

## TRANSFORMATION AND PERSISTENCE OF THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE CHIRU TRIBE OF MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

*Religion is a system of beliefs, thoughts and moral values which is often manifested in the relationship of human beings with supernatural beings and nature. The study of the traditional religion of Chiru tribe provides some pen picture of the culture and tradition of this tribe that reveal their identity itself. The present study is an attempt to introduce the traditional religion of Chiru tribe with reference to its transformation and persistence in the present days. The present study was carried out among the Chiru tribe of Manipur. Different anthropological tools and techniques were used during the field work such as schedule, personal interview, participant observation and secondary sources to ensure accurate data. Personal interview is one of the most important tools in getting maximum information as the study is descriptive in the absence adequate written record. One of the important findings of the study is that Chiru tribe has well developed traditional religion which has been practiced since time immemorial. There are four types of traditional worship: Leibeklon, Inrouireii and Sornom and Loipuishak Rathakoui. After the conversion into Christianity, drastic changes took place in all aspects of Chiru society. The impact of Christianity has led them to gradually become a progressive tribe even though they are yet to catch up with other major tribes of Manipur. The present study has been able to discover the existence of a unique traditional religion of the Chiru tribe. The conversion to Christianity has been quite complete as none among the Chirus practices the traditional religion any longer. However, some elements of the traditional religion are still found to persist. There have also been conscious efforts among the Chirus to preserve their rich culture, tradition and unique identity.*

**Keywords:** Chiru;Leibeklon;Inrouireii;Sornom;Loipuishak Rathakoui

### INTRODUCTION

Chiru is one of the recognised tribes of Manipur having its own culture, tradition, folktales, folklores, folksongs, language, religion and belief etc. They mostly inhabit the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. They show predominantly mongoloid features, and speak Chin-Kuki language of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.

Religion is one of the social institutions of every human society from the primitive to the civilised contemporary world. Religion is a system consisting of belief, faith, thought and practices which involve the worship of supernatural and nature. It plays a very significant role which influences every aspect of the life of a human being. Anthropologists believe that religion is the by-product of the evolutionary development of human brain. When anthropology emerged as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, anthropologists tried to trace out the genesis of religion. Edward Burnett Taylor is of the view that, religion has its roots in the intellectual and speculative experiences of life events like death, diseases trances, vision and above all dream of a primitive man, which led him to conclude that all there are to be counted for by the presence or absence of the 'soul'. He propounded the three fold origin of the theory of religion. (a) Religion developed out of fear (b) the core values of all religion are the same

though there are great differences in the form of religion (c) all religions admit that there is a supernatural power. In the book, "Primitive Religion" (1871), Edward Burnett Taylor describes Animism as the earliest form of all religions. He shows the evolution from animism to monotheism, through polytheism. James Frazer regards magic as the source of religious development. Herbert Spencer is of the view that ancestor worship is the origin of all religion. The origin of religion may be of great diversities among different tribe, caste, race and regions of the world but the core values are the same.

#### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The present study is the outcome of a field study carried out in different Chiru villages of Manipur i.e. Charoi khullen, Dolang, Bungte and Chiru Rem Colony/Happy valley Tarung villages over a period of six months from January to June 2015. To obtain all the primary empirical data for the present study, some important anthropological tools and techniques have been used. As Chiru is very small in population does not have its own script, personal interview plays an important role in getting the required information for this study. Data collection is done through schedule, personal interview, and participant observation. As the present study is on traditional religion which has extinct and not practiced in the present days, selected elders, old aged persons who were once living a traditional life and are now converted into Christianity, teachers, writers, educationists, scholars etc of the same tribe were interviewed. In addition to the primary information, secondary sources such as books, literature, magazine and unpublished manuscripts were referred for obtaining adequate information pertaining to the present study. The information of both primary and secondary sources is minutely cross-checked for proper justification, to ensure less error and reliability. The outcome and findings of the present study are briefly stated below.

#### **TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF CHIRU TRIBE**

Religion is considered as one of the most important aspects of the life of Chirus. The Chiru religion has been evolving since the creation of the tribe and it has been handed down by the progenitors from generation to generation through oral tradition. According to the beliefs of the Chiru tribe, there was a supreme God known as "Patheiin" in Chiru language, which made heaven and the earth. It is believed that Patheiin is the omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent master of the universe. The Chiru tribe has been worshiping the Patheiin since the time immemorial. Religion is one of the social institutions connected with social, political and economic life of the Chiru tribe.

**Laibeiklon:** Chirus worship Patheiin in order to avoid any sort of circumstances and unfortunate accidents such as death caused by sickness, diseases, nightmare, demons, evil spirit, drowning in the sea, river, death in the forest, death caused by fall from the tree, and also to live a happy and prosperous life at the place called Niknalon, which is located on the eastern side of the village. They worship Patheiin by offering fruits, vegetables, cooked rice and by sacrificing domesticated animals like dove, cock, pig, sheep, goat, cow, buffalo etc at the altar known as "Rothoina Mun". Laishu Theiimpu, priest of worship of the village will perform this religious ceremony; and pray for peace, joy, health etc among the villagers and also for peaceful coexistence with other neighbouring villages. If any of the family members are sick and suffering from diseases and pains caused by demons and evil spirits. The "Laishu Theiimpu" will also perform the rite and rituals for this family's members. For demons and evil spirits, he will ask a question, "What kind of evil spirit caused the illness?" After knowing the cause of the sickness, the priest will invoke the demons and evil spirits by sprinkling the blood of animals. The cooked food and meat will be eaten by Laishu Theiimpu and he will also offer to the demons and evil

spirits. By doing this, the sick man will recover from his illness and is believed to get cured from demon possession. This religious ritual is conducted and performed during the months of June and July in a calendar year.

**Inrouireii:** Chirus are the Patheiin fearing people because they have a traditional family worship service known as “Inrouireii” in Chiru dialect. “Inrouireii”, the family worship service, is usually held in the month of Murpatha (July) to Aramtha (September) before conversion into Christianity but nowadays it is commenced during the winter season of December and January in a year. This worship service is conducted by every family of the villagers led by Laishu Theiimpu. Laishu Theiimpu will offer a prayer for the betterment of the family such as good long life, peace, health and prosperity in the family without lacking anything and also prays as per the request of the family. The family firmly believes that they will get abundant blessing from Patheiin. Mostly, this kind of worship called “Inrouireii” is performed once or twice in a year but sometimes even thrice in a year as per the request and desire of the family.

This religious ritual “Inrouireii” is compulsory for one and all because every family member has to be present at the ritual ceremony. The ritual service is usually performed in the kitchen at dusk. According to this ritual ceremony, each of the family members will offer a hen, each hen was very significant, representing each one of the family members. Sacrifice to the Patheiin was to receive peace and relief from all difficulties to overcome the worries, sickness, suffering, pain and also the sins committed by them. According to the seniority of the family members, the Laishu Theiimpu will perform the rituals by praying for everyone, starting from the eldest to the youngest of the family members. The hens are killed by Laishu Theiimpu and sacrifice is made to Patheiin. However, the rich family used to offer pig for the whole family, apart from the individual’s offer of a hen each. The hens and the pig which they kill are cooked and eaten together by the family members; the neighbouring families, friends and relatives would also be invited for the dinner. If the Laishu Theiimpu does not eat chicken, then he will eat pork. If he does not take pork then he will take chicken. However, if the priest does not eat either of this food, then the family will arrange another food item like fish. During this ritual ceremony, every family member should meditate including the outsider who will also take part in the ceremony as the ritual is solemn and holy. They are not even allowed to take any household work. If this procedure is strictly followed by the family, they believe that they will be blessed abundantly. The most significant of these ritual ceremonies is that the children will cut the hair and make it bold except a small portion in the cowlick. Few hair and feather of the hen will be fixed in the head with Khoinak (a kind of gum taken from honeybee) until it falls by itself. It also signifies that “Inrouireii” is performed and fulfilled by the family.

**Sornom:** Another very important aspect of “Inrouireii” is to perform a ritual ceremony known as “Sornom”. The importance of “Sornom” ritual is to predict the fortune of everyone in the family. This ceremony is to find out if there is any untoward incident such as accident, sickness, death, misfortune as well as joy, happiness, success, and achievements of the family would be revealed. The part of Lamva (Intestines) of hens and liver of pig which they kill in the “Inrouireii” are preserved for ritual service. The Lamva of hens and liver of the pig will be kept in the Kokvon (a basket made of bamboo strip) at the place of altar made within the kitchen. The Laishu Theiimpu will minutely observe the Lamva of each hens and liver of the pig, whether there is any defect or not, any changes in the colour of the intestines and liver, then he will predict the fortune of each family member and the liver of the pig was for predicting the fortune of the whole family. The prediction will be conveyed to each family member

without any hesitation because if the fortune of the family is not good, they will try to change their bad character and try to do good thing so as to avoid any misfortune in the future.

**Loipuishak Rathaikoui:** Loipuishak Rathaikoui is also one of the traditional religions of the Chiru tribe. This is held once in a year during the month of Biriiptha (December). The literal meaning of the term Loipuishak Rathaikoui is the calling of the soul by giving the feast to the soul. For this particular worship service, the youth of the village Reibak and Deiirkai would go to the forest to collect firewood in which they will cut fifty logs of firewood by cutting down a big tree. The labour of all the youth will be remunerated with wine for at least three day. In the following afternoon, the youth will collect the leaves of plantain and bring them to the Domitory house, "Seriin". When they came back, Koulak fixed the day for Loipuishak Rathaikoui the volunteers of the village called Tangva will make an announcement to the villagers and distribute firewood and plantain leaves to every household. On the day, all the household of the villager will prepare a feast consisting of different items. The traditional musical instruments including drum will be played for this event. The Laishu theiinpu will start worshipping the deity at Niknalon Routhoina which is located in the eastern side of the village called Theiireii Rapakung and call the soul and offer a feast brought by the villager in the plantain leave usually consist of rice, salad etc. when they came back, all the youth will collect the food items and bring them in Seriin. The former Deiirkai will be received at Domitory house by shouting a slogan ho ho se se se, after which they will eat together the food stuffs and start merry making for better life.

#### **ACCEPTANCE OF CHRISTAINITY**

It was during the British colonial rule that Christian message was spread among the tribal people of Manipur. Among the tribal community, it is believed that Tangkhul was the first tribe in Manipur who received the western education by receiving English education. Because of this reason, a drastic change has taken place in every aspect of the life of Tangkhul tribe. Through the western education, this community has become very progressive tribe in Manipur. The Chirus believe that the Tangkhuls were the ones who brought Christianity to the tribe. Even in the post independent India, Chiru tribe continued to follow their traditional religion. This proves that this tribe is one of the last to receive western education and Christianity. By the late 1936, the Lamdangmeii village of Nungba sub-division of Tamenglong district of Manipur was the first village of the Chiru which accepted and converted to Christianity. From then on, it spread to the neighbouring villages of Dolang and so on. Therefore, Lamdangmeii Baptist church is the first among all Baptist churches of the Chiru tribe. Today, this tribe form an administrative church body known as CRBCA (Chiru Reiiim Baptist Church Association) established in the year 2011 after departed from the KRBCA (Kom Rem Baptist Church Association).

By the year 1966, Chiru tribe fully adopted Christianity. There are a number of Christian denominations among the Chirus such as Baptist, Seventh - day Adventist, Catholic and Pentecostal etc. One significant observation of the present study is the apparent disinclination of the Chiru tribe to allow the entry of other Christian denominations except Baptist which seems to be a sign of the tribe's conservative nature. However, the Chirus still preserve and practice the traditional religious rituals till today. The family worship service known as "Inrouerei" is very much a part of life among the Chirus. Though they have the family worship service, all the rites and rituals such as offering of sacrifices are not practiced nowadays and the role of Laishu Theiinpu has now been replaced by that of the Pastor.

## **TRANSFORMATION AND PERSISTENCE OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

After the complete conversion into Christianity, drastic changes have taken place in the Chiru community. First and foremost, western education has enabled them to open the eye to the world. The people are now exposed to the outside world which was never foreseen before. After their conversion into Christianity, Chirus are today deeply embedded in the principles of Christianity. At the same time, people started to know the values of their culture and their identity in which contemporary tribal people of northeast India face conspicuous issues of ethnic identity and division. Today, the people of this tribe start to think and realise the importance of core culture values. Now there is social consciousness among the people to preserve the rich cultural heritage. There is an awakening among the young and old to strive for the revival of culture and tradition including the traditional religion of the Chiru tribe. Most of the elders who were once following the traditional religion have passed away but it is fortunate some are still living in the present generation. Though major changes have taken place in the society, customary law, dress, form of polity, traditional worship service, festivals etc still continue to exist even today. The traditional values of their culture seem to give them a sense of belongingness and the desire to preserve their rich and unique culture. Therefore, it can be said that the Chiru tribe are now progressing day by day even though a lot of social, political and economical reforms need to take place compared to other more advanced tribes of Manipur. Some of the most important religious aspects continue to flourish are discussed below.

### **Persistence of traditional belief system**

According to the ancestors, legends and oral literature which have been handed down from generation to generation, the Supreme God (Patheiin) is the creator of the universe who made the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth and all the living creatures on earth including human beings. The supreme Patheiin, who is also known as God of universe (Kapa Patheiin), is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. With this belief in Patheiin, the Chiru tribe has been worshipping Patheiin since time immemorial by offering domesticated animals like cow, dog, hen, sheep, goat, pigeon etc. including rice, vegetables and fruits. Despite the coming of Christianity, the traditional belief system of Patheiin still persists as it has some similarities with that of Christian faith.

### **Persistence of offering system**

The best of offering collection were given to the Supreme God, Patheiin. The offering includes domesticated animals like cow, dog, hen, sheep, goat, pigeon etc, and also rice fruits and vegetables in the traditional religious system. Even after conversion into Christianity, the tenth tithe i.e. tithe and thank offerings of their incomes were given to the Church. It is believed that the Patheiin of the traditional religion and Christian religion gives abundant blessing to the people.

### **Persistence of the burial system**

The burial system is one that continues even after conversion into Christianity. When a Chiru is death, he will be buried by performing different types of ritual ceremony according to the kind of death. In the Chiru community, there are two types of death: Thitbalam (the natural death) and Sarrathi (the unnatural death). Those who die natural deaths are buried in the village cemetery known as Thangkungjar, but those die unnatural deaths such as death by accident, murder, death caused by falling from tree, death by drowning in water, death due to nightmare, death caused by animals etc. will be buried out the village. Burial system is still continued even after adopting Christian faith.

### **Persistence of the belief concerning life after death**

According to the traditional belief of the Chiru tribe, if a Chiru man dies his or her soul is separated from the human body. The soul of a dying person will go to “Ravanram”. Even after conversion into Christianity, they believe that the soul of the dying person will go to heaven until the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is not clear whether the concept is biblically correct or not.

### **Persistence of priesthood**

In the traditional religion, a priest plays a very important role in the society. All the rites and rituals of the traditional religion are headed and conducted by the priest. In the traditional religion of the Chiru tribe, there was a worship priest known as “Laishu Theiinpu”. This priest was to be selected from either Chongdur or Shampar clans of the Chiru tribe; no other clans were eligible or allowed to hold this position. Even after the acceptance of Christian faith, the priest still continues to exist by another name known as “Patheiin Chongsem”.

### **Persistence of traditional festivals**

Chirus are generally agriculturalists who practice Jhum cultivation or slash and burn cultivation or Sweden cultivation. Since time immemorial, the festivals have been associated with agriculture life cycle and traditional religion. These festivals play very important part in the life of Chiru tribe. Therefore, even today, the celebration of these festivals shows continuity of their culture that enhance the richness and uniqueness of the culture of this tribe. Some of the festivals that are still celebrated by the Chru tribe in the contemporary world are:

1. Phoibei Moroi Festival: Phoibei Moroi is one of the cultural festivals associated with work culture in which the whole community of the village help one another in the agricultural society. The tilling of the field, popularly known as “Kangraikar” in Chiru language, is practiced during this festival. It is usually celebrated and held in the month of Monoi Tha (March) and Masai Tha (April).
2. Derkai Rohoi festival: Derkai festival is the festival of the youth especially for the boys who attain the age of 11/12 year of age. The literal meaning of “Derkai is “the first time that a man wears pant, Ponza (traditional clothe), wearing of head gear and making of basketry for the first time; Rohoi means celebration. The festival is usually celebrated in the month of Biriiptha (December).
3. Reiinreii Lamvaka festival: Reiinreii Lambaka is one of the traditional festivals of Chirus tribe on the occasion of confirming a young girl entering maidenhood. In other words, it is the festival where small girls attain puberty which shows that they become mature and reach marriageable age. It is celebrated during the month of “Purpa Tha”(February)
4. Sangroukou festival: Sangroukou is the festival of seed showing usually celebrated in the month of Monoi Tha (March) and Masai Tha (April).
5. Shangbouk festival: Shangbouk is the festival of annual harvesting festival usually performed during the months of August, September and October (Zing Tha to Ratang Tha).
6. Loipuishak Rathakoui: Loipuishak is the festival of calling of soul usually held during the month of Biriiptha (December).

## CONCLUSION

The present study of Chiru tribe shows and reflects the rich cultural uniqueness of this community. It also indicates that they have their own traditional religion which has been practiced since time immemorial. The traditional worship service is of four kinds, among which, the common worship service of the villagers known as Laibaklon was performed at Niknalon by the chief priest of the village, Laishu Patheiin. He would offer sacrifice at the altar called Rothouina Mun. The significance of this worship service is to ensure peace, harmony and to prevent all harms and dangers including the loss of life of people. "Inroureii" is also one of the most important traditional worship services held once or twice in a year. The significance of this service is to sanctify from sin committed against God and fellow beings and to bring peace, joy and happiness to the family. Rites and rituals would be performed in accordance with seniority of the family. The worship service called "Sornom" is considered to be one of the most important traditional worship services of the Chiru tribe. The significance of this service is the prediction of the fortune of each individual and family for the coming year. Lastly but not the least is Louipuishak Rathakhoi which is believed by Chiru tribe to be another opportunity to redeem themselves if they are not good, if the outcome is good they can do much more than they do. In the changing scenario of the present contemporary world, the Chiru people are fortunate to know the fact that they still remember the traditional system of their tribe and efforts are made to preserve their rich culture and tradition which have been passed down from generation to generation by the progenitors. Knowing and understanding of their traditional religion is also one of the core elements of their cultural values which have always been connected and in touch with the human society. Moreover, this may be one of the reasons why we see the continuity of their traditional way of life. It may also be the social consciousness brought by the western education.

The advent of Christianity has brought drastic changes in the social, political, economic and religious aspects of human life. The strong movement of Christianity in the hill areas of Manipur has convinced the Chiru community to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ; now they are fully converted into Christianity not leaving even a single person in the traditional religion. In spite of their complete conversion to Christianity, one cannot deny the persistence of some elements of the traditional religion Chiru tribe. In fact, some traditional festivals are still observed and celebrated even in the present day too. This shows the importance and uniqueness of one's own culture and tradition as it the identity of the people itself.

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**Persons interviewed:**

1. Ashek Thanglen of Dolang Village
2. Angam Zating Chiru of Dolang Village
3. Rehongkha Thanglen of Bungte Chiru
4. Thanglenzam Thanglen of Choro Khullen
5. Thanglenwan Thanglen of Choro Khullen
6. Rangnetlar Sekho of Dolang Village
7. Thanglenshor of Dolang Village
8. Thangthoichoi Sekho of Dolang village
9. Laiperlen Sekho of Chiru Rem Colony Thangmeiband Imphal
10. Dingneichoi Sekho Chiru Rem Colony Thangmeiband Imphal
11. Thangchung Sekho of Dolang village