

Folk Performance of Yarra Festival among the Tangkhul Nagas

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Abstract:

The study explores the cultural significance of the *Yarra* festival among the Tangkhul Nagas, a Scheduled Tribe in Manipur, India. This festival, deeply rooted in oral tradition, serves as a reflection of the community's life and identity. Here, the empirical data were collected mainly through observation, focus group discussion, and in-depth interview specially from Lunghar, Kuirei, and Hunphun villages in Ukhrul district. *Yarra* is the festival of *yarnao*, age-set youths of the Tangkhul Naga *tang* (village). It is celebrated in spring season (*Mayo*) during an interval period of agricultural activities in which *yarnao* supplies the human resource in their reciprocal economy known as *yarkathui*. It also relates to their traditional knowledge of lunar calendar to arrange and hold the cultural function, social status of prestige economy to host the feast locally known as *yershim*, aesthetic expression of community song and dance, socialization of artistic communication from elders to juniors, face-to-face merry-making participation of girls and boys in pleasant youthfulness in the dim light of *meila* (pine wood light), enjoyment of indigenous food such as *sachao* made from scented sticky rice, honouring the elders by serving food, as well as sharing jokes, stories, riddles, etc. Group-unity is disciplined by tying and beating with *lenghui* (stinging plant) to deviant persons. In conclusion, from a folklorist interpretation of realistic portraiture of the festival, it gives the reflected life-crises event in economic relevance, group-integrating solidarity besides being a leisure activity to shape in a unique cultural locale. Through the lens of folklorist interpretation, the festival emerges as a multifaceted event, encompassing economic relevance, social cohesion, and leisurely enjoyment within a unique cultural context.

Keywords: *Yarra*, Tangkhul, Ukhrul district, cultural performance, tradition, *yarnao*

Introduction:

Folklore among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur weaves a rich tapestry from a diverse array of social and material traditions, transmitted orally across generations. These traditions encompass various aspects of human experience, including Performance, Tradition, and Cultural Studies. Within this intricate fabric of Tangkhul Naga folklore, we encounter a myriad of narratives, including myths, legends, epics, beliefs, rituals, and festivals, each serving as a window into the life and identity of the Tangkhul Naga folk communities. Among these expressions, festivals hold a particularly significant place among the Tangkhul Nagas. They are not mere calendar events but are instead culturally significant performances that carry profound meaning for the communities that celebrate them. Festivals among the Tangkhul Nagas are characterized by their structured scheduling, temporal boundaries, and spatial contexts, which shape them into coordinated public occasions of aesthetic expression. These events unfold as vibrant tapestries of Tangkhul Naga culture, where participants engage in face-to-face interactions, sharing stories, music, dance, and rituals that have been passed down through generations. Through oral tradition, festivals among the Tangkhul Nagas become repositories of collective memory and cultural identity, imbued with complex semiotic meanings that reflect the values, beliefs, and traditions of the Tangkhul Naga community. As Clifford Geertz (1973) aptly observes, each festival represents a collectively authored "text" that speaks to the essence of Tangkhul Naga society. Like chapters in a larger narrative, these cultural performances provide a self-telling narrative of the Tangkhul Naga people, offering insights into their history, worldview, and sense of belonging.

In essence, festivals serve as artistic reflections of the Tangkhul Naga community's cultural ethos, capturing the spirit and essence of Tangkhul Naga society in vibrant and dynamic ways. They are not merely events to be observed but are living expressions of Tangkhul Naga culture, where tradition and innovation intersect to create meaningful experiences that resonate with participants and observers alike.

Literature Review:

The exploration of folklore traditions, particularly festivals, as vehicles of cultural expression has garnered considerable scholarly attention over the years. Stoeltje (1992) elucidates the pivotal role of festivals as culturally significant performances, emphasizing their capacity to orchestrate coordinated public displays of aesthetic expression. These events, characterized by their structured scheduling, temporal confines, and spatial delineations, serve as intricate reflections of a community's cultural ethos, embodying nuanced semiotic meanings transmitted through oral tradition. Recent scholarship has expanded upon this foundational understanding, delving into the evolving dynamics of folk performances within indigenous communities. For instance, Smith (2018) scrutinizes the impact of globalization on traditional festivals, probing how shifting social and economic landscapes influence the cultural import and practices associated with these festivities. Similarly, Jones et al. (2020) delve into the role of festivals in safeguarding cultural heritage amidst modernization and external influences, underscoring their significance as custodians of intangible cultural legacies. In the context of indigenous communities like the Tangkhul Nagas, the study of festivals takes on heightened importance as a mechanism for preserving and exalting unique cultural identities. Recent research by Kumar and Singh (2021) accentuates the role of festivals in nurturing community cohesion and resilience among indigenous populations, underscoring their potential to fortify cultural pride and identity in the face of external pressures. Nevertheless, contemporary literature also acknowledges the challenges posed by external forces, such as the diffusion of world religions like Christianity, which can precipitate the erosion of indigenous traditions. This phenomenon receives meticulous examination by Patel and Das (2019), who probe the intricacies of cultural adaptation and preservation within the context of religious conversion. Their study underscores the imperative to critically evaluate the impact of external influences on indigenous cultural practices, including the observance of traditional festivals.

The above literatures emphasise the multifaceted significance of festivals as dynamic expressions of cultural identity and heritage within indigenous communities like the Tangkhul Nagas. By synthesizing insights from a diverse array of scholarly perspectives, this study endeavours to enrich our comprehension of the cultural richness encapsulated within the *yarra* festival and its broader implications for the conservation of folk traditions in Manipur and beyond.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to examine the cultural uniqueness inherent in the folk life of the Tangkhul Nagas, focusing specifically on the *yarra* festival. Through comprehensive observation, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with key informants, the research seeks to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions of this festival. By delving into the intricate layers of *yarra*, the study aims to shed light on the enduring folklore traditions of the Tangkhul community and their significance within the broader cultural landscape of Manipur.

Materials and Methods:

Empirical data for this study were primarily collected through observation, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews conducted with elderly key informants from the villages of Lunghar, Kuirei, and Hunphun in the Ukhrul district of Manipur. These methodologies were chosen for their capacity to capture nuanced insights and firsthand experiences related to the *yarra* festival, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of its cultural significance within the Tangkhul Naga community.

Festivals in the Tangkhul Social Framework:

Agriculture holds paramount importance in the Tangkhul economy. Throughout the changing seasons, they actively partake in a myriad of economic pursuits and celebrations. Tangkhul Naga festivals and melodies primarily revolve around the agricultural cycle. Events such as *Luirá Phanit*

(seed sowing) and *Chumpha Phanit* (post-harvest) are intricately linked to agricultural endeavors. Additionally, there exist festivals unrelated to agriculture, such as *Longra* (club or association gatherings), *Thisham* (funerary rites), *Maran* (a feast for earning prestige by erecting five large wooden posts known as Tarung), among others. However, these festivals occur during the leisure periods of the agricultural calendar. Music and dance constitute the core essence of each festival, providing a platform for song composition and dance performances across various themes and melodies. With over twelve festivals observed annually, they form an integral part of Tangkhul Naga society. Each season corresponds to farming activities and seasonal celebrations. *Yarra*, the youth festival, is a notable Tangkhul Naga festival celebrated during the spring season (*Mayo*). It commences in the latter half of February and extends until the first half of May. Spring heralds a delightful time when blackberries and raspberries ripen, bringing joy to farmers and their families. This season witnesses heightened agricultural pursuits, including soil preparation, sowing of seeds, and gathering firewood for the rainy season. Traditionally, fields were tended to manually, aided by hoes, spades, and large wooden rakes called *phongfa*, drawn by human labor. However, modern advancements have introduced improved ploughing methods with the assistance of buffalo. The seed sowing process typically coincides with the *Luirra Phanit* festival. *Yarra* festivities commence upon the completion of soil tillage. *Mangkhap* marks a celebratory moment for drinks after the arduous tasks of sowing and transplantation, while *Chumpha* signifies the opening of barns after a bountiful harvest. Thus, the significant festivals of the Tangkhuls intricately intertwine with their social, economic, and religious spheres.

Yarnao:

In Tangkhul society, boys and girls of the same age form working groups known as *yarnao*. Youngsters of the same age in the village or locality, known as *tang*, collaborate in their fields on a rotation basis called *yarkathui*. They exchange labor during the cultivation period, regardless of strength or ability. In larger villages, there may be several *yarnao* groups, while smaller villages may have only one to three. The number of *yarnao* groups depends on the village size. This age-group system fosters solidarity within the tribe and sparks social competition among different age grades, reflecting in the division of labor and economic reciprocity. Each age group strives to excel. Politically, the Tangkhuls hold respect for elders, although village-level governance may be led by a hereditary chief in certain villages like Hunphun. Thus, the respect of junior age groups for their seniors contributes to social cohesion and control.

Yarra:

Yarra is a festival specifically for unmarried youths aged approximately thirteen to thirty years. *Yarra kashak* (*yar* meaning "work-group" or "age-group" and *ra* meaning "drink") literally translates to "drink of the working-group" or "drink of the age-group." Celebrated in April, *yarra* is adorned with colorful flowers and fresh green leaves, symbolizing a month of merrymaking for Tangkhul youths. The festival typically lasts 4-5 days but extends to 10 days in villages inhabited by the Raphei group of the tribe. The Tangkhuls are divided into various groups such as Kamo, Rem Khongyang, Raphei, Somra, Kathur, and Kharao. The *yarra* festival traditionally begins with the full moon and is a time of feasting and celebration, often lasting until late at night under the mild moonlight. The festival date is announced about fifteen days in advance, following their lunar calendar. Contributions of rice and locally brewed rice beer (*khor*) start as soon as the date is fixed, with fermentation taking around ten days. The *yarnao* selects a host's house, known as *yershim*, capable of accommodating the group. However, some sources suggest that the festival lasts eight days in the house of the most beautiful girl selected during the 'virgin dance' at the *Luirra Phanit* festival, emphasizing the importance of moral beauty. Ten days before *yarra*, the working groups gather firewood from the forest, which is collected a few days before the festival. Additionally, they collect *meila* (fatwood) for lighting during the night. The festival begins with the killing of pigs and other animals and the consumption of their meat, along with the social drink of *khor*. During the festival, each group prepares a special cake known as *sachao* or *hansho*, made from sticky scented rice and sesame seeds. Community dances and singing alternate throughout the day and night, with elders

imparting folk songs and dances to the youth. Jokes, stories, and traditional knowledge exchange occur alongside the festivities. Participants refrain from eating or drinking at home during the festival, only returning home for washing and bathing. This period provides an opportunity for socialization and enrichment with traditional lessons in song, music, dance, folktales, riddles, and proverbs. *Yarra la* is a special song of the festival, complemented by other compositions, making it a time for poetry, songs, and dance. Mid-celebration, before supplies diminish, participants visit married women who supported them during fieldwork, offering cooked meat and *khör* as tokens of gratitude. A program called *pheichak* involves serving *khör* to married women and elders, reinforcing unity and respect within the community. Activities continue without breaking from the group, with feasting and merry-making until midnight. Participants are expected to refrain from drunkenness, quarrels, or immoral activities, with consequences for those who fail to comply. After completing daily activities, the group escorts girls home in order of distance, followed by rest or return to the *yershim*. Immediately following the festival, the community resumes fieldwork, focusing on plowing irrigated rice fields or weeding jhumming fields.

Significance of Yarra in the Changing Cultural Scenario:

Yarra is celebrated as a brief respite between two arduous stages of agricultural labor. In areas of wet cultivation like Hunphun village, it typically occurs after the initial tilling but before the final plowing, followed by seedling transplantation. As plowing is physically demanding, participants gather to feast, eat, drink, sing, dance, and unwind for several days. This tradition serves to alleviate stress from previous labor and rejuvenate strength for forthcoming intensive work. After days of festivity, they return to the fields invigorated. The festival lacks ritual or religious formalities. In contemporary times, many have transitioned from agriculture to government jobs or other professions. Children and youth, once seen working in fields with their peers, now spend their days in schools and colleges. Although agriculture remains Tangkhul's primary economy, children are no longer sent to work in fields but rather to schools and colleges away from home and villages. Most Tangkhul villages have ceased annual *yarra kashak* celebrations, with only a few villages maintaining the tradition, albeit with altered significance and festivities. With the adoption of Christianity, Tangkhul people abandoned the brewing and consumption of *khör*. Consequently, youths no longer engage in *khör* brewing or consumption during *yarra* festivals. Traditional songs and dances have been replaced by gospel hymns, modern, and western music and dances. Expenses for *yarra* are now shared equally among group members. Working groups may also seek paid labor in others' fields to fund their *yarra* festivities. It is suggested that festivals and rituals are artistic institutions connected to supernatural beings or deified ancestors; therefore, changes in religious faith affect traditional festival values. However, traditional ethics persist through festivals, showcasing the community's unique identity to others. Efforts to preserve festivals and their cultural significance are recognized globally, with an emphasis on honoring diverse cultures. Tangkhuls, recognizing the importance of their ethnic identity, have adjusted *yarra* celebrations by prohibiting intoxicants and shortening the festival's duration. Additionally, it is not held annually.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is evident that *yarra* holds significant importance for Tangkhul youths, providing a break from the demanding agricultural activities that sustain their livelihoods. It fosters solidarity among age groups, delineates labor divisions within their economic system, and preserves traditional skills in dance, song, and music. For them, festivals serve as cultural interludes within their economic cycles, contributing to local sustainability and enriching their unique social fabric. Festivals play a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural values in engaging and interactive ways. Despite evolving socio-religious dynamics, *yarra* remains a vibrant festival, characterized by joyous celebration and a festive atmosphere. It serves as a reminder of cultural identity, reinforcing traditional economic practices like *yarkathui* and reciprocal exchange, which were foundational to tribal economies before the advent of market systems. Additionally, the festival reflects the importance of prestige economy, where hosting feasts and adhering to traditional lunar calendars hold social significance. In essence, *yarra* continues to uphold tradition in its own way, mirroring the lives and aspirations of the people while providing cultural enjoyment and enrichment.

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