

# Traditional Material Culture Of The Kukis Of Manipur With Special Reference To Their Marriage System And Practices

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to throw light on the important values and significances of materials among the Kukis in relation to their marriage system and practices. Materials are the fulfilment of the needs and necessities of human life. As such, certain materials play important role in the socio-cultural life, among other things in relation to marriage system and practices in the Kuki society. The materials used in bride price and gifts for the bride are of great values and significances. In the Kuki society, giving and taking of bride price serves as an important factor for a good binding relationship between both the families of the bride and the bridegroom in all situation and circumstances whether it be misfortune or joyous occasion. It also signifies that the bride and the bridegroom are blessed with good procreation, with many children and offspring. Therefore, the bride groom and his parents try their best to fulfil the bride prices as fixed by the bride's parents. In doing so, the bridegroom is considered a good and trustworthy son-in-law by the bride's parents. As such, giving of bride price is an important competitive arena of bridegrooms to gain love, trust and favour from their parents-in-law. In the like manner, the material items used as gifts to the bride are important and highly valued material items in the society. On the whole, the material items used for bride prices and gifts for the bride are valuable asserts of the Kukis and the use of these items in relation to marriage practices means a lot in the Kuki society.*

**Keywords: Kuki, Marriage, Material Culture, traditional, bride-price, bride, bridegroom**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term "Material Culture" refers to the relationship between artifacts and social relations. It also refers to the physical objects, resources and spaces that people use to define their culture. It is concerned with how people make exchange and consume the material world. It is also a term used to mean the study of ancient objects in order to understand how a particular culture organized and functioned over time. Study of material culture is, therefore, the study through artifacts and other pertinent historical evidence of belief systems, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society usually across time. Thus, study of the material culture of a people forms an integral part and important aspect in recapturing and reconstructing their traditional history. The Kukis are of rich traditional heritage; the richness of this is reflected in their traditional culture and customary practices that are closely associated with their

material culture. Their traditional material possessions consists of dresses & ornaments; art & crafts of various purposes including agricultural implements and weapons of various designs. These traditional materials are the living testimonies and aesthetic values inherited from their predecessors, which are of great cultural significance to the society. With this conceptual background this paper is an attempt to investigate on the material culture of the Kukis in relation to their marriage system and practices with special reference to bride price and gifts to the bride. The Kukis are found settling in Myanmar's Chindwin valley, Chin Hills State and Arrakan State on the Myanmar side; Manipur, Mizoram, Lower Assam, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya on the Indian side; and Chittagong Hill Tract and Sylhet District of Bangladesh. Thus, the Kukis live at different places occupying huge geo-topographical areas of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, the focus of this paper is limited to cover those of the so called Thadou speaking groups of the Kukis of

Manipur.

## II. UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE

Marriage can be understood as a union between individuals which has formed the foundation of the family. It is the basis of family life which admits men and women to family orbit (Batabandaram, 1981:77). It is a union between a man and a woman that is sanctioned by the society through the performances of a certain ceremony (Westermarck, n.d:1). It is a lasting and socially recognized relationship between a man and a woman, as contrasted with temporary or illicit union (Vefler, 1932:11). Thus, marriage is a union, permanent at least by intention, of a man and a woman, for the purpose of procreation, rearing of children and mutual companionship and assistance. Marriage is also understood as one of the primary institutions of society, a universal institution that describes the relationship that binds a family and binds it for the procreation and rearing of children (Hastings, 1973:27). As an institution, marriage governs the relationship of the married man and woman, their children, their relatives and their society; and thus, is a means of establishing relationship between different families or groups and an ensuring of maintenance and continuity in the holding of properties. Therefore, marriage is significant and essential in the foundation of the family in which the marriage couple with their children form a social unit of society as a primary social institution (Westermarck, n.d: 1)

## III. MARRIAGE AMONG THE KUKIS

Marriage like in any other societies is an important form of institution in the Kuki society. It is the first step to establishing the institution of family and the primary social unit of the society. It is a stage of entering into various activities with greater humanhood (Kapvung, 1995:251). In the Kuki society a married person occupies a position of honour and is considered as a responsible person. A married person is entitled to all social privileges and is allowed to participate in all social functions. A bachelor or a spinster does not enjoy the privilege usually open to a married person. He is rather considered as a person who has not fulfilled his/her duties in life (Goswami, 1985:25). Marriage also constitutes one of the important life cycle ceremonies in the society. In the Kuki society marriage plays a vital role in building relationship in the family, relatives, as well as in the society at large. Cross-cousin-marriage was the traditional marriage practiced in the Kuki society. Such practice is normally called *Pute chanu kichenpi*, which means a man marries his maternal uncle's daughter (H. Shonthong, 1996:12). The practice of cross-cousin marriage accounts for the continuity of family life. It provides a means of establishment of consistently recurring links between related groups (Das, 1985:92).

### A. TYPES OF MARRIAGES

In the traditional Kuki society, monogamy and endogamy are the dominant forms of marriage while polygamy is not

practiced although there are rare cases. Exogamy was not permitted and polyandry is not heard of in the Kuki Society. There are different types of marriages among the Kukis by which a mate/partner is acquired, such as *chongmou a kipui*, *sahap sat a kipui*, *jol lhah a kicheng*, *kijam a kicheng*, and *jol gai a kicheng*. The first two are arranged type of marriages while the rests are amount to the type of love marriage by elopement.

#### a. ARRANGE MARRIAGE

Arrange marriage is the most popular type of marriage in the traditional Kuki society and is considered ideal and accepted as lawful (Goswami, *ibid*). The arrangement is normally done by the parents due to the consideration of preferential form of mother's brother's daughter marriage also known as cross-cousin marriage because it is customary for a young Kuki man to get married with his mother's brother's daughter (Kamkhenthang, 1988:95). The arrangement often takes place in such a way that when the parents of a son are determined that their son should marry no other than his mother's brother's daughter called *Neinu*, the negotiation is initiated by the parents of the boy during the childhood of the boy and the proposed girl. In some extreme cases, when a daughter is born in the family, her father's sister and her husband initiate on her birth with the claim that the baby girl being the *Neinu*, should not be given to anybody else and she should go to them as their son's wife. Such earmarking is called *Kikhao-khi* (pre-engagement). For this the boy's mother, without any hesitations, goes to her brother's family and reserves/engages the girl-child for her boy-child to get them married when they attain marriageable age. (Doungel, 1993:139).

#### b. LOVE MARRIAGE

This is the type of marriage by mutual consent or love between the lovers. When a young man and woman fall in love they ask their parents to give consent to their nuptials. Such a situation often results in formal negotiation of parents and relatives of the man and woman (Gangte, 199:79) through and after which the marriage is performed. The procedures of the marriage are same as that of arranged marriage as discussed above. Sometimes on failure to get parental consent the man and the woman resort to marriage by elopement i.e. secretly running away without parental consent.

#### c. ELOPMENT

This is the type of marriage by secretly running away without parental consent. When a young man and woman fall in love and when their parents or either of the parents raise strong objection, or when there appears a third person in between them who is likely to stand in their way because of his being a serious contender to win the heart of the woman in marriage, or when the economic consideration that involves in the event of all formalities of marriage are to be fulfilled in the case of either the man or the woman in abject poverty, or even when the woman is impregnated by the lover; in all these cases marriage by elopement is resorted to (Gangte, *ibid*)

## B. THE PLACE/USE OF MATERIALS IN MARRIAGE INSTITUTION

In the kuki society, in all types of marriages, be it arranged or elopement, bride price applies in the form of materials which play a significant role in the marriage system and practices.

### a. BRIDE PRICE

Taking and giving of bride price is a socio-cultural practice in the marriage system among the Kukis. Among the Kukis bride price or bridal value differs from clan to clan, family to family, or region to region. As such, the different bridal values are: (i) *Sel jou som* (Ten mithuns); *Sel Jou get* (Eight mithuns); (ii) *Sel jou Sagi* (Seven mithuns); *Sel jou nga* (Five mithuns) respectively. The normal bride price consists of the following:

#### *Man lamkai*

*Man Lamkai* means the led/leading bride price. It consists of the following:

- ✓ *Selpi kisuisa/asung a cha potsa* (one senior/ matured female mithun that has given birth to a baby mithun for the led bride –price i.e to lead the whole lot of the bride price.)
- ✓ *Lutom Laisui* (*Lu* means head while *tom* means cover and *Lai* means worm while *sui* means tie. Therefore, *Lutom-laisui* means cloths to be used as turban/headgear for covering the head of the bride's father and costume for covering the belly of the bride's mother).
- ✓ *Dahpi khat* (One big gong measuring seven or nine span of the palm.)
- ✓ *Khiba /Khichong Khat* (One necklace with rare beads representing precious stones)
- ✓ *Khipi chang khat* (One rare big bead representing a big and precious stone taken as the value of one young mithun called *Selgol*.)

In the case of those whose bridal values are of *Jou som* (ten mithun), the led bride-price called *man-lamkai* consist of two mithuns (one senior/matured mithun and one young mithun) other items such as *Dahpi* (big gong) and *Khichong/Khiba* (necklace) are also of two each.

## C. REASONS OR SIGNIFICANCES OF GIVING AND TAKING BRIDE PRICE

In the traditional Kuki society, giving and taking of bride price serves an important factor for a good binding relationship between both the families of the bride and the bridegroom in all situation and circumstances whether it be misfortune or joyous occasion. It also signifies that the bride and the bridegroom are blessed with good procreation with many children and offspring. Therefore, the bride groom and his parents try their best to fulfil the bride prices as fixed by the bride's parents. In doing so, the bridegroom is considered a good and trustworthy son-in-law by the bride's parents. As such, giving of bride price is an important competitive arena of bridegrooms to gain love, trust and favour from their

parents-in-law. Among other things the scribe was told that following are the main considerations.

- ✓ *Long kaidoh* man meaning price for dragging away of a body/person. For this purpose one mithun is always attached to the bride price, and is considered to lead the whole lot for the bride price, and is called *Man lamkai*, which means the led-bride price.
- ✓ Compensation to the economic loss because of the girl being taken away from the family, who is usually considered as one of the main pillars of the family economy.
- ✓ Being the bearer of children for the propagation of family lines of generation to which she goes.

In the Kuki society, bride price has an underlying social value in that it must by all means be not paid in full at a time. A part of it is always to be paid in future. This has an implication to the fact that the man (husband) should always have obligation, love, respect etc for his wife and her relatives thereby enlivened a sense of maintaining constant and good social relationship with his wife. It also has an implicit value on the importance of the wife and her in-laws and relatives. It is said that the component of bride price, such as *Khichong* represents precious stones and ornament, and *Dahpi* represents valuable asset which are not within the reach of human's society to acquire. The same is with *Lutom laisui* because clothes are of great values for human beings to cover their bodies and for other various purposes. In the like manner, a man's wife is so valuable that the price is not within the limit of a man's capacity to pay in full. Thus, the unpaid portion or the part of the bride price is a constant reminder to the man and his relatives that his wife, and for that matter, her relatives are as precious stones and assets which are yet to be paid in full (Gangte, 1993:94-95).

## IV. MOU THILKEN (GIFT FOR THE BRIDE)

It is customary for the Kukis that when a daughter got married, her parents prepare gifts for her. The following are the common gifts often presented to a girl by her parents on her marriage.

- ✓ *Selkhat* (one mithun either mature or young)
- ✓ *Soh numei khat* (a female attendant in the case of *Chongmou Hailam*/arranged marriage system)
- ✓ *Samthi khat le Samthao* (a bamboo comb and hair oil)
- ✓ *Konvang le nam* (a hollowed carrying basket made of split strips of a special kind of bamboo called *Gopi* and a rope/ string for carrying fire wood and other things)
- ✓ *Tutah khat* (a small spade to be used while working in the field for removing weeds out of paddy plants)
- ✓ *Sumbel Khapget khat* (one big gold colour pot measuring eight spans of palm)
- ✓ *Khiba khat* (one necklace with rare beads representing precious stone.)
- ✓ *Hah le Chao* ( Bracelets and bangle)
- ✓ *Lelpi* (A special basket made of bamboo strips for keeping cloth) (Goswami, 1985:48)

Like any other human society, materials play a vital role in the Kuki society. Materials are the fulfilment of the needs and necessities of human life. As such, certain materials play

important role in the socio-cultural life, among other things in relation to the marriage system and practices in Kuki society. As stated above, besides the use of mithun, an important domestic animal of the Kukis, the materials used in the bride price and gifts for the bride are of great values and significance in the Kuki society. On the materials of the bride price, *Lutom* is meant for wiping the sweats of the father while *Laisui* is meant for tying the belly of the mother after delivery (Haokip, 2012); *Dahpi* (gong) is among the item of musical instruments associated with important occasion and play an integral part in the society; and *Khi* (rare beads) are the materials that represent precious stones.

In the like manner, besides mithun and female attendant, the material items used as gifts to the bride such as, *Samthi* (comb), *Konvang* (carrying basket), *tutah* (small spade), *sumbel* (gold colour pot), *khiba* (necklace), *hah le chao* (bracelets and bangle) and *lelpi* (a special basket) are important material items in the Kuki society. With regard to bracelets and bangles, they are ornaments highly regarded in the socio-cultural life of the Kukis. A bride preparing for her marriage is incomplete without these gift items. It is said that even if a girl unwilling for a proposed marriage arranged by the parents, would comply with the arrangement if she is assured of being ornamented with the bangle for the in-laws usually take special note of this fact which commands respect and the sacrifice of one's love for arranged marriage (Chongloi, 2008:196). *Lelpi* is a special basket used as a treasure box for keeping cloths, money, and other valuable items. On the whole, the material item used for bride prices and gifts for the bride are valuable asserts of the Kukis and the use of these items in relation to marriage practices means a lot in the Kuki society.

The practice of levying bride price existed among the Kukis since time immemorial. It is not a form of punishment or penalty as such, but it acts as continuous symbol of relationship among the nuptial kin groups in all circumstances of life. Thus, the material aspect of the bride price has great moral values. At the hour of distress, the two families (the bride family and the groom's family) will have an opportunity to console one another and on the other hand they may even share their joys and sorrows at times of victories as well as distresses. As such, it is obligatory on the part of every married man to fulfil the customary payment of the bride price without any exception; otherwise he is considered as half-human being. Successful payments of bride price bring about fertility to the woman and prosperity to the offspring of future generations. A man who is loyal to the payment of bride price is considered a perfect in-law and is treated dearly by the maternal family.

When marriage happened to be through elopement, the maternal parents take utmost care in dealing with the situation. Most parents, if they are not happy with the marriage (if they don't like the boy) they often resort to harshly levying the bride price. If they agree with the marriage of their daughter to the boy, they will try their best to lessen the unnecessary burden's to the boy's family by noting them to come at their own disposals. But in reality the boy's family comes with certain offerings either in cash or kind or both. Then the girl's family will inform them to come again, usually, after a lapse of one year for slaughtering the bridal animal. As a mark of

reciprocity to the offer made to them. In certain cases the bridal price is offered only after a male child is born to the married woman. Complete payment of the bride price during the life time of the mother is considered as taboo.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study shows that materials play a vital role in the socio-cultural life, among other things in relation to the marriage system and practices in the Kuki society. There are varieties of materials used by the Kukis associated with their traditional cultural aspects and way of life. As such among other things, different materials play important role in marriage system and practices in the Kuki society particularly in giving and taking of bride price and gift items for the bride. As stated, in fact, it is not a form of punishment or penalty as such, but it acts as continuous symbol of relationship among the nuptial kin groups in all circumstances of life. Thus, the material aspect of the bride price has great moral values in the socio-cultural life of the Kukis. Likewise the materials used in the bride price and gifts for the bride are of great values and significance in the society. With the changes brought about by the coming of Christianity accompanied with modernization and development, there are slight changes in the form of the material items in today's society. Due to non-availability of some of the traditional material items today they are replaced by cash. Nevertheless, the system, practice and the socio-cultural values and significances still applies and is practiced in the Kuki society today.

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