructed in the northern side of the parental house. It is the traditional believe that the children of the younger son are not healthy if the house is constructed in the southern side. The practice of selecting the northern side of the parental house for the construction of the younger son is not found among other tribe like the hmars, paites and thaddeus. After completing the construction of the house, the father invites the villagers to inaugurate the newly house. This is called *inn thaklut*. The father shares the necessary household requirement such as utensils, clothing, furniture etc. to his son at the time of inauguration of the house. However, the selection of a particular site for the construction of the younger house disappears today following the adoption of Christian religion.

Inheritance

Every society has each own rules of inheritance. Diverse laws of inheritance are found among different societies. For example, among the thadoukuki society, the eldest son inherits the property of the father whereas among the hmar, the youngest son inherit the father's property. Primogeniture is found among the suantak society. However, the father sometimes distributes his property to all the sons but the eldest son gets the lion share. Daughters have no right to inherit the father's property. In case the father have no sons, the right of inheritance goes to the eldest son of the father's eldest brother or eldest son of the younger brother of the father if the father happen to be the eldest in the family. If the father has neither sons nor brother, the right of inheritance of the property passed to the head of the family clan. In the suantak society, the adopted sons have no right to inherit the property of the father.

It is common that extramarital and premarital sex is happening in every society even though the custom prohibits it. In the suantak society premarital as well as extramarital sex is prohibited. However, by human nature it happens sometime. Son or daughter birth by illegitimate wife is called *zaocha*. In the suantak society, though *zaocha* (illegitimate son) may be the first son, has nothing to say over the property of the father.[3] in other words *zaocha* does not have the right to claim or inherit the property of the father. However, the father has to treat *zaocha* equally with his legitimate son and look after him till he get married and sheltered.

Suantak society is an enlarge family where chanu, becha, zawl, *upa* and *tupa*are inalienable components. Themarried daughter of a man is called *chanu* and the male relative is called *becha*. In case the man has no married daughter or no daughter, he is expected to select chanu from any woman of close relatives of the village. In the same way, if the man has no close male relative to a place where he is living, he has to appoint one of his nearest male relative on the line of clan as*becha*. *Chanu* and *becha* play an important role in the suantak society. When a man performs a functions or social feasts, *chanu* and *becha* are expected to assist the man in all works of the function. They are assigned different duties at the function. As mentioned earlier women are assigned lighter works in the suantak

family, *chanu* has to do household works at the time of the function such as cooking food, washing utensils, sweeping the floor of the house, fetching water for cooking, etc.

The husband of chanu has to cook the curry of the feast and no outsider is allowed to involve in the cooking. *Becha* has to supervise all the works related to the function. *Chanu* and *becha* are also expected to extend financial help to the man if necessary.in the suantaks society, when the man kill a big wild game he has to distribute certain portion of its flesh to his relatives. *Chanu* and *becha*are expected to share such portion of the hunt animal as a symbol of love and gratitude. Thus, in return to their service *chanu*and *becha*share the hip and the chest portion of the animal respectively. Tradition has not allowed anyone to spoil or snatch the hip and the chest portion of the animal without the consent of the share owners. Anyone defying this law is liable to impose fine in the suantak society.

*Zawl*signifies friendship. In other word *zawl* means friendship. It is a friendship base on similar name. *Zawl* friendship is not like an ordinary friendship. Therefore, when a man hunts a big wild game, he used to give a flesh portion taken out from the back bone of the animal to his *zawl* friend. The *zawl*friendship is exist even today in the suantak society.in the suantak society, the head of the clan is called *upa*. He occupies an important position in the society. *Upa* can settle a disputes or cases regarding family matter.[4] he is highly regarded and honor by the members of the clan. Clan headship is hereditary. In other word the succession of clan headship passed from father to eldest son.

As a head of the clan, *upa*enjoy certain privileges in the society. When a man kills a wild beast, he has to give *sating* (back bone of the hunted beast) to *upa* as a mark of honor in the society. *Upa* can impose fines or penalties upon those who failed to give *sating*. *Sating* in the suantak society signify head of the clan. As the ribs of the animal depend on the backbone, all the members of the clan depend on *upa*.

Tupa is a husband of daughter or sister. Thus, when a man marries one's daughter or sister, he becomes *tupa* for the man. Conversely the man becomes *pupa* for a man. *Tupa* play an important role at the time of social feasts and functions in the suantak society. When a man performs feasts or social ceremony such as marriage, death anniversary, birth anniversary, etc., his tupa is expected to do certain works. At the time of such occasion *tupa* has to kill the animal and clean the intestines of the animal kill for the function. This is called *sagil jut*. *Sagil jut* is a compulsory work assigned to *tupa*at the time of such functions.[5]beside,*tupa*also has to clean all the utensils used at the function or feast.

Courting It is natural that selection of mates is base on the beauty or handsome. In the suantak society, when a boy selects a mate, he has given priority to the natural beauty of the girl followed by different criteria. Physical health or strength, moral character, politeness, etc. are the other basis for the selection of a girl. In the suantak society, there was a traditional smoking called *dumzial,* (cigarette) made from local tobacco[6]. *Dumzial* is roll and tied with a piece of

thread in order to prevent from unfolding. Almost mature boys are practicing this smoking. When a boy goes to a girl for courting, he always carries tobacco and asks the girl of his choice to roll *dumzial*. If the girl agrees to the proposal of the boy, she tied the *dumzial* with green thread and gives it to the boy. If the girl uses white thread, she means to say ''we are friend'. If she refuses the proposal of the boy, she uses red thread. Sometime the girls use their hair to tie the *dumzial*. If the girl tied the cigarette with her hair, it means she dedicated her life for the boy. Thus, *dumzial* serve a communication between the boy and the girl

Marriage

In the suantak society, matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is followed. Thus, a boy has to marry the daughter of his maternal uncle. The daughter of his maternal uncle is called *neinu*. Traditionally, the eldest son is expected to marry the daughter of maternal uncle. However, this does not mean the younger son cannot marry his maternal uncle. The son can also marry a girl of his own choice. Therefore, some time a boy marry a girl of his own choice. When a boy falls in love with a girl; his parent keeps a close observation to the family of the girl. If the family of the girl has hereditary diseases or if the girl is a witch, she is rejected by the parent of the boy. The girl's parent too observes the family history of the boy in order to avoid having a spouse from a family suffering hereditary diseases or having offences record in the village.

Types of marriage

Three type of marriage are found in the suantak society. They are (1) *congou* (2) *kijam* and (3) *zawlgai*.

(1). **Chongmou:** It is an arrange marriage. *Congou* marriage is performed after negotiation between the parent of the boy and the girl is arrived. At first the boy's parent along with *chanu* and*becha* go to the house of the girl with one pot of *zu* and requested her parent to give her to their son. If the parent of the girl consents to their request they fix another day for further meeting. Traditionally, a feast called '*sumtansa'* is perform before marriage is taking place. The feast is supposed to be done by the boy side. In the second meeting, they fix the date for which *sumtansa* is to be performed. On the day of *sumtansa,* the thiampu (priest) observed the liver of the animal killed for feast and if the he is satisfied with the colour of the liver he will announce that marriage can be performed then both parties discuss in detail about bridge price, wedding date, etc. If the priest is not satisfied with the colour of the animal, the marriage is cancelled.thus, the boy's parent, one day prior to the wedding date gives bridge price like mithun or bull or whatever it may be according the negotiation to the girl's parent. On this day, the girl's parent performs sending off ceremony by killing two pigs. This is called *chanusatha*[7]. All the relatives and friend circle of the girl are invited on this day. One of the pigs kill for the ceremony is cut into two pieces. This is called *sa hap*. When the ceremony is over, half of the flesh is presented to the boy's parent. Thus, wedding is performed by the village priest called *thiempu* on the next day of sending off ceremony.the same is performed by the pastors in the present days.

(2).**Kizam:***kizam* is another type of marriage in the suantak society. The word *kizam* is synonymous with the English word 'elopement'. This type of marriage is more common than the other type. This marriage is base on mutual consent between the boy and the girl without the interference of their parents. Usually, the boy elope the girl in the hut of a paddy field or a house of one of his friend from different village and sheltered there until the news of

elopement is reach to the family of the girl. If the parents of the boy does not like the girl, they go to the place where the boy and the girl are shelter or hiding and separate them. But if they like the girl, they have to convey the news of the elopement to the parents of the girl.

Therefore, when a boy elope a girl the parents of the boy go to the girl's parent in the morning of the following day to inform the news of the elopement. In doing this, the boy's parent offer*zu* to the girl's parent and presented a traditional shawl to the mother of the girl. If the mother of the girl accepted the presentation, it is a signed of approval of the elopement and if she does not accepted the presentation, it is a signed of disapproval. Both the boy's and girl's parents have the right to separate them if they are not agreed. Marriage is performed in the same way of performing *chong mou* marriage only after negotiation come between the boy's and the girl's parent.

(3). **Zawl gai**: As stated earlier, premarital sex is sometime happening in the suantak society. When a woman become pregnant due to premarital sex, she is liable to be taken by the man who has affairs with her as his wife. Thus, the boy has to inform his parent to take the girl as his wife. Before taking the girl, the boy's parent asks the girl's parent for permission to take the girl as their daughter-in law. If the girl is permitted then the boy's parents take her to their home. Accidental conceive is also sometime happening in the suantak society. Such cases are brought to the chief or the village court to settle the matter. The boy has to pay one mithun as a fine to the girl's parent if he refuses to marry her. However, the girl has to give the child to the boy after delivery. The child is known as *zao cha* in the suantak society.

Polygamy

Polygamy is prohibited in the suantak society. However, polygamy is relaxed under certain circumstances. Thus, a man is permitted to take second wife whose first wife is barren. If a man died leaving his wife and children, the unmarried elder brother or younger brother of the man is permitted to take the widow as his wife if she agreed. However, these happenings are rare in the suantak society.

Bride price

Bride priceis a common culyure in the societies of almost all the tribes of the north east India. The suantaks are not exception from it. The prices of the suantaks women are fifteen mithun, one gong, one necklace, and one traditional shawl. According to traditional custom, the bride prices (*mou man*) except mithun are kept on a *godal* (a large plate like bamboo plaited) before the girl's parents at the time of marriage. This is called *manmala*[8] (a bride price gives in advance) in the suantaks.

Mode of payment of bride price is unique and simple. One is not necessary to pay all the bride prices at one time. He is required to pay articles such as *puandum* (traditional soul), *khi* (traditional bead), and *dakpi* (gong), etc. One the day of marriage as mentioned above. The remaining prices may be paid in cash ranging from one hundred to ten thousand, counted as one or more mithun according to the agreement of the wife giver and taker. But the last bride price should be compulsory mithun which is supposed to be paid when the woman become old. It is traditional believe that the children of the woman are not healthy if all the bride prices are paid while she is young.

Divorce and remarriage

Divorce is not very common in the suantak society. However, it does not means the suantak society is absence of divorce. Therefore, divorce occurred sometime. There are several reasons for divorce in the suantak society. One of the common factors responsible for divorce is bareness. When a woman is found to be barren she is liable to be divorce by her husband. Extramarital sex is another factor responsible for divorce. Incompatibility also led to separation of husband and wife in the suantak society. Another factor for the diversion of husband and wife is ill treatment of the wife by the husband.

There is no prohibition with regard to remarriage of widow and widower. Therefore, a husband and wife are free to remarriage at any time after one or both of them have sought and accepted the divorce suit. According to the traditional custom, remarriage in the suantak society takes place after divorce or the death of one's spouse. There is o fixed period of time or restriction on when to court or joined a fresh partner. A widow with grown up children and lived in the house of her husband event after his death is expected to consult her children if she found a suitable match to marry her.

If her children did not endorse her proposal she is not liable to break out the union from her decease husband's house. But she can make a union only after returning to her paternal place.

In case of remarriage after the death of one's spouse, there is a general opinion. Remarrying before the lapse of one year after the burial of one's death spouse is regarded taboo and is extremely detested. However, after the expiry of one year the lonely spouse is free to court or accept a fresh partner at any time.

Price of widow

A widow without issue who has gone back to her parental home is still one mithun less than the price of a spinster. But a widow with issue is much lesser than that of a spinster. Suppose if a widow remarrying while living in her first husband's house, the price given by her first husband shall be decompensate to the relatives of the first husband by the second husband. Naturally, the price of widow is less than the normal bride price.

In the suantak society, widow is much sympathized not only by her relatives but also by the whole neighborhood. She is the only non-official of the village exempted or slackened from payment of taxes to the village chief. If she is leave useless by deceases spouse, or if the children were still minor, she is liberated from compulsory social work also. She is also assisted and help by the youths of the village in weeding, sowing, harvesting and building her house or repairing her house. However, she has obligatory duties toward the village chief when there are festivals or ritual, and when there are non-official or official guests. At such event, she assists the ladies of the chief resident in fetching water, pounding and husking rice, cooking, serving meal, cleaning up the interior and exterior of the house of the chief.

Many a time, such widow abused the sympathy and liberty they were rendered. They become carefree and often breach the hallowed customary laws. However, no one dared to insult or slighted her for being her pitiful position. Some time she would create hullabaloo among the womenfolk who were in drinking spree. Though it was regarded taboo to join among men in drinking spree, no man would spank or chided her. Thus, many women in many parts of the world may well envy the women and the widows of the suantak society their high status and their free and happy life or their unfathomable liberty.

In the suantak society, a married woman is not allowed to visit her parental house until and unless *kisuule* is done[9]. She is permitted to visit her parental house at any time only after *kisulle* is done. Usually*kisulle* is done after completion of one month from the day of her weeding. After completion of one month, she along with her in-law went to her parental house with a presentation. It is traditional believe that a woman have no prosperity in life if she visit her parental house before *kisulle* is done.

Dormitory

Almost all the tribals of north east India have the institution of dormitory. But the institution is different from tribe to tribe. For example, the mizos and the nagas have separate lodging house for the young boys and girls of the village which is usually constructed in the heart of the villages[10]. The name of dormitory is also different from tribe to tribe. The mizos called *zawlbuk*while the nagas called *marung*

The suantaks have no separated *sawm* house for lodging. Every house in the village can be use as *sawm* house. There may be one or more *sawm* in a suantak village. The number of *sawm* member is not fixed. Thus, all the boys who are attaining puberty or thirteen years of age can be a member of *sawm*. *Sawm* is lead by the one of the senior most among the member. His word is obeyed and followed by the rest of the members. The *sawm* members always stand for the cause of the villages. They work together and stand united at the time of emergency.

There is no permanent *sawm* house. Therefore, the *sawm* house is usually changed from time to time. The change of the house is under the discretion and the selection of the *sawm* leader. During the night, the young boys learn the art of making bamboo basket, playing traditional music like flute, beating drum, wrestling, etc. Thus, the *sawm* serve as a place for learning and shaping the future character of the young boys of the villages[11].

The practice of head hunting and tribal raids in the primitive society has necessitated the institution of *sawm*. Therefore, all the young boys in the village are confined together in one house during the night so that at times of emergency; their service would be available in a short time. However, the institution *sawm* is disappeared today following the adoption of Christianity.*Lawm*is a social organization associated with agriculture activities. This organization is a common practice among the tribes of manipur. There are two kinds of *lawm*; (1) *lawmlian* and (2) *lawmen*[12]. *Lamina* is formed by senior group in the village and *lawmen* by junior group.*Lawm* is lead by one of senior most among the members who is called *lawmlamkai*. *Lawmlamkai* informed the entire member regarding daily working routine. The *lawm* are engage to perform a work related to agriculture such as mowing, seed sawing,

harvesting, weeding, etc. In rotation.when the *lawm* goes for the day's work, they wait each other in the entrance of the village until the members are arrived completely. At the time of working they used to make a sound together *hoi*, *hoi*, *hoi*[13]. They make the sound in order to work harder and faster. The *lawm*used to have lunch at noon after working half a day. The *lawm*used to perform a feast called *lawmzu nek* at the end every seasonal works.[14] The feast is performed at the house of *sawm* leader.

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