

Som: A Decaying Traditional Institution of the Thadou

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Creating distinct identity from others, the Thadou one of the Kuki tribes of Manipur is endowed with a beautiful, varied and colourful culture and customs which makes them unique. Like many tribal groups of Northeast India, the Thadou also once had *Som* (dormitory) for boys where a group of young boys would sleep together at night and were being imparted the significant fundamental practices of healthy social living. Thus, *Som* acts as an institutional centre for learning in the traditional society of the Thadou. However, the isolation of the simple Thadou society was broken with the advent of British rule in Manipur and the western culture and world views were gradually diffused in the minds of the Thadou. Eventually the Thadou are drifting away from their traditional ways of life. As such, *Som* was badly affected. This paper attempts to highlight the significant role played by *Som* in the traditional society of the Thadou and also aims to explore the factors which might have been responsible for discontinuation of *Som*.

Keywords: Som, Traditional Institution, Thadou, Dormitory

Introduction

The tribal people in many parts of the world had a peculiar tradition in that the youth did not stay in their respective homes, but made a common place to stay. They used to stay there till they got married and hence brotherly feeling was more in them than in other communities. These youth houses otherwise known as bachelor's dormitories were found in several tribal societies such as the Lushais, Chins, Nagas, Abors, Garos, Singphos, Mismis and Mikirs (Horam, 1975:66). The Thadou are not exception to this and thus dormitory existed among them which they called in their dialect *Som*. However, unlike the Mizos or Naga tribes, the Thadou had not separate building for *Som* house (Shaw 1929:70).

The Thadou is one of the recognised tribes of India in Manipur vide (a) President of India's order S.P.O. 24774 published in the Gazette of India, extra ordinary part II, section 3, No. 316-A, New Delhi, 29 October 1956, Ministry of Home Affairs. They

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have been classified as Kuki tribes that are subsumed under the broad Tibeto-Burman linguistic stock spread over the India's Northeastern region (Sithou, 1982). The Thadou is the largest among the Kuki tribes and are also the largest tribe of Manipur in 2001 census. According to William Shaw (1929) "the Thadou Kuki live in a large area of the hilly country bounded by the Angami Nagas of the Naga Hills District in the North, the province of Burma in the East, the Chin Hills and Lushai Hills in the South and the District of Cachar in the West. Mainly, it may be said, they occupy the Hills of the State of Manipur on all sides of Imphal valley." At present, they mostly occupy the Southern parts of Senapati district i.e. Sadar Hills and South Eastern parts of Churachandpur district, Tengnoupal areas of Chandel district in Manipur and have a wide distribution covering all the districts of Manipur. Besides these areas, they are also found in Nagaland, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam.

Generally the Thadou have Mongolian feature and cultural traits. Though they are of Mongolians stock, their skin is not yellow. There is a slight variation in skin colour among the Thadou. Some have a yellow olive complexion and some are certainly of darker shades and some of a dark yellowish brown (Shaw, 1929:12). The nucleus of the Thadou society is the family which is traditionally verilocal and patriarchal. It consists of a man and his wife, their unmarried children and in many cases their married son and his wife and children. Large extended families are, however, rarer today than they were even a generation ago. Basically, the Thadou social structure is built around segmentary lineages which are constantly on the rise. There may be different levels of segmentation. At the basic level there are only household lineages of closest relatives who are related in a patrilineal line. Descent through a lone of first born gives some advantages to the eldest son. There are special lineal rights enjoyed by him. He customarily succeeds his father's position, head of the household when the father dies. Thus, the eldest son is elevated to the position of the father. In accordance with practice of a prescribed rule of primogeniture succession and inheritance, a particular residential rule is produced (Das 1985: 8).

Weaving and spinning was a part of Thadou culture, therefore, the Thadou women were known for their skill in weaving and spinning. It is difficult to find any Thadou girl who does not know weaving or spinning. Probably Thadou Shawl is the most beautiful shawls, seen in Northeastern part of India. Similarly, the men have good skill in handicraft. They produce a number of beautiful and useful items out of cane, bamboo, wood or timber, iron, brass and so on (Gosh 1992: 204).

Som (dormitory)

Som among the Thadou could have existed since the time when the society was in the state of perpetual warfare as all the hill tribes of Northeast India had been in the past (Sangkhuma 1981: 305). Thus an inter-tribal feud, inter-clan rivalry, fighting between two chiefs of different villages was a common phenomenon in the past. This has prompted the young men to sleep together in a common place, in order to protect the village from any oncoming attack. Under these circumstances the institution of *Som* was originated among the Kuki (Haokip, 1991:119). Whatever may be the origin of dormitory, it is undeniable that it is the centre of tribal culture. In it are taught the lesson of the tradi-

tions, norms, ideals, religious beliefs, methods of earning livelihood and discipline (Sharma, 2004:162).

Som among the Thadou is a youth organisational set up which concerns only able-bodied young boys of the village. It is a bachelor dormitory in which all young boys of the village sleep together at night (Gangte 2010: 134). This community centre for boys serves as an institution of learning (Haolai 2006: 72). The activities of *Som* is in full enthusiasm when all the members assembled in their respective *Som* after completion of their daily *Jouleikon* (jhum work) and *Nilhah An* (evening meal) thereby exchanging ideas and thoughts along with merry making, creating jokes, composing of a song about the achievement of their ancestor for the society, their bravery which they sang whole heartedly. Thus, all the fundamental practices of healthy social living were inculcated among the boys in the *Som*.

There may be one or more *Som* in a village in accordance with the population and size of the village. As the Thadou does not have separate building for *Som* house, the young boys therefore, form into several groups and select the family having one or more young damsel to set up their *Som* (Doungel 1992: 286). However, there is no fixed rules as to which *Som* of a particular boy is to join. Large villages of the Thadou-Kuki are divided into a section called *Veng* such as *Khonah Veng* (Upper section), *Venglai* (middle section) and *Khoto Veng* (lower or southern section). Therefore, a boy can join any of the *Som* he likes (Haokip, 1991). Each *Som* has a leader called *Som Upa*. His duty is to control and oversee the well being of *Som* members. Regarding the age for boys to join *Som*, Goswami (1985) stated that there is no hard and fast rule regarding age for boys. Generally, on the attaining the age of nine or ten a boy no longer sleeps with their parents but join the *Som*.

The activities of *Som* members were keenly observed by the Chief of the village. A spirit of keen competition and ambition to excel pervades all the activities of a *Som*. Healthy and friendly competition prevails among the *Som* members in various fields, be it sports, helping *Meithai/Chaga* (widow/orphan), defending the village, etc. Haolai (2006) opines that the meritorious members of *Som* were honoured by placement in the King's or the Chiefs service and eventually would serve as *Semang* and *Pachong* (ministers) in the court. They would also be appointed as *Gal Lamkai* (general in army). *Som* as an institution mobilise the service of the young men to meet the needs of the society. The service rendered to the society was obligatory and spontaneous. It manifests the spirit of free service i.e. *Tomngaina*. The members of *Som* do not expect to receive any reward for the help they rendered. It is believed that *Tomngaina* were born out of *Som*. Thus, *Som* is a traditional institution of the Thadou where the boys acquire practical training in the traditional mode of life as well as rendering his free services for the welfare of the society.

The girl of the *Som* house is known as *Somnu* (host of dormitory). If there are more than one daughter in the house the eldest one will be senior *Somnu*. When the eldest one is married the next one will become *Somnu*. *Somnu* prepares and arranges the bed for *Som* boys and washes their clothes when necessary. She fetches water and firewood to be used by *Som* boys and mends their torn clothes. While preparing for agricultural work, she carries all their agriculture equipments and the lunch package called *Sun*

Bu, for *Som* members. It is her duty to comb their hair at night by applying local hair oil made of pig fat. Each *Som* members have their own separate combs which are kept separately. She prepares tea and wine and rolls local tobacco known as *Zou Dum* for smoking and *Som* members in turn consider her as their own sister and help her and her family in all possible needs. They help them in all possible household work and jhum work like construction of their house. *Som* members conventionally become part of the family. When *Somnu* is married the bridegroom is to pay one *Jubel* (a jar of wine) to her *Som* youths as a fine which is known as *Meivah Chanman* (lost of light) because they are deprived of their *Somnu* who used to light fire for them (Tuboi 2005: 113). According to Haokip (1991) despite their intimate relations and close association, sexual relation as well as cases of unmarried pregnancy was unheard of between *Som* members and *Somnu* (host of dormitory). Similarly, Tuboi (2005) stated that every youth of *Som* maintained unity and harmony, truth and tranquility, brotherhood and we-feeling which were regarded as the main principle in the traditional youth organisation.

A *Som* member has a festival known as *Somkivah*. This festival is celebrated at the end of the year or in the beginning when everyone is free from agricultural works and activities (ibid: 116). *Somkivah* is a four day festival observed by a *Somgie* (members who sleep in dormitory) group in the household where the boys of *Som* sleep. Each *Som* group observes it separately on different dates in the different households where they sleep (Goswami 1985: 98). Generally members of *Som* rear pigs for the purpose of the celebration. Though the festival was named *Somkivah* or dormitory feast, in reality it becomes the village festival as the Chief of the village along with his cabinet minister, all the relatives of *Som* members, *Tucha* (sister son) and *Becha* (mentors or friends) of the owners of *Som* house collectively participated in the festival (Tuboi 2005: 117).

Significant Functions of *Som*

Som was considered as the best traditional institution in the Thadou society for the boys in discipline, responsibility and leadership. It acts as an agent of socialisation in the traditional society when no formal education prevails among the Thadou. *Som Upa* (elders of dormitory) imparted *Som* members various traditional practices and systems, folk song, folk lore, legends and myths of different kinds and also various social norms and manners along with the spirit of *Khankho* (humanitarian). Nunthara (1996) opines that training which the young men received in dormitory was intensive and strenuous with strict discipline, therefore, the members, do not only acquired the good qualities of life in the line of humanitarianism and skills in self defence, the spirit of protecting the community from external aggression but also developed positive attitudes to life based on social value as well. He further opines that the older men also assembled in the evening and narrate stories concerning great events and deeds of bravery, chivalry, heroic efforts in the past as well as customary rules which were important for the young men. From these accounts, younger generations learn old traditions, customs, and social codes, and young boys learned discipline and respect for elders. Thus, life in a *Som* is based on certain traditions and customs which are invariably followed by the members.

Som members offer their free and compulsory services to the village. The mainpurpose of this organisation was to defend the village from external danger. In

times of peace, they rendered every possible service to the village community whenever required (Gangte 2008: 70). In the by-gone days, an incendiary war among the tribals was frequent and usual, thus it was necessary to teach every able bodied man to fight their enemies for the safety of the people and village. The young boys kept their war weapons, such as daos, spears, swords, arrows and shields in their own respective *Som* house, so that they could readily use them without any delay in times of emergency. When the chief waged war against the neighboring village or tribe, the *Som* members came in the front line, led by their *Som Upa*. Thus, *Som* was regarded as police military force in the traditional Thadou society. The village forces were always engaged to implement the orders of the Chief. All the villagers were obliged to carry out the commands of the Chief. The main duty of the village force was to keep the villagers safe from external attacks (Tuboi 2005: 115). The safety of the village depends on the capability and ability of the *Som* members through their untiring alertness from external attacks. Thus, *Som* acted as a village defense in the traditional Thadou society.

Apart from defending the village, T.T. Hoakip (1991) opines that, traditionally all those who were to sustain and perpetuate the village society were required to work under *Som* system through a uniform code of conduct and discipline, for it was the potential source of strength for maintaining the health and vitality of the village society, maintenance of social coherence and loyalty to cultural values were considered to be of immense importance. Equality, self sacrifice, group dynamics and group solidarity were regarded as important for the sustenance of society. Thus, the institution of *Som* also acted as the cementing force towards the community based organisation of the traditional village society of the Thadou.

The members of *Som* inculcate the spirit of *Khankho* (humanitarian) as a result it was a centre for competition in rendering services to the society among the members. In this regard, Nunthara (1996) stated that everyone was ready for any emergency and try to surpass his friends in chivalrous act and bravery. In the event of death in times of emergency, the relatives of the deceased were to be immediately informed and there would be instant competition for the first one to go as messenger. It has been recalled that some of the traditional figures were known to have never really slept for fear of not being able to be the first one to wake up at the first sign of any possible emergency. There had always been a healthy competition in bravery and chivalrous deed in war or in peace, within or outside the village and at home or in the forest. The reward for such chivalrous and heroic deed was a social recognition, a passport to social prestige and esteem. According to T.T. Haokip (1991) the institution of *Som* was also closely connected with the economic activities in terms of production and reproduction. To the poor, needy and destitute, it was the source of help and assistance in respect of building and repairing of houses, cultivation, and execution of welfare scheme, etc. At the time of construction of any house in the village, all the *Som* members used to bring house building materials from the jungle whereas the female members fed the weary workers and helped them refresh themselves from the tiring work of the day. Politically *Som* was the backbone of the Chief who derived power and strength from it, and ethically, it was the centre of moral and psychological training and social re-adjustment.

The collective life of man is possible only in the context of social constraints.

The sustained social experience of man has revealed to him that in his own interest and in the interest of others he must subject himself to some kind of control which is over and above him. Therefore, the survival and smooth functioning of the society is possible only when there exist in it social harmony, solidarity and order. Social harmony and solidarity is not an automatic development. Individual members of the society must strive and struggle to bring it out. Members of the society are able to bring about social harmony or order only when they conform to certain accepted standards of behaviour or norms. Conformity to norms must prevail over the self-seeking impulses of the people. Group welfare or societal welfare must take precedence over individual's pleasures (Rao 2001: 473). Therefore, *Som* also acted as an agent of social control in the traditional Thadou society which in turn controls the activities of individual members. It is through the *Som*, that the youth learns the social norms and the penalties for violating them. They learn how to respect elders and love the younger ones which are the essential qualities that should be embedded in a person's life.

Due to the absence of modern recreational centers like parks, clubs, cinema halls, etc. in the olden days among the Thadou, *Som* acted as recreational centre for the youths. It gave a refreshing mind through various recreational activities. According to Sitlhou (1982) it is here in *Som* that they practice and play various games like wrestling, high jump, spear throwing, and weight lifting, whirling of top and other items of sports. A spirit of keen competition and an ambition to excel pervades all the activities of *Som*. Sometimes there are competitions of sports between various *Som*. The game they played here was different from others in that the sole intention was not to hurt the opponents but to cultivate friendly feelings among them and developed a sense of brotherhood.

The other important function of *Som* was that it was a place where the youths receive informal education in olden days. Therefore, it is a place where the youth got trained in war-fares, fighting, dwelling, discipline, social efficiency, customs and dance of their own tradition. It was a place for developing the personality of the youth. It was also an institute for learning extra curricular activities and physical education (Serto 2007: 130). In the field of extra curricular activities, *Som* members were imparted training in handicraft such as wood carving, bamboo work, cane work and basketry. They therefore produce articles which are necessary for day to day use such as *Beng* (basket for carrying paddy and other), *Konvang* (basket for carrying fire wood, bamboo tubes of water), *Shin Khup* (basket for keeping valuable articles), *Nam* (rope for carrying *Beng* and *Konvang*) and *Samthi* (comb) (Sitlhou, 1982). Similarly, the physical educations were in the form of traditional sports. It is worth mentioning that among the games and sports, wrestling was one of the interesting sports among the youths. Thus, *Som* was a sort of informal school as well as training institution for the youth.

Decay of *Som*

Majumdar (1998) while examining *Nokpante* (dormitory) of the Garos stated that, the bachelors' dormitory was a living institution in most of the areas of the Garo Hills till the thirties of this the twentieth century. Gradually it lost its vigour of the grand old days. According to him, today it has become an anachronism. So as *Som* among the Thadou

was a living and the most important traditional institution before the coming of the British colonial rule in Manipur. However, the importance of *Som* has been declining gradually which leads to its discontinuation. Some of the factors which were responsible for discontinuation or decay of *Som* among the Thadou are examined below.

The year 1917 marks a landmark in the political history of Manipur tribal's. It was in the year of Bolshevik Revolution of Russia that the Thadou-Kukis of Manipur revolted against the British government (Chishti 2005: 26). In the course of World War I when the Government made a demand on the Thadou for quota of labourers for France, they felt alarmed and started an agitation which was fanned up by the *Lambus* who apprehended a possible journey to France along with the contingent. The growing discontentment of their suppression finally erupted in the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 (Dev and Lahiri, 1987). The defeat of Thadou by British during the Kuki Rebellion is one of the most important factors that shattered the institution of *Som*. Because, before they were defeated in the hands of the British, the Thadou believed that they were destined to be rulers of their own earth. They regarded other hill tribes among whom they lived as their underlining. When they got defeated at the hands of the British in 1919, their over bearing pride that disdained everything exotic began to wane. Their prestige among the hill tribes has been reduced, also many Thadou who went to France as non-combatants were convinced that the earth is not as small as they held it before (Sitlhou 1982: 127). Similarly, the defeat of the rebels was not only defeat at arms, but it was a defeat of their sovereignty and their way of life. One result was that, large number of the Thadou began to turn towards Christianity. The gospel of Christ brought a welcome word of peace and brotherhood to a people so recently ravaged by war. It is possible that they were influenced by the fact that Christianity was the religion of their conquerors (Haolai 2006: 128). With the suppression of the rebellion, communication was developed to facilitate transport of men and material to the interior area. Some social services like schools and dispensaries were established. The defeat in the hands of the British brought an end to this traditional process of learning and created modern methods of learning through western education (Rao, et.al. 1991: 171).

The spread of Christianity among the Thadou is another factor which created an obstacle on their way in the continuation of *Som*. The first Christian Missionary in Manipur, William Pettigrew arrived at Imphal on 6 February 1894, but being denied to work among the Meities, he moved to Ukhrul in early 1894 (Ansari 1997: 154). Pettigrew did not only preach the gospel but also made a serious effort to spread modern education among the tribals by setting up a school. Similarly, the word of Gospel had reached among the Thadou which resulted in the establishment of the first ever Church among them at Tujang Vaichong village in 1916 (Ibid : 155). Christianity began to make their influence felt and the Thadou embarked upon changes which is still in process. In other words, the Thadou society, which had seemed unreceptive to change, underwent drastic changes. They are no longer isolated from the arena of modern civilisation. Therefore, conversion to Christianity was spreading rapidly among them. At present almost cent percent of them are Christian. Mc Call (1949) opines that the practice of Christian virtues did not allow its members to be fascinated to worldly things. Naturally, some of the practices could hardly expect the sanction of strict Church ideas, and this fact has pro-

vided the opportunity for the religious leaders to condemn dormitory, in pursuance of the prevalent tendency among the people to destroy and eliminate all that dates from a period prior to the Christian era. The people's attitude for imitation and a general sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the European combine to accelerate this tendency. Much of the urge lies in a desire to evade the discipline of the past. Apart from the gospel of love and salvation, Christian missionaries brought with them western ideas of religion and education. It was the turning point and a drastic change from the traditional way of life. Therefore, *Som* could not withstand the force of social changes and gradually began to lose its importance resulting in its discontinuation or decay.

The British Government along with the Christian missionaries brought with them formal education and imparted earnestly among the hill tribes of Manipur. However, the introduction of formal education disrupted the traditional system of learning and redirected them to the new pattern of modern education, traditional system was gradually relegated. Thus, one of the most important factors that paved the way for the extinction of *Som* was the introduction of formal education among the Thadou. Sangkima (1992) opines that with the introduction of formal education, parents now prefer to send their children to formal schools because they realised that they would gain more in sending their children to school. They could control their children better at home than the traditional institution. The school rather than *Som* became a place which attracted the children more and more. Therefore, the role of *Som* is replaced by formal educational institution in the present day Thadou society.

Conclusion

The institution of *Som* in the traditional society of the Thadou was the main learning centre for the youths in all state of affairs. It is in the *Som* that the youth acquired the most important qualities of one's life i.e. *Khankho* thereby rendering their free services to *Meithai/Chaga* (widow/orphan) in particular and society in general. Ironically, the advent of British administration in Manipur along with the spread of education and Christianity brought about sweeping changes among the Thadou of Manipur. Thus, the isolation of the simple Thadou society to the outside world was broken and the Thadou are undergoing a transitional phase and their culture is also under a process of flux and change. In response to such changes they are adopting consciously or unconsciously a new way of life. Therefore, *Som* could not withstand the force of social transformation that took place in a fast and forceful pace. *Som*, the traditional beautiful institution, has gone into oblivion. In spite of its significant relevance in the society, the institution of *Som* among the Thadou has completely vanished today. Thus, the Thadou lost their most important traditional institution.

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