

Mimkut: The Festival of the Kuki Tribe of Nagaland

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Abstract

The present paper explores the significance of Mimkut, a post-harvest festival of the Kuki tribe in Nagaland, celebrated in honour of the blessings of Chung Pathen (God of the heavens). Officially recognized on January 17 during the tenure of P. Shilu Ao, the then Chief Minister of Nagaland, Mimkut was registered as the Kuki community's popular festival and declared a restricted holiday for the people of Nagaland. The festival gained prominence in the 1980s with state-level celebrations initiated by Pu H. L. Singson. This paper also delves into the historical roots, rituals, and cultural lore surrounding Mimkut, including its origins linked to the transition from cultivating MIM (Job's tears) to CHANG (paddy). The enduring cultural legacy of Mimkut serves as a unifying force, promoting pride and identity among the Kuki community.

INTRODUCTION

Mimkut is the most popular festival celebrated by the Kuki tribe of Nagaland. It is a post-harvest festival celebrated on 17th January every year with all pomp and glory by young and old. It marks the conclusion of the agricultural season, particularly the harvest of maize. The festival is deeply rooted in the community's cultural heritage, serving as an occasion for thanksgiving to deities, especially Chung Pathen, for a bountiful harvest, and as a moment to honor deceased ancestors. Traditional rituals include offerings of fresh produce, rice wine, and livestock, alongside vibrant cultural performances such as singing, dancing, and feasting. Mimkut fosters a sense of unity and pride within the Kuki community and showcases their rich traditions. Over the years, state recognition has enhanced its prominence, ensuring its continued celebration as a vital cultural event in Nagaland.

EMERGENCE OF MIMKUT IN NAGALAND:

In the time of P. Shilu Ao as the Chief Minister of Nagaland, the two Kuki MLAs of the first Nagaland Legislative Assembly namely- Lalkholam Kuki (6-Tening AC) and Langkam Kuki (Ghaspani-II AC), Mimkut was officially registered by the then government of Nagaland as the common and popular festival of the Kuki tribe of Nagaland and the day 17th January was listed as a restricted holiday. This gave a new vigour and boost to the celebration of Mimkut all over the state among the Kuki community where young and old celebrates the festival in all grandeurs of tribal colours as a mega annual cultural festival.

A huge impetus was given to Mimkut celebration in 1980s, through the initiation of Pu H L Singson, the then Minister of Forest, Government of Nagaland, when Mimkut was celebrated at the state level. The first state-level celebration of Mimkut was held at Molvom village (now under Chumukedima district) in a vibrant and jubilant spirit.

HISTORY OF MIMKUT:

Mimkut is the last festival celebrated in a year by the Kuki community. It is called LHOLHUN KUT which roughly translated means a post-harvest festival. Naturally, it falls in the autumn season, after harvesting MIM (Job's tears also known as adlay or adlay millet) the last cereal crop which at the time of ancestors was the main staple food-crop cultivated. 'MIMKUT' in fact, is an idiomatic word, coined from the combination of MIM (Job's tears) and KUT which in the wider use of the term means 'ceremony' or 'festival'. It is because; the sacred rites and rituals pertain to nothing but MIM celebration.

The main objectives of MIMKUT is 'thanksgiving' in gratification of CHUNG PATHEN (God of the heavens) for His blessings through the yearly toil, and invoking Him for the same throughout the coming year. The ceremonial rituals are purely adhered to THEMPU (Priest), who today is replaced by revered church Pastor. He seeks atonement for the year's wrong-doings and invokes His blessings on behalf of the entire villagers or Kutters.

LEGEND OF JUTHEL PADDY:

The sacredness of MIMKUT could be best illustrated by going deep into its root which is unique and truly wonderful. Moreover, the beautiful lore associated with it, adds to its sanctity which cannot be compared to other agricultural KUT. It is for certain that whenever MIMKUT – Changkut (rice festival) is talked about, the story of 'JUTHEL Paddy' cannot be ignored.

It so happened that, in the times of our ancestors, a farmer happened to catch sight of JUTHEL (a species of rodents) floating down the river called TWIHAT/TWINANGHEM clutching on a section of bamboo. The river was in spate and fortunately, the current pushed the bamboo towards him. The man caught the bamboo and pulled it out from the fast flowing current. As he split it into two, to his astonishment, he found grains of CHANG (paddy) in it. He started cultivating it, and discovered that it was not only more productive, but tastier than MIM.

In due course of time, the other villagers started cultivating the new-found crop CHANG in their jhum field. Years later, they all decided to switch MIM over to CHANG by performing an appropriate religious ritual to appease the spirit of MIM. It was because; MIM had survived them and forebears for years and years together. In other words, through this ritual they abandoned and said adieu to MIM. For this, some stick to the meaning of 'KUT' as "abandoned" and, they are not totally wrong. MIM was thus replaced by CHANG. Hence, this ritual that marked the transition of CHANG replacing MIM in the mode of cultivation came to be known as MIMKUT. However, the switchover does not mean that they would give up the cultivation of MIM altogether for good. Womenfolk continue to grow MIM till today as a side crop. It keeps the story JUTHEL Paddy and MIM in continuity or the past history alive till today.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MIMKUT:

Mimkut marks the transition of CHANG (paddy) giving adieu to MIM (Job's tears) in the agro-practice of our ancestors. The Mimkut festival holds deep cultural, agricultural, and social significance among the Kuki tribe of Nagaland.

- Changes in cultivation brought about changes in food habit which consequently gives birth to a new form of kut called CHANGKUT. Hence, often, MIMKUT and CHANGKUT are paired as MIMKUT-CHANGKUT.

- The significance of MIMKUT is much felt and celebrated particularly among the Kuki community living in Nagaland. Mimkut plays a pivotal role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Kuki tribe. Through vibrant celebrations, the festival serves as a living repository of the community's rich traditions. These activities not only maintain a connection to ancestral practices but also ensure their transmission to younger generations. More importantly, it inspires them and sows the seeds of belongingness and a sense of pride and unity in them.
- Mimkut has been instrumental in reviving ethnic pride. In earlier days, many youngsters felt hesitant or ashamed to wear traditional attire. However, the festival has reversed this trend. Today, wearing traditional attires during Mimkut is seen as a mark of honor, symbolizing a renewed embrace of cultural identity.

Mimkut is a celebration of the Kuki tribe's journey of agricultural evolution, a platform for cultural preservation and promotes of ethnic pride. Through this festival, the Kuki people ensure that their rich traditions and unique identity continue to thrive across generations.

MIMKUT LORE:

MIMKUT, like other historic events that has taken place at the time of forebears have its lore, which renders a seal of approval to its story.

JouvaMim-chang ka kutne,
Haochavangkhn ka kutne.
JouvaMim-chang ka kutne,
Selchalmangngin ka kutne.

The song means to say that a big mithun is being slaughtered for Kut feast by the entire village. The incarnation related to MIMKUT also clearly shows the source of CHANG, or from which they (ancestors) had obtained besides they had carried with them from KHUL and procured from other sources. It is worth noticing that, CHANG is often used as a term for cereal crop (for millet and paddy by forebears).

A portion of the incarnation pertaining to MIM-CHANG ritual runs as-

“Twhat galla Juthelnupohchanglhahungngo
Pi Chaichingchangpohchanglhahungngo
A-mi pennaKhulsin’achanglhahungngo
A-selpennaSisepnachanglhahungngo
A-uipennaTunglul la changlhahungngo
A-ah pennaMolkoijachanglhahungngo
A-vohpennaBolnolachanglhahungngo
A-mimpennaLheival’achanglhahungngo

In the incarnation, THEMPU (Priest) summons the soul of MIM or CHANG from different places: KHUL, SISEP, TUNGLUL, MOLKOI, BOLNOL and LHEIVAL, wherefrom they procured paddy, Mithun, Dog, Fowl, Pig and MIM respectively. He begins it with summoning the paddy soul obtained from JUTHEL and Pi CHAICHING, a fore-mother who had brought paddy while they made their escape from KHUL/SINLUNG (mythical place of origin). This suggests that their great ancestors had cultivated paddy even in their early settlement. They might have started cultivating MIM during their historic journey.

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