

## **Ritual, Reciprocity and Renewal: An Ethnographic Study on Mariini Festival of Ngari Village of the Poumai Naga Tribe.**

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### **Abstract**

The Mariini Festival is a major indigenous celebration of seed sowing that has bonded kinship, agriculture, ritual authority and cosmological ideas into a cultural system. The festival is characterized by various activities that govern social interactions, agricultural practices and communal obligations according to a unique lunar calendar. The King's ritual acts are a fertility of land and a spiritual strength. The five-day festival celebrates fertility through seed-sowing rituals, community bonding through wrestling, processions and group observances, and kin affirmation through gift-giving. Sacrifice, divination and symbolic reading of natural phenomena are rituals that express a worldview connecting human life with spiritual and environmental forces. The Mariini Festival is an ethnographic case study that illustrates how cultural customs are used to conserve collective identity, regulate social behaviour, and conserve ecological knowledge. In the face of today's socioeconomic changes, the festival is still an important mechanism of cultural continuity, resilience and the intergenerational transfer of indigenous values.

**Keywords:** Ritual, Resilience, Identity, Tradition, Culture

### **1. Introduction**

Poumai Naga tribe is one of the major tribes of Naga Community living in Manipur. It inhabits most part of Senapati District situated in the northern part of Manipur and also some part in the Phek District of Nagaland. According to 2011 census, the total population of Poumai Naga tribe is estimated at around 1,87,000. It consists of more than 90 (ninety) villages divided into 4 (Four) sub units called 'Circle' namely, Chilivai, Lepaona, Paomata, and Razeba (Punii and Meyeiho 77). There are 4 (four) villages of Ngari and it is under the Chilivai Circle. The people of these villages speak similar dialect and have similar customs, traditions and ritual practices. The community's most famous and most prominent festival is the Mariini Festival (Seed Sowing Festival). Its importance is closely related with the agrarian way of life of the people as agriculture is the main occupation and source of livelihood of the majority of the population (Pao 69). Their religious life is entwined with paying due honor and respect by way of making offerings and sacrifices in times of festivals and celebration. It is tied to the agricultural cycle and the lunar calendar deeper than a celebration. It is a system of observances, rites, prohibitions, and social activities structures the community's agriculture and preserves the integrity of the community. It is governed exclusively by the phases of the moon, which decide the timing of all activities. Villagers

explain the calendar by living in harmonious equilibrium with their environment, and give significance to both lunar cycles and natural phenomena. The Mariini Festival helps people to remember that culture is not preserved in monuments and in books, it is lived, practiced, and celebrated. Every act and social exchange within the framework of the festival transmits the values to posterity and the festival illustrates the values of perseverance (Pou). It also signifies the importance of the king, as the source of the ritual authority and the prosperity of the people.

## 2. The Lunar Calendar and the King's Role

The Mariini Festival is very much tied to the lunar calendar and that is the basis for celebrating it. This unusual calendar numbers up from the first day to the twentieth, then counts backwards from nine to one. This unique rhythm is the heartbeat of community and flows of expansion that control the lives of its inhabitants (Pao 8). The community is reminded of the need for balance and harmony in their everyday lives, guiding them through the cycles of labour and to a greater awareness of who they are and where they belong. The king is the focus of this festival and the king sets the mood for the whole festival. His every movement is under great scrutiny for the people believe that his activities are directly linked to their good fortune. On the eleventh day of the moon, the king warns the villagers reminding them of the holy regulations They must observe. He then moves to the precious stone, a symbolic gesture that stresses his spiritual duties. The astonishing thing is that he does this in complete silence, never saying a word to anyone. Such quiet is important as it is representative of the king's function of bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular. The villagers are meant to rest on the twelfth day. They can't go to the fields or perform any labour fishing is not even allowed. However, some of the women folks may try to sneak away for fishing, but they're not allowed to take any baskets with them. Those who break these regulations especially the men folk will be penalized (Pao 23). The intent of these limits is to teach the villagers that they need to strike a balance between being productive and taking time to rest and contemplate. It's a reminder that it is as vital to stand back, think about what they do and be disciplined as to get job done. These allows the villagers to re-energize themselves and return to their work with newfound strength and focus. After the twelfth day the villagers resume their daily task of repairing the grass roofs of their homes and some re-modelling work until the cycle of days is over and they have to halt on the eighth day. At the same time the king stays in his house for four days, halts his royal tasks and prepares himself spiritually to the new season coming.

## 3. Sacred Preparations and Ritual Sowing

The twentieth day of the moon, a particular and sacred moment is noted. On this occasion a piglet is sacrificed and the meal is then subject to very rigorous regulations. For example, the flesh from the piglet is eaten without any rice and it is only accompanied by alcohol. There are additional regulations about how the dinner is prepared, no gravy is permitted to spill while the meat is cooking. Also, the utensils used for this meal are different from those used for ordinary meals in the household. All these laws are meant to underline the importance and sacredness of this act and to ensure purity and detachment from the regular daily life. The strictness of these standards is a testament to the importance of this event, and the necessity to treat it with regard and care (Pou). The ninth day of the moon plays a major role in the cycle of festivals, it is the hour when the monarch rises with the sun and goes to his garden where he surreptitiously sows seeds, thereby starting a new agricultural year. This modest act is full with meaning not only as the beginning of culture but as the sanctification of the whole cycle of growth (Pou). Those lucky enough to see the

king sowing seeds are thought to be rewarded with good fortune and poised for a fruitful year ahead. Once the seeds are sown, the King goes home and spends his time sipping homebrew alcoholic drinks. This emphasizes the need of taking a break and preparing for what comes next. The sowing germination and eventual growth of seeds is a poignant reminder that human life depends on heavenly blessing, and human labour.

#### **4. The Five Days of the Mariini Festival**

The Mariini Festival is celebrated over five different days beginning on the eighth day of the lunar month. Each day is characterized by certain rituals, social interactions and symbolic meanings that combined make up a coherent cultural framework focused on kinship, fertility and communal identity. These five days do not serve as discrete events but represent a carefully choreographed ceremonial cycle in which the community displays shared values and maintains social cohesiveness. The first day also called butcher or slaughter day, is the official opening of the festival and includes the ritual slaughtering of animals. This gesture lays the framework for community richness and hospitality changing individual wealth into shared wealth. It means the change from the restraint of preparation to the participation of festivity. The second day, *Southak Toulat*, is about familial renewal when married ladies visit their natal homes to conduct arranged exchanges of gifts with their brothers and paternal relatives. This strengthens enduring familial relationships, and stresses reciprocity as an important social value. On the third day, *Southak Touyin* ritual restrictions and agricultural divination are observed. Cooking is forbidden and seeds are planted in secret to anticipate agricultural luck tying human life to natural unpredictability. The fourth day is dedicated to strength and community identity with wrestling matches, processions and public performances that promote discipline, skill, and inter-village cooperation. The fifth and last day entails leaving and reading the omens in nature, such the call of the cuckoo and then a community consideration of the year to come.

##### **i) Day One: Butcher Day / Slaughter Day**

The first day popularly known as Butcher Day or Slaughter Day, is the official start of the festival. The main event of this day is slaughtering of animals, which will provide meat for the next feasts and community events. This slaughter is also possibly more symbolic than pragmatic. It is the transformation of individual wealth of households into social wealth. The animals are a store of economic value in normal times, but they are converted into food which is shared. This redistribution is a moral principle in which prosperity only assumes meaning when it is shared within kinship and community networks. The abundance of meat prepared on this day indicates the suspension of scarcity and the making of a momentary state of collective abundance. It marks the transition from the previous period of restriction to a period of celebration and social openness. In this sense, the first day establishes a liminal state where the usual norms of daily life are suspended and replaced by ritual obligations. Thus, Butcher Day provides the material and symbolic basis for the festival beginning a cycle of generosity, and shared abundance.

##### **ii) Day Two: Southak Toulat**

The second day *Southak Toulat*, is the most important part of the festival socially and emotionally. It is concerned with the ritual return of married women to their biological homes where there is a formalized exchange between sisters and their brothers or paternal kin which the ritual reverses the separation marriage creates for a period of time. While women leave their birth families to join their husband's households after marriage, *Southak Toulat*

symbolically re-establishes their connection to their birth families. It suggests that kinship is not broken by marriage but transformed into continuing obligations of care, respect and exchange. Brothers and paternal uncles bring meat, vegetables, fruits and two chickens (one rooster and one hen) as gifts. These gifts are about love, responsibility and balance. The coupling of the female and male chicken signifies fertility, harmony and continuity of life linking human relationships with nature's cycles. Women in return, present finely woven shawls a symbol of artistic skill, labour and family honour. Such exchanges are not merely material transactions but symbolic reaffirmations of emotional and social bonds between siblings. An important part of this day is the experience of women who have no brothers or paternal male relatives. Their public mourning emphasizes the emotionality of kinship and the pain of social absence. Thus, the festival acknowledges presence and loss and kinship becomes a lived emotional reality and not just a structural system.

### iii) Day Three: Southak Touyin

On the third day called Southak Touyin, ritual restrictions and agricultural divination take place. The most important prohibition is of fire-making and cooking. Fire, a key element in domestic life is put on hold signifying withdrawal from ordinary social activity. In eating food prepared the day before, the villagers distant themselves from everyday domestic practices and enter into a sacred time frame governed by ritual discipline. The principal ritual act is the secret sowing of seeds at dawn. The villagers plant a few grains and wait to see if they germinate. This act is agricultural divination a glimpse of the harvest of the following year. If it sprouts, it is a sign of abundance. If it does not, it is a sign of hardship. This is indicative of a worldview in which agricultural success is not solely dependent on human effort, there are forces beyond human control. The ritual thus converts natural processes into meaningful signs that orient the collective's understanding of the future. Another important aspect of this day is that no outsiders are allowed in the village. This limitation reinforces social boundaries and cements internal unity. In restricting participation to community members, the village creates a safe ritual space that enhances the collective identity. Thus, Southak Touyin incorporates restriction, divination and social closure into a system of uncertainty management and increasing solidarity.

### iv) Day Four: Arrival Day and Wrestling

Excitement, public performance, and inter-village interaction mark the fourth day. Visitors arrive and games are organized preparations are made for wrestling matches the main attraction of the day. By day, the villagers play games and entertain guests with hospitality.

#### a) Performance & Games

The festival is flavoured with traditional games and performances. Shot put is a strength event as it is stone game. The performance of *Khalu Matak Touda* in the Ngari language is a reflection of the linguistic and creative heritage of the community. Horns and flutes fill the air with holy noise. To test the agility and skill is taken the long leap or *Longphu Hotda*. These games and acts are not a sideshow but part of the festival, a cultural education of the younger generation and an affirmation of identity for the whole town.

In the evening men participate in a ceremonial procession through the village dressed up in their best traditional attires and shawls and begin their whooping session which only men folks participate. The parade is a public declaration of identity, courage and discipline. Women are an important part of this procession as assessors. They determine the quality and beauty of the shawls and the choice they make is the basis of social recognition and honour.

This suggests that male performance and female craft are interdependent in the production of social prestige. There is a firm belief that no one in the procession should trip. A fall is considered a bad omen, a disruption of social and cosmic order. Physical discipline thus becomes a metaphor for moral and social order. Wrestling matches are held at night and are the highlight of the day's activities. They are not mere entertainment but organized competitions, testing strength, endurance and skill. At the same time wrestling is a channel for interaction between villages, turning rivalry into regulated competition and mutual respect. They stay overnight with guests by sharing food and hospitality which builds inter-community relationships and maintains alliances.

#### v) Day Five: Departure and Divination

The last day the guests depart and the festival conclude. Visitors receive packed food and gifts which symbolize the ongoing nature of friendship and social obligation after the festival. Once the guests have gone the villagers indulge in an important form of divination by listening for the call of the cuckoo. The direction from which the bird sang was regarded as an omen. A call from the east is considered to indicate misfortune such as bad harvest and disease, while a call from the west is considered to indicate prosperity and good health. This practice is grounded in a worldview in which nature speaks to human society in symbolic messages. Villagers gather in the evening to discuss the signs they saw during the festival and what they portend for the year ahead. This collective interpretation brings individual perceptions into a common social knowledge. A few days later the king performs a final ritual by carrying a hen in the cultivated lands, sacrifices it and eats it at home. This gesture symbolically closes the agricultural cycle and affirms the king's position as a mediator between the human community and the natural world.

### 5. Symbolic rituals and cultural values and importance

The Mariini Festival compresses three interrelated themes contributing to Ngari Village's perspective. They are power, fertility and kinship. The Southak Toulat rite which emphasizes reciprocity and lifelong responsibilities, fosters kinship by requiring married women to return to their birthplaces and exchange gifts with their male kin (Punii and Meyeiho 85, 95). Seed sowing rituals symbolize fertility, communicate agricultural regeneration and community health, and connect human effort to the powers of nature. The king plants the ceremonial seed which symbolizes a successful crop and the seeds indicate the success or failure of the community's prosperity. Apart from being a medium for the display of physical prowess in public performance and wrestling contests, it is an important tool in the development of social and cultural ties (Punii and Meyeiho 84, 89, 96). Together these axes form a cultural background in which family is a social resource and reproduction is an ecological resource.

The festival is an archive of ecological wisdom and oral traditions through traditions like seed rites and story-telling that document experiences with the environment and climate a crucial cultural store of indigenous knowledge (82, 87, 105). It maintains social norms of gender complementarity, respect for elders, and group duty. The Mariini Festival also stands as a fortification against modernization and external influence demonstrating the community's resilience and ingenuity while at the same time preserving its traditional heritage.

### 6. Culture Practice and System Cultures

The rituals of sacrifice, divination, constraint, feasting and performance of the Mariini Festival constitute a cohesive cultural matrix of meaning making. They are parts of a single

social order rather than separate rituals. Sacrifice mediates between the spiritual and the human transforming material commodities into symbolic gifts (Punii and Meyeiho 88-89). Divination offers interpretive frameworks for understanding uncertainty and environmental change. Ritual restrictions create sacred time and also set the tone for behaviour and impose discipline and structure. We eat together, and that's a bonding experience. Dance, wrestling, processions are expressions of power, identity and collective pride. These practices link social structure (kinship and hierarchy), economy (agricultural and redistribution), and cosmology (belief systems). The festival is a dynamic system in which meaning is always being produced through ritual action (Punii and Meyeiho 104- 105).

## 7. Conclusion

The Mariini Festival of Ngari Villages is a very complex cultural system that incorporates kinship, agriculture, cosmology and social order into one system of meaning. It is more than a seasonal celebration, it is an institution that organizes the community's daily life that deals with environmental uncertainty and that preserves a shared identity across generations. The cycle of festivals assures the constant reproduction of social relations and agricultural fertility. In ritual practice, ecological unpredictability becomes organized cultural knowledge, so that the group interprets seasons and environmental indicators as meaningful to a meaningful moral and cosmic order. The process reaffirms the communal identity through shared participation in feasts, performances and competitions (Punii and Meyeiho 80). It sanctifies cycles of agriculture through ritual planting and divination, and reasserts kinship links through exchange and responsibility. Mariini is typical of a regional perspective in which the life of the land, ceremonial activity and cosmological belief are closely intertwined (Punii and Meyeiho 82). It is part of the larger Naga setting of traditions of sowing good and specific local forms also testify to the richness and flexibility of indigenous cultural systems.

This tension between common practices and regional particularity indicates the region's vibrant cultural continuity. But more than anything, the Mariini Festival is a potent act of resistance and cultural survival. Instead of theorizing them, it anchors them in practical ritual practice thereby maintaining the social, ecological and spiritual basis of Ngari Villages. The festival remains relevant in the context of social change and industrialization as an active component of the link between people, the natural environment and the sacred order (Pou). Thus, the Mariini Festival is not only a manifestation of cultural identity but also an important tool in the preservation of it, transmitting the values, systems of knowledge and collective memory of Ngari Villages through the ages.

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