

Sweat, Toil And Marriage: The Practice of “Kumlo” in the Traditional Chothe Society of Manipur

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Abstract: *Marriage is one of the oldest living institutions of mankind. It gives social and legal recognition to the union between individuals for the perpetuation and maintenance of social order. Every society has its own unique customs in marriage such as rites, rituals and other traditions which are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, religious and historical factors. This article is an analysis of one such practice: “kumlo”, one of the pre-wedding traditions popularly practiced (but not limited to) by the traditional Chothe tribal society of Manipur. In simple words, this cultural practice entails a boy to perform labour services for his prospective bride’s family to gain the right of marriage from her parents, i.e bride service. The present article contends that while the practice has been interpreted as an expression of an excessive love shown by the Chothe parents towards their daughters, on the other hand, it perpetuates the notion of male dominance or patriarchy by treating the women as commodity wherein a prospective groom has to earn the marital rights through labour or payment. In reconstructing this cultural practice, a combination of various qualitative research techniques, drawn from both primary sources such as oral tradition, handwritten notes, interviews, personal diaries of village elders, as well as scattered references in secondary literatures written by British as well as Indian anthropologists have been incorporated.*

Keywords: *Chothe, Kumlo, Bride Service, Zurman, Modernisation*

The Chothe tribe is one of the oldest indigenous communities, belonging to the Nagas of Manipur, in north-eastern parts of India. The account of their origin is shrouded in mystery, intertwined between myth and history. In fact, the knowledge about their past regarding origin, migration and settlement at their present location has been passed down throughout the generation by word of mouth in the form of folktales, songs, proverbs, chantings, and so on. Similar to other tribes of the region, the Chothe believes in the highly popular “cave and tiger” myth – that they came out of a primordial cave (variously

known as Hurpi-Kathorang (or Hurpi Thoranga in the writings of some local scholars) in which the mouth was guarded by a ferocious tiger (kamkei rangpa). According to oral tradition, it was the intercession of one man from the Makan clan (one of the principal clans) that ensured the safe passage of all the other clan members out of the cave. Similar to certain communities of the state, the Chothe tribe has 7 (seven) principal clans.

The dialect spoken by the Chothe belongs to the Tibeto-Burman, a sub-group of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. Recently, it was listed as “definitely endangered” in the UNESCO’s World Atlas of Languages. At present, there are 19 Chothe villages which are distributed across three districts of the state: Bishnupur, Chandel and Tengnoupal districts. The total population of the tribe stands at 3,580.¹

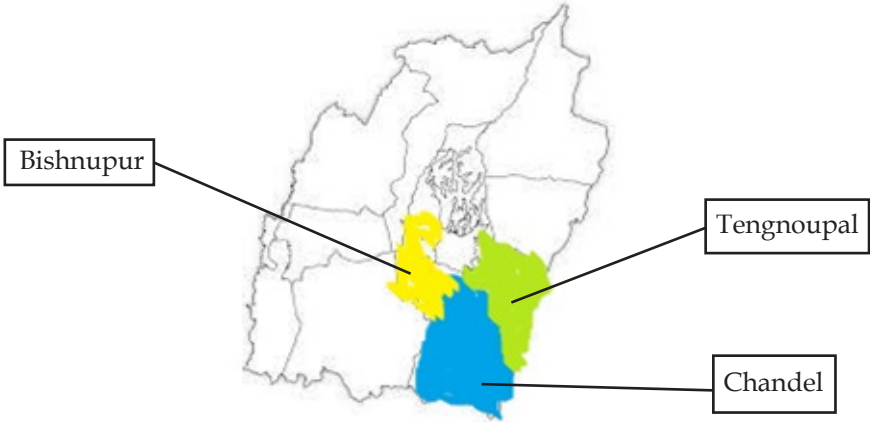


Figure: Distribution of the Chothe tribe in Manipur

Research objectives

- 1. To examine the cultural significance of kumlo in the traditional Chothe society.
- 2. To assess the position of women in light of the practice of kumlo.

Methodology

A combination of various qualitative research techniques drawn from both primary sources such as oral tradition, handwritten notes, interviews, personal diaries of village elders, as well as secondary sources including scattered references in secondary literatures written by British as well as Indian anthropologists have been incorporated in the present article.

Review of Literature

The concept of bride-service is rooted in many ancient societies where a husband has to perform labour services to gain full rights to his wife. In their book, "African System of Kinship and Marriage," Radcliffe Brown and Daryll Forde interpreted the practice as one form of 'marriage payment' in which instead of payment in goods (bride price) the bridegroom must stay in the house of his future wife and work for her family or her kins for the loss of her labour.² This constitutes the classical compensatory interpretation of bride service.

However, critics have argued that by overtly focussing on the economic feature, the symbolic and functional aspect of this cultural practice has been ignored. It has been argued that through the hardships during the period of labour service, the girl's family can assess the character and skills of the boy. In other words, it can be a test of demeanour and commitment of the prospective groom rather than simply an equivalent of a bride-price.³

Writing about the Chothes, British colonial officers such as Col. J. Shakespear asserted that a man's choice in selecting his bride is very limited and fixed as the tribe follows prescriptive clan exogamy. For instance, out of the seven major clans, a man cannot choose his bride from any of the remaining six clans but is restricted to certain sibs or sub-sibs based on established social norms and traditions. Violation of this rule results in severe social sanction. However, specific informations on bride-service are relatively rare and scanty in his work.

A serious academic study on the Chothes began with the works of Indian anthropologists and later continued by the local researchers and academicians. R.C Roy's article "Notes on the Chawte Kuki Clan" is a case in point. In this article, the writer provides a short yet concised description of the Chothes living under Bishnupur district, covering almost every aspects of the community. On bride-service, it was mentioned that a boy has to perform labour service in the house of his bride's family for three years before the actual marriage occurred. However, if the boy's family can afford a bride-price, then the labour service need not be performed.⁴

However, it was professor T.C Das who wrote one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Chothes. Just like Roy, Das's work was a result of his extensive ethnographic field work which was carried out between 1931 and 1936 although a periodic stay among the community was said to last only four to five months. In his discussion on marriage, he called the practice of kumlo (bride-service) as "yaun-gimba / yaun-inba" (a cultural practice where a husband lives in the house of his wife after marriage), which are related but nonetheless two different things.⁵ However, despite its limitations, the monograph deals with every aspects of the community in greater detail than any existing book does.

Using the data provided by Das and Roy, many scholars since the 1940s and 50s onwards have discussed the nature of the marriage system prevalent among the Chothes. By custom, an ideal marriage partner for a man is his mother's father's daughter. Rodney Needham has called this a prescriptive matrilateral

cross-cousin marriage.⁶ Since then, this has generated interests from other scholars, both western and Indians. Of late, Cheithou Yuhlung, one of the leading scholars from the Chothe community has joined in the fray.

In Chothe Phurup Ki Samlap Pa Puwari, an article in an edited book, the author Y. Maipak Chothe covers an important dimension of society including birth, marriage, death, village councils etc. In relation to marriage, the article provides concise information on various aspects such as types of marriages, prescribed exogamous clans, bride-service, marriage rites, etc. The author observes that while it is common for the parents of a boy (s) to find a suitable bride for their children, the reverse is not true, even in case of a family with only daughters.⁷

Traditional Marriage system

The term for marriage in the traditional Chothe dialect is “nuhla-pamhla”. Marriage provides an expression to relationship between a bride and groom on one hand and among the kinsfolk on the other hand. The nature of marriage practiced by the Chothe is one of the most widely discussed and debated issues among the anthropologists, both western and Indian for its preference of a particular kind of marriage rule: matrilineal cross-cousin marriage wherein a boy marries his mother's brother's daughter. The society practices a prescriptive clan based exogamous marriage system. There are seven major clans with their numerous sub-clans or sub-sibs. People belonging to the same sibs are considered to be of one's kin and relation and as such, marriage is prohibited between the same sibs. Following are the names of the seven major clans (in alphabetical order):

1. Khiang
2. Makan
3. Mareem/Marim
4. Parpa
5. Rangsai
6. Thao
7. Yuhlung

The society places an immense importance to the institution of marriage to such an extent that parents often urge their children to get married when they come of certain age. However, there was no fixed age of marriage. Normally, both boys and girls usually got married in their teenage or little later in their 20s. Chothe marriage can be classified under three broad categories:

- 1) Arranged marriage
- 2) Love marriage (e.g. Elopement)
- 3) Forced marriage.

When a boy reaches certain age, his parents will start looking for a suitable girl, keeping in mind the prescribed exogamous clans, ideally the mother's brother's daughter. These rules are strictly observed by the society. There are

minor differences at a village level when it comes to marriage procedures. In some villages, if both the parties agree to the union, then the boy's parents must present a fowl and jar of rice beer (zu) to initiate a customary practice known as 'reikungseel' (engagement), making public the intention of both the parties to marriage.⁸

However, before the actual marriage happens, the boy has to prove his worth by staying and working in the house of the bride's family for three years (or less depending on the agreement) by doing manual labour services of any kind to the satisfaction of his prospective parents-in-law. This practice is traditionally known as 'kumlo' (i.e. bride service). However, if the boy's family can pay the bride price, then the labour service need not be performed.⁹

According to village elders, marriage was such an inexpensive affair in the past that it could be done just by slaughtering a fowl or a dog or a pig. Writing about the Chothe (Chawte) J. Shakespear has asserted that marriage is by "simple purchase" and the items consist of a spear, dao, fowl and zu.¹⁰ However, the practice should not be understood in a literal sale and purchase but a symbolic economic exchange compensating the bride's family for her utility and a symbol of woman's value in the family.

Due to combination of various factors such as limited geographical mobility, ease of matching, strong community ties etc., an intra-village marriage is more common among the Chothe. If a boy marries a girl from other village, a customary fines consisting of a pig of certain size and a jar of zu, collectively known as "phungtangram" is to be paid by the boy's family to the village council of the aforementioned village. At present, a jar of zu has been substituted by an equivalent value of Rs. 500. Further, if a boy marries a non-Chothe girl, the customary laws of the two tribes are taken into consideration to decide the payment of phungtangram.¹¹

Kumlo and its cultural significance

Kumlo is derived from a word, kum meaning 'a year' and lo 'to earn or to obtain something in exchange for labour or services'. However, the practice cannot be understood in its entirety from the literal meaning of the term itself due to complexity of the socio-cultural and religious customs involved in the traditional Chothe marriages. Alternatively, it is also known by the term "phukal lorut." In oral tradition, a Chothe boy named Chungthang Yuhlung was serving his three years labour service when his prospective bride, Thaowon Samhranu, well known for her beautiful and long hair was forcibly taken away by the king's men during the reign of Charairongba.¹²

The duration of the service varies across families depending on the agreement between the two parties. But normally, the standard period is of three (3) years. In case of a single male child living with his ageing parents, the boy's parents can negotiate with the girl's families to shorten the period of bride service or pay Rs. 3000 in lieu. During this period, the boy is expected to provide various

labour services such as jhum work, basket making, domestication of animals, community services etc. Although they can eat together, the boy and his prospective bride slept separately as they have not been married. In the 'Original customs and culture of the Chothe tribe', written by the Lamlanghupi Chothe village research committee, a boy is required to present four jars of rice beer (zu) each year to the bride's relatives and clansmen until the completion of the kumlo service.¹³

On completion of three years, if the girl's family is impressed with the groom, then an auspicious day is fixed for marriage. The actual marriage takes place in the bride's house with all the customary exchange of gifts on both sides. After the completion of the marriage ceremony, the bride is escorted to her new home (i.e husband's house) but the groom continues to stay with the bride's parents for seven more days. On the seventh day, the groom's parents visit the bride's parental house to formalise the completion of the kumlo service.¹⁴ Only then, a groom can return to his natal place and begins a fresh start with his wife. Some of the conditions under which a man can be exempted from bride service are widow remarriage, premarital conception and when a boy marries a divorcee, etc.

With the adoption of Christianity, modernisation, urbanisation, greater economic independence coupled with the influence of technology and media, there is a shift to relationship based on love and individual choice, emotional compatibility making bride service irrelevant and outdated. At present, the Chothe society has no longer practiced kumlo as part of the wedding traditions. In the revised customary laws prepared by the Chothe Lim Abom, Manipur (CLAM), an apex organisation of the Chothe tribe, the aforementioned practice has been replaced by an equivalent monetary value amounting to Rs. 12,000 along with additional gifts in both cash and kind, to be presented to the girl's family. These are collectively known as zurman.¹⁵

In anthropological writings, a term which is closest in meaning to the practice of kumlo is the "bride service" or "suitor service." The term first appeared in Radcliffe Brown's study on marriage customs among the African tribes. He discussed it as one form of 'marriage payment' in which instead of payment in goods, the bridegroom must serve for his wife by working for her family and her kins. He further maintained that bride service, unlike payment in goods is not returnable in case of divorce.¹⁶ Historically, the earliest reference of a bride service is found in the biblical account of Jacob's 14 years' labour in Laban's house for his two daughters, Leah and Rachel.

Bride service is a rare but documented practice found in about 11 percent of the world's tribal societies. Studies have confirmed its presence among the Jivaro people of Peru and Ecuador, Urarina of Peruvian Amazon basin, Wakuenai people of Brazil and Colombia, Yecuana Indians of Venezuela, Timbira people of Brazil. In India, it is practiced by the Gonds, Bhils, Baigas, Birhor and some tribal groups of northeast India.¹⁷

Traditionally, kumlo has been an integral part of the customary Chothe marriage. Any discussion on marriage is incomplete without acknowledging its importance as a necessary step before the formal sanctioning of a marriage. The practice is a reflection of a society such as the Chothe where parental choice in the selection of mate is held in high esteem. For instance, through the performance of various labour services assigned to him, a boy demonstrates his commitment, hardwork, and capability to the satisfaction of his prospective parents-in-law. In the process, he earns the trust and confidence of his future in laws.

More than a cultural idea, the practice is often explained as a way to compensate the bride's family for the loss of her labour and the expenses incurred in raising the bride. This interpretation fits the classical compensatory model, one of the leading explanations for the institution of brideservice. Laurel Bossen argues that this process is consistent with the growing recognition of the important contribution of women in a family.¹⁸ Only after the completion of the labour service or its payment in equivalent value, a boy is given the right to marry the girl.

As such, during the period of labour service, the two families develop mutual respect and understanding which ultimately strengthened the bonds of kinship and laid a strong foundation of affinal relationships. Because of the negligible or rather minimal transfer of wealth associated with the practice, bride service has also been likened to 'trial marriage'.¹⁹ These allow the couple to determine their compatibility in different areas such as life goals, daily routines, shared interests, financial management etc.

Kumlo and the status of women

Research on the relation between bride service and its impact on women's position is relatively few in comparison with the studies on bride price. There are inconsistent outcomes and contradictions with regard to the impact of bride service on women depending on the specific cultural and social context. In general, tribal societies are characterised as being more egalitarian than hierarchical caste based societies leading to less discrimination against women. Tribal women participated equally in economic contribution and decision making in the family. They are free from restriction imposed on remarriage, widow remarriage, absence of dowry, etc. Writing about the Naga women, Furer Haimendorf showed a stark contrast between the status of tribal women and the non-tribal women arguing that the former had more freedom and enjoys higher position in the society than the latter.²⁰

Many independent researchers and village elders have interpreted kumlo as the manifestation of the high position accorded to a woman in the past and the excessive affection shown by the Chothe parents towards their children. Parpa Vincent Chothe, one of the leading independent researchers of the Chothe community asserted that a Chothe girl was not easily married off in the past

without knowing the character and temperament of a boy. Naturally, a kumlo functions as a screening test to find the most suitable boy for a daughter.²¹ In course of the period of labour, the bride and her parents can assess the boy's personality and demeanor.

Discussions on bride service are mainly focussed on the groom's effort to please the bride's family, particularly the prospective father-in-law to establish rights to marry the girl. Generally, women do not come into the picture. In his critique of a bride service, Bartholomew Dean has argued that a bride was not a passive object in a marriage transaction and her agentive role in deciding the arrangement and maintenance of the marriage cannot be overlooked.²² Among the Chothes, only when a girl gives her consent to the match, the two parties can start the negotiation on terms of kumlo service. Moreover, as a societal acknowledgement of a woman's labour and her contribution to domestic and agricultural work, bride service brings some degrees of respect and elevate her status within her husband's family after marriage.

On the other hand, bride service is deeply intertwined with patriarchal social structures which reinforce male dominance and female subordination. In theory, bride service or its alternative payment in gifts or money (bride price) is supposed to be a recognition and valuation of women's productivity and her contribution to marriage. But in practice, the labour provided by the groom is generally understood as a form of 'payment' for the transfer of rights over the bride from one male headed family (natal family) to that of her husband's family (marital family) which, in the process reduces the bride as a 'commodity' that can be exchanged. In the aftermath of marriage, such commodification of women legitimises male authority as it reinforces the patriarchal notion that male lineage and authority must be dominant in the family.

As marriage does not only create relationship between a husband and wife but also extends to a wider network of kins on both sides of the families, bride service can restrict women's autonomy in several ways. In a tradition-bound society like the Chothe, during the period of service or when the terms of kumlo have been agreed to by both the families, girls are expected to guard their modesty until marriage. The bride's family and her relatives constantly monitor her conduct, behaviour and social interaction to prevent from any acts of premarital transgression as violation of the terms of agreement on bride service or any other matter brings shame and damages the reputation of a family.

Moreover, a degree of differential treatment is inherent in case of violation of the terms of kumlo by either one of the two parties. For instance, if a boy expresses his unwillingness to marry the girl during the service period, his family has to pay a fine which consists of a pig and a jar of zu (rice beer) to the parents of the girl. However if a girl refuses to marry a boy in similar context, her family is liable to pay a sum of Rs. 50 as compensation to the boy's family. In addition to this, they are required to give 3 pigs and 3 jars of zu to the village officers.

Conclusion

While bride price has been studied extensively in anthropology and economics, the practice of bride service has been mentioned much less in existing literature. Kumlo (bride service) as an instrument of determining the suitability of a prospective groom is a hallmark of traditional Chothe marriage system. It functions to establish ties between the bride and the groom families. One interpretation of bride service is the compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her labour and a boy's demonstration of his right to marry the girl, while others have emphasized on the agency of all the parties involved in working out the terms of kumlo. Modernisation has brought about changes in people's aspiration from family alliance to individual choice in mate selection. Consequently, people have found the traditional bride service irrelevant and outdated. Finally, in assessing the relation between bride service and the position of women in the Chothe society, there are contradictory outcomes of the practice on women's position.

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