

## The Religious Life of the Tاراos: Past and Present

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### Abstract

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*Religion is a particular system of faith and worship. The Tاراos believes in rapu- the creator of the universe, goddess Shangku- the savour and spirit. The traditional religious beliefs of gods, goddesses, deities were based on worship, propitiation and tackling of gods, deities, the ancestors and also the evil spirits. However, in practices the worship includes sacrificial of animals, fowl, rice beer, etc., followed by a grand feast in the belief of a superior power always direct the lives and the course of nature and observed submission, devotion and reverence to the supernatural power. Such belief, faith and practices related to the absolute power constitute the religious life of the Tاراos in the past. But today, the life of the Tاراos had undergone a change with conversion to Christianity.*

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**Keywords:** Tاراos, Religion, Belief, Rituals, goddess Shangku, Supernatural, Conversion.

### 1.Introduction

The Tاراos is a smallest and least known tribe of Manipur in the north east India with a population of some hundreds. A single village origin in the long past has gained with six villages in Chandel district and a single village in Ukhrul district of Manipur. Tاراos simply means 'a happy people' derived from the loud roaring sound 'rao rao' (the naga of April 1981: 49) produced by the dying tiger slain by the legendary Tاراos hero Khurpu in the periodical period. Like the various tribes of the region their legend has it that the progenitors of the Tاراos live inside a cave called tukleikhur and emerge out from a cave at the bank of enthohna mul or the houbi hill believed to be at the bank of Chindwin River in Burma the current Myanmar. Thereafter migrated to one place to another and currently entered to the eastern part of Manipur.

Gangumei Kabui, (1976) reported that the Tاراos had come to the notice of the ancient kings of Manipur. The old chronicles of Manipur, particularly the Loiyamba Shilyen, the Royal Edict of King Loiyamba (1072-1122 A.D.) refers to the duties to be performed and tribute to be paid by the Tاراos in the south-east of Manipur. The earliest allusion of the Tاراos in the Meitei Chronicles (Cheitharol Kumbaba) occurs during the reign of Paikhomba in connection with the abandoning of Tاراos in 1677 A.D. (Iboongohal and Khelchandra ed. 1667:38). Reference of Shangkhuleima, the goddess of the Tاراos in the Royal chronicles occurs in 1892 A.D. during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj with regards to the worshipping of Shangkhuleima by the Tاراos. J. Shakespear (1912;175) was of the opinion that most of the old kuki tribes have a belief in pathien as their supreme deity except for the Tاراos which worship another goddess which has a Meitei name. In fact the Tاراos continued to worship Shangkhuleima as late as 1966 till they became virtually christianized.

## 2. Discussion on the past religion of the Tarao

A religion is a system of belief and practices found in every culture that formalizes the conception of the relation between human beings with supernatural forces and supernatural beliefs which seems to bind together men and supernatural power. Belief and rituals have been found to be the main component part of religion everywhere.

In the past the Taraos were the believers of three important beings;

1. The rapu - the master of all
2. The goddess - Shangku also called Piterte- the savour and
3. The spirit - mostly of evil

### 2:1 The Rapu:

The Tarao believe that the Supreme God, The concept of God by the Tarao can also be compared with the Vedic explanation which read the one reality is called by the wise in different ways, Agni, Yama, materisva. (Rig Neda 164; 46). Rapu created the universe and all Mankind . He is in spirit and no statue had ever made as a symbol. But a temple called Lamvaal or Rapu thlaam is constructed in the hearth of the village. An alter called Sharungpham or Rapupham is made for Rapu. Markheengkung a `Y` shape tree a symbol of their victory over their enemies when emerged from the cave is created in front of the temple once in every six years. Besides Shangatlin is erected three times in a year to predict their future sign by performing rituals. Most religious activities are also carried out by two village Priests known as Amcham-Amlan.

Markheengkung and Shangatlin are erected in front of each houses for worship and offering, which is consider stronger and powerful than an enemy. It is Rapu himself who is in the form of this tree. The markheeng is thus sacred and victorious tree for the Tarao indeed.

### 2:2. The goddess Shangku (Piterte) :

The Taraos were followers of goddess Shangku, a woman who belonged to Khulpu clan. The goddess is also known as Rapu and was their savour from fire and flood. The term Shangku to Shangkhuleima was another name given by the Manipuri King. A shrine of goddess Shangku Rapu is located just below Moreh road near Tengnoupal. The Tarao people worshipped this goddess Shangku once in a year during the month of August and lasted for two long days. The king of Manipur Maharaja Budhachandra also worship her by every two years because she was married with the god of Meitei called Wangbrel lai, the Meitei god of water. So there had been a close relationship between the two communities. Reference of Shangkuleima, the goddess of the Tarao, in the Royal Chronicles occurs in 1872 A.D. during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj. With regards to the worshipping of Shangkuleima by the Tarao, Shakespears (1912:175) was of the opinion that most of the Kuki tribes have a belief in pathien as their supreme deity except for the Tarao which worship another goddess which has Meitei's name. Annual worshipping of the goddess Shangku continued till 1966. Sacrifice of animals, a reddish Tarao rice called masounu, dried fish, rice beer, crusted aluminium chips were offer followed by a religious feast. On 5th February 1989 Shri. Priyo Singh took the image of Shangkuleima along with the articles including coring vessels, bamboo cup, and iron rod for lifting the sacrificial offering for presence in the state museum of Manipur

### 2:3. The Spirit; Mostly of Evil:

In all societies of simple technology, people believe that the process of nature and the success of human endeavour are under the control of entities outside the range of everyday experience, whole intervention can change the course of events. The word that is generally used to describe such entities is considered supernatural (S, F. Nadel, Nupe religion, 1954). Animism, animatisms, dreams, divination, fertility cult, magic, taboo, totemism, witchcraft, shamanism, etc constitute the core religion of the people. The Tarao believe in a number of deities which are applicable to the approaches that becomes stereotyped which is ritualised (F.R. Horton and R. Finnegan eds., modes of thoughts), and spirit, the existence of many spirits which are mostly evil. They are called Rapu Ramnai. They believe that sickness or death of any person is caused by Rapu Ramnai. So sacrifices are offered to the spirit. Some of the deities and evil spirit prevailing among them includes;

- a. The Arao- The Arao is a family deity associated with birth ceremony (naothlathloh). A hen for female child and a cock for a male child was sacrifice for naothlathloh.

- b. Kashalei – It is a deity resting at the top of a first pillar. When an individual is suffering from any disease or illness, the family perform this ritual at the threshold of the house. It was believed that there is a deity resting at the top of the first pillar of the house that protect the family from all evil. The corpse's head is directed forwards its pillar. At this time deity is removed and place somewhere in the courtyard till the dead body has been taken to the burial ground.
- c. Markheengkuung maring – It is a domicile deity. It is erected in front of each house. It is related with child marriage (Yurkhu), a ceremony for adoption of a child (raochal) and other. It can be performed by either by the head of the family or amcham and amlan.
- d. Buloon – It is the deity of a family's hearth. The head of the family used to drop little rice upon the hearth before he starts eating as a sign of gracing to god for the meal.
- e. Enkharkung thlou – It is another deity at the front door. It is magico-religious act conducted by the village Priest at threshold of the front door. It was perform when a child or any members of a family is suffering from illness.
- f. Rapu Ramnai – The Tarao believes in the existence of many spirits, mostly evil and are called Rapu Ramnai. These spirits mostly resides outsides the village and are also known as Ram Rapu (ghost of the forest)'
  - i. Kousar : A person's spirit of unnatural dead- accident, suicide or beyond the law of the people. The spirit of these peoples is considered evil, so such spirits are believed to live in the forest, rocks, etc. When this spirit feels hungry, thirsty the spirit comes and enter to anybody and feed them.
  - ii. Kukthla or amarui: These are evil spirit and they are in the forest too, like a ghost these spirits sometimes frightened people through sign, sound etc., and even make people to fear. However such kukthla or amarui (evil spirit) can be chased out easily by mischief words or scolding responding to their action.
  - iii. Lapkhal khang and Mijaamthlou: These are gods and they are evil too. Therefore the living soul and the spirit of the dead person can be separated through sacrificing chicken. The rice is kept on a banana leaf, the magician cuts and divides the rice into two equal portions, the first portion is offer on the graveyard of the dead person and the remaining portion is given to the living person.

#### 2:4. Rites and Rituals:

Rites and rituals insulate each group from the other while at the same time uniting in common responsibility for the welfare of the country (American Anthropologist 1936). The Tarao had performed certain rites and rituals throughout the year. Some of the activities regarding rites and rituals practised by the Tarao are briefly described as-

1. Thlaa shaan – It is a ritual performed in the month of december every year for Selecting out new jhumming area. It is performed by a man of Rapdou, a sub-clan of Thangsha. He would select or choose the place of jhumming area by peeling the stem of markheeng tree towards the bottom. If the remove bark turns up while falling on the ground it is a sign of good result of agriculture for the particular year.
2. Palphar – It is a ritual for closing of a gate performed in the month of Matrao (February). The whole villagers after constructing the gate, a Khulpu Priest performed its ritual. He closed the gate with a special wood called Uktru. Khakla kah (shooting of arrows) follow to chase all the evil spirits inside and outside the village. Once the gate is closed, no one is permitted to pass nor enter through it unless the gate is open the next day by the Khulpu Priest.
3. Chemha Thalha: This ritual is to prevent any harm while using knives and axes. Sacrifice of a dog at Lamvaal or Temple is the main rituals of Chemha Thalha khaam. The ritual is performed by the Khulpu Priest at the foot of a specific wood, locally known as Shungreel. This Shungreel is erected near Uichuk lung (Particular stone) for this particular ritual. The Khulpu prays that the power of the knives should be used against the tree and warded off the harm of the people. A

Tursheem maluum rupiphui (bamboo cup with pointed edge on Tursheem maluum rupiphui (bamboo cup with pointed edge on one side) is placed at the sacrificial place and an egg is broken over it. The flow of the egg is observed in two ways –

- i. If the fluids suddenly flow, it indicates cuts and wound. So the villagers are advice to be careful. and
- ii. If there is abundant flow of yolk toward east, it predicts good yielding for the particular year. But if the albumen amount is more on any direction it indicates scarcity of rice.

4. **Triktru:** This ritual is mainly done in the month of Tluunram (June). It is a final send off ceremony of all the departed souls of the whole year. P.R. Gurdon (1990) mentioned in the ancient time that the Japanese performed ceremonies at regular intervals at the tomb of the deceased member of the family, food and drinks were served to the spirit. These features of the Japanese ancient cult is common with the ancestor worship of the Taraos. The Tarao used to offered food and drinks at the tomb of the dead person once in every week unless triktru rituals is performed. Once this ritual is performed offering of food and drinks are no longer offered. The living family or families or the parents offer a grant feast to the villagers in order to shed off their sorrow. And it was believed that by performing these rituals, the soul rested in peace in it above forever.

5. **Rumuserh** – It is also a ritual performed that lasted for two long days in the month of Diva (Augusst) mainly for knowing the significance of the sign of the goddess Shangku (Piterte). It is a ritual performed by the village Priest alone and accompanied by one elder each from the Chanasa and Katrimsha clan.

6 **Kumseer** – This ritual is performed when a boy(s) child attained the age of six. It takes place in the last week of May every year. Anyone can perform kumseer. A rice beer and a big feast is provided by the host. The whole villagers enjoyed the celebration with beating of drum, singing and dancing throughout the night.

7. **Kumpeetlung** – It is a periodical ritual performed once in every six year. It is the ritual of renovation and cleaning of the Holy Lamvaalthlaam (the temple of God). It is initiated by the village Priest the Khulpu. All men folk went hunting for three days and they are not allowed to enter the village, however they have to stay at the outskirt of the village gate. After three days they would enter the village with the animals they hunt and performed ritual at Lamvaal thlaam. It is significant to note that three elders one from each clan went to Laimaton to worship and beg blessing from goddess Shangku also called Piterte.

8. **Concept of Soul and Sin:** Thlavai (The soul) is believed to be with human being right from the time when a child is conceived. It is only death that separated the soul and the body. The soul never dies or otherwise, but one has to attain or receives his or her respective rewards in the final judgement at Thikhu by Chum kurung. They believed that animals too have soul, and so animal is killed to accompany the departed soul of the person indicating that soul also live even after death. They believed that sin is nothing good, but the evil motion like killing, stealing, and immorality etc. Those evil doers on earth never reach the place of thikhu- the place or the village of death. Thikhu is meant for the good souls, to do good and no evil while living on the earth. The souls of the evildoers remain on the trees, in the rivers, in the forest, and thus hunt for human beings.

9. **Rituals performed in time of sickness:**

When a person is sick. The village physician is consulted; the physician finds the cause of sickness with the help of a bow and rice. Bow is used for chasing the evil spirit and rice for the spirit. Either an egg or a dog or a hen is sacrifice to the evil spirit. For instance, in an egg, a small hole is made and through this the flow of a yolk is observed. The position of the yolk flow does the prediction, and in case of animal chopping the neck does the prediction. If blood does not comes out while chopping it is believed that sickness will not be healed.

10. **Ritual performed in time of Drought** –

During drought, goddess Shangku thus involved. People collected antoxicated plant called Kuru and performed the rituals at the meeting point of three stream i.e. Athlangva, Marouva and Tuimathla for kurusuk (beating of antoxicating kuru plant) for catching fish. At dawn a woman from the from the tlangsha clan starts fishing and in the meantime an energetic man ran up with a large nabornah tree leaf round his head, as soon as he reach the statue of Shangku, he cover the statue of Shangku with the naborna leaf and ran towards reishok flower (rhododendron arboretum) and break a branch of leaf, the moment he breaks the flower plant goddess Shangku bestow her blessing upon the people.

Traditionally, the Tarao believed in a number of gods, goddesses, deities and spirit. Their religion was mainly based on worship, propitiation and tackling of gods, deities, the ancestors and also the evil spirits. And however in practices, the worship also includes sacrificial of animals, fowls, rice beer followed by grant feast.

11. Death rites: When a person dies, the death body is bathed and laid properly. Every household brings a handful of rice to the deceased family, a shawl from the relatives and friends were also presented as a gift- to mark their presence and oneness with the death. They believed that the departed soul has to cross a river and therefore a cow is killed so that the person can hold the tail of a cow when crossing the river. In olden days to life, they believed that the soul of the dead man and woman returns home to life on six and five days respectively. But the dead never risen again to life as a man was not welcome by his family. Accordingly, A man died and on the sixth day he had to rise. So, his family waited for his returned. But the man came back with stinking body, full of maggots and his daughter-in-law felt dirty and was not welcome. So, he went back to his burial place again and since then death never rises again. A gourd containing water was kept on a grave. A small basket is made and kept in the hearth of storing food for the departed soul daily. The food is collected and burnt at the grave every six days for man and five days for woman by the family. This keeping and burning of food continues till they performed the ceremony of Triktru in the month of June every year i.e. the last ceremony for the death to bid good bye. After triktru ceremony the soul of the death was believed to live in the place where gods reigns at thikhu.

3. Findings and Conclusion: Changes of the Tarao religion and its significance: Changes is usually constructed as being adaptation by which a society faced with evolving paradigm `adapt` to the change expectations. E. A. Shils suggested that in the new states of ruling elite consist of the people who have chosen to reject traditional values and seek deliberately to modernise their Society.

Though changes in the religion may occur in any of the three elements like photography, mythology and rituals, yet more often than not an understanding of the change is limited to the more concrete aspects of religion in the form, rituals and ceremonies. That the change in the form and ceremonies affect its appearance- the form, the essence or the spirit of religion to the more concrete aspects of religion in the form, rituals and ceremonies. That the change in the form and ceremonies affect its appearance- the form, the essence or the spirit of religion remains intact. However, if there were a significant shift in its philosophy the religion would lose its spirit-clinging the dead appearances may be, but having lost the very core of its cultural heritage.

The Tarao as they were converted to Christianity. Religion in the form of Christianity has played a significant role in bringing about change and development. Christianity did not exist before; it was the British Missionaries who took up the work of converting them from their previous belief in animism and supernaturalism. There are significant changes in the family, marriage, social life, marriage, social life, food habit and so on. Some of the changes are briefly discuss below:

The new faith through Christianity had brought peace among them; a religion that met their needs sets them from the bondage of evil spirits. Their animistic religion did not teach them about sin and salvation, but a new Christian society based on equality and natural aspect was established.

Regarding social life, Christianity has fast reaching influence in most of their festivals, taboos and ceremonies which were replace by Christian festivals like good Friday, passion week, Easter Sunday, Christmas, New-year etc. The practices of food offering to the spirit of the dead once in every six days in the graveyard that continued till the annual ritual of triktru was totally given up since they believed that human spirits does not roam on earth.

Individuals and families helped each other in times of death and other misfortunes in the form of cash or deed and also celebrate together in times of any important gathering like marriage, birth etc. In most of the occasion public were provided with jubel (rice beer), however, now a days they used to offer the public by tea replaced rice beer. Marriage is being honoured and solemnised in the church by Reverent or Pastor with western style in a modernised way. The spirit of the Christian family and marriage is love which does not regard the wife consciously or unconsciously, as simply the one who took his meal, washes his clothes, cleanse his house and brings up his children but is an equal partner in all the household matters.

The importance of education is realised by the parents, who send their children to schools and colleges. Daughters and sons were treated equally by the parents; these changes are because of the education opportunities and willingness of the people. Man and woman are moving away from low paid agricultural labour and getting jobs which pay those more like the clerk, teachers, doctors, lecturers etc., in private and government departments.

With the advent of Christianity, the lifestyle of the Tarao has tremendously changed even in the sanitation and hygiene. For instance, a mother chewing of food for the babies and unhealthy mouth to mouth feeding was replaced by a special cooking for babies and spoon feeding. The practices of letting freely of pigs, dogs and chicken in the open ground were completely stopped. Washing of hands before eating, praying before meals, wearing of clothes which are comfortable and mainly western style like trouser, skirts, jeans, etc., are common now a days.

Besides, they have become in the sphere of occupations. They are no longer farmer, cultivators, but many of them have gone to become doctors, engineers, typists, clerks, lecturers etc. They are also compelled to spend their times for discharging their occupational duties, which have led them to concentrate less time on the practices and observance of their old traditional rituals, tradition and customs in their day-to-days life. Women are no longer housewife instead taken up jobs like teaching, nursing, etc. Traditional goods have given ways to western goods like chairs, tables, umbrella and other modern aluminium utensils etc. Changes have taken place in the matter of food habit as well as many items of fresh vegetables. Fresh pulses and the like are added to the otherwise restricted diet of rice and meat.

New methods of farming and cultivation have emerged; most of the cultivation has given to use fertilisers, tractors, pesticides, etc., to increase the yield crops. The hard money earned is invested in the banks for future purposes. Houses are built with proper ventilation with drainage facilities, and household items like T.V. fridge, telephone, truck, jeep, van etc. are now the common features among the Tarao. The traditional religion has been replaced by the Christianity which in turn tends them to forgo the rites, rituals. Side by side many of the festivals in relation are kept aside and Christian festivals had become largest festivals which are now observed. All the traditional beliefs and practices are today becomes a thing of the past as all have embraced with Christianity. However, it is observed that they also follows their traditional ways of life in order to resurrect their old values as far as possible as to observe their unique identity and such change would not sweep away the old values on which the very foundation of the society rest.

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