

Traditional Warfare Techniques Of The Tribes Of Northeast: The Kabuis Of Manipur

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Abstract

The paper attempts to delve into the warfare techniques of the natives of Northeast India with special reference to Kabuis of Manipur. Like other natives of Northeast, the Kabuis, too, lived in the villages and on the slope of the highest hills on the ground of defence and security. Their village is built in such way that the no one could not enter and attack the village. It is the *Khangtans*, senior members of *Khangchu* who at the cost of their lives took the responsibility of defence of the village from enemies' attack. However, they are under the strict supervision of *Pei*, supreme military body of the village. The main weapons used by the Kabuis are spear (*Bui*), dao (*Bang*) and also shields. They are expert in the use of spear and aimed at surprising their enemies, and after throwing the spear, came to close quarters with the dao. In fighting, those who do not have shields use thick cloth folded round the abdomen for safety. Based on prediction of omen as per customs they decide to go or not to go for a war. After successful raid they return home and observe *Rihshang Tuna Kabaomei* ritual for whole day and night with war songs. Now, the Kabui people observe war rituals in *Rih-ngai* festival without violence only for plentiful harvest of the village.

Key words: *Manipur, Kabuis, Warfare, Bui, Khangtans, Khangchu, Rih-ngai*

Introduction

In the distant past, head hunting¹and animosity among the villages was a common phenomenon in the hills area of Manipur. So, the defence of the village was a matter of great importance. Like the other Naga and Kuki tribes, the Kabuis, too, settled on the slope of the highest hills and not far from the top and occasionally a ridge, when flat enough was chosen as a village site.² It is on the consideration of defence, security and health. They constructed village gate (*Kairong Raang*) and fortified the village with wooden palisade and *Raangpan*, a kind of big thorny plant. In some areas, the villages, around the forests have plants which do cause itching over the human body if the latter come into contact with the former. This is also a part of

fortification of the village. Houses were constructed in rows or clusters according to convenient. Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney states that the Kabui villages are “accordingly planned for everyday defence and stockade as hill-fort.”³The Kabuis are found inhabiting in the western hills of Manipur present Tamenglong and Noney districts.

Materials and method

The study has adopted interdisciplinary method particularly the application of knowledge of both history and anthropology. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources and also on field work interview with knowledgeable persons of the Kabui Community.

In political organization, there is an organized force or physical force under coercive authority to deal with the maintenance or establishment of social order within a territorial framework.⁴ Fortes and Evans-Pritchard⁵ have emphasized that while in primitive states the chief has the command of organized force, in stateless societies force is not the monopoly of any particular person or class. Among the Kabuis, there is no regular force; however, *Pei* (village council) maintained peace and order within the village territory by using the force of able bodied males of *Khangchu* (youth dormitory) when it demanded. *Pei* as a supreme military body had command over the fighting forces of the village. It decides on wars, raids or defence of the village. The youth dormitory is controlled by the *Pei*. The whole fighting force is called *Riphen* (*Ri* means war and *Phen*, fighting). The fighting force of the village includes all males of the dormitory, but the real warfare is carried out by the *Khangtan*, senior members of the dormitory. They are a group of well trained and experienced warriors. The warriors meet at the *Ritu Kaibang/Khangtan Kaibang*, the house of *Khangtan*, where they discuss the defence matters. After discussion, they submit their proposal to the *Pei* for approval. The *Khangtan* executes the plan. The owner of *Khangtan Kaibang* is a warrior who had collected at least a head of the enemy or wild animals like tiger etc.⁶ For the security of the village, two *Riphens* are assigned to keep a vigil over the village, day and night alternately. At hours of darkness, two *Riphens* take the responsibility of guarding the village; the *Riphens* with spear and dao move up and down and across the village singing village guarding songs (*Kairong Lon Lu*). This song not only keeps them (*Riphens*) awake, but also instils a sense of security among the women, children and old people of the village. In other words, the villagers can sleep without fear. In the same way, the other Naga tribes also deploy a regular sentry at the gate and look-out platforms to watch the approach of the enemies in the village. The *Morung* boys are usually deployed as the sentry guard on rotation basis.⁷The village sentry is relaxed only when there is no war or quarrel with the neighbouring villages.

Riphens were not paid salary for their service. However, it is customary that during the annual festival of *Gaan-ngai* the villagers always offer them special treatment in the form of

offering special type of rice beer (*Joungao*) and best meat chutney (*Jantam*) to them. Indeed, they are the real protectors/defenders of the village from the enemy and wild animals. On the defence of the village, R. B. Pemberton wrote that the safety of the “village is entrusted to a number of youths selected for their superior strength and activity, who are distinguished by a blue mantle of the Khes cloths, tastefully studded with cowries, and garter of red thread bound around the calf of the leg. It is difficult to conceive a more pleasing union of manliness, grace and activity, than is exhibited by one of these safeguards, when seen standing on the very verge of some projecting rock with all the sense of conscious security.”⁸ Apart from this, *Pei* has also full power to intervene in any types of ill-feeling arises between two different clans and two different families in case the matter is brought to the notice of the *Pei*. Once the matter is placed to the knowledge of the *Pei*, the question of further clash is not acceptable and if any party violates this tradition, then they are to be punished by charging huge fine. Whenever, there is a crime, the *Pei* sent immediately able bodied persons (*Riphens*) to protect the victims and to stop the aggressors until a final decision on the matter of dispute is taken by the *Pei*.⁹

The main traditional offensive weapons of the Kabuis are spear (*Bui*) and dao (*Bang*). They also use shield of wicker work, ornamented with painted figures and dyed hairs. These shields are of great length and curved slightly across. The Kabuis are very expert in the use of spear and they had the faculty of aiming and throwing the weapon with fatal skill. Like most of the hill tribes, they aimed at surprising their enemies, and after throwing the spear, came to close quarters with the dao. The dao is an instrument resembling a bill hook is universal amongst all the hill tribes. It is also used to cut trees and fowls, divide meat, curve posts, and for any other kind of work.¹⁰ In fighting, those who do not have shields use wrapper of thick cloth folded round the abdomen several times for protection. In defending villages and roads, the Kabuis also use of stones and panjis¹¹ or sharp-pointed bamboo sticks a few inches in length, which they stick into the ground, point upwards, at least retard any party that may start in pursuit.

The universal weapon of the Nagas is javelin (spear); it is usually adorned with coloured hair, and ornamented with strips of rattan of various colours. The *Loohoopas* make use of a long spear and some of the eastern Nagas handle the tomahawk. The total disuse of the bow among the Naga tribes seems a very singular circumstance, especially as the weapon is common to all the surrounding hill tribes, and the advantage given them by the use of it, is acknowledged by the Nagas themselves. “The steadfast retention of their weapons of offence, may be considered as one strong mark of nationality, and an indication of a common origin; in it may also be traced the continuance of a long established custom, which could scarcely be preserved amongst tribes now so diverse, and that too, contrary to all the dictates of experience, were it not possessed of some sanctity, or consecrated in their recollection as the weapon of their forefathers.”¹² According to Heath and Perry, “The universal Naga weapon was the spear, with a bamboo shaft, a long, leaf-shaped iron blade, and a pointed ferrule. Overall length could be up to about 8ft (2.4m). The shaft was either plain or ornamented with red-dyed goat’s hair, with a space sometimes left bare

for the hand. The Naga customarily carried two spears; a plain, shorter one for throwing, and the longer, decorated one for use a close quarters.”¹³

Generally, the Naga war dress includes a number of odd contrivances which give a fierce appearance. They bind up their legs with brogues of parti-coloured rattans, and adorn their heads and necks with bands of the same. On their heads they wear bunches of feathers intermingled with plates or brass and the horns and teeth of wild animals. They affix a bunch of hair to supply the deficiency of a tail.¹⁴ “Altogether the costume and accoutrements of the Nagas are extraordinarily picturesque, and the thrilling sight of such a savage bounding along and shouting his war-cry can be imagined.”¹⁵

The main causes of inter-village feud/war were land disputes (*Lamjang Agaimai*), hunting in the forest of other village (*Meikailamkho Shulaiimei*), abduction of another man’s wife (*Meinou Nimjaimai*) on her charming and attractiveness etc.¹⁶

Among the Tangkhuls, in case any inter-village war is declared, it is the responsibility of all the ablest male members of the village to go to the war. The village councillors with the warriors will have a close door emergency meeting and plan the war strategies in the chief house or sometimes in the house of one of senior most warriors.¹⁷ The warriors are to be equipped with spear, dao etc. They must possess high esteem of moral character. An immoral man is not permitted to go to war because it will bring bad luck and fall at the hands of the enemy. The warriors, if they are to go on the next day, must stay away from his wife that night. It is the responsibility of the village councillors to check and arrange all these things.¹⁸

The Maram people of Manipur, before the warriors set out on a war they kill a rooster by strangling and predict what the day will be like. As they kill the fowl the legs of the chicken is examined by an old man and predict how the war is going to be. If he predicts that they are going to win, they go for war, but if they feel that they are going to lose the war they do not go.¹⁹

The Angamis, before they go for a war expedition, all males assemble together and decide on the village to be attacked, and the chief of the village appointed to command the party (warriors) does consult the usual omens, which proving positive, a rooster is killed and cooked, and all partake of it. Then, they provide themselves with spears and shields, and cooking two days’ food wrap it up in leaves in baskets with meat, and set out for the village to be attacked.²⁰

Among the Kabuis, before the warriors set off their feet for battlefield the village chief (*Nampou*) would bless them and worship the Almighty God for their success in war mission. *Nampou* would wait at his house or at a place observing food taboo (*Lumthengna*) until the warriors return home.²¹ He would not sleep with his wife. According to Kabui custom and tradition, the person who violated the marriage code is not permitted to participate despite his

courageous and strong physique in the belief that it will give misfortune and trouble to the warriors. Similarly, the husband of a pregnant woman also is not allowed. Cowards are mocked in the presence of the girls (*Tunagoihukhou*). Usually, the warriors set out from the *Ritu Kaibang*; the *Nampeï*, assistant of *Nampou* and *Khangtanpou* would lead the warriors. In theory, *Nampou* is to act as supreme commander in war. And before leaving the same place, *Nampeï* would distribute a piece of ginger (*Gu*) to every warrior for safety and protection as ginger is considered to be the fingers of *Haipou Mhucharakhandijungpu*, divine priest of *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God. At the same time, *Khangtanpou* would bring out a pot of rice beer (*Joungaolai Khat*) with meat chutney (*Sharoutam*) which they ate and drank after libation of holy wine to *Tingkao Ragwang* (*Joupan Keimei*). This imposes upon them (warriors) the duty of carrying out the mission successfully. Drinking of holy wine means one is sanctified.

They would halt a while at the village gate (*Raang*), where the *Nampeï* would observe omen by stick (*Thigpei Daan*); if the omen is favourable, they would go for war, but if not, they would return home. *Thingpei Daan* is performed in this way: the *Nampeï* will distribute a piece of stick to every warrior, then he collected the same pieces of stick and wrapped them up in a banana leaf; with the package of stick in his hand, the same person prays to God saying: “We are human beings, we do know nothing please tell us the truth whether we will win or lose in the fighting.” If the *Nampeï* finds all the pieces of stick while opening the package, then it is considered as good omen, but if some sticks are gone astray, a bad omen, they will lose some warriors in the fighting.

After omen taking rite, the *Nampeï* also would worship *Bambu*, the northern presiding deity of the village by offering an egg (*Charungbung*) for safety and protection and success in the raid/attack. The rite separates them from their own land. The village gate (*Kairong Raang*) is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds and therefore, to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world.²² Generally, in the tribal inhabited areas there are unclaimed zones of forests between the territories where everyone has the full rights to travel and hunt.²³ While the warriors are in the neutral zone between two villages (worlds) is considered as transitional period²⁴ and they offered a piece of ginger to the presiding deity (*Shong*) of the virgin forests not to give trouble to them. As soon as they reached in the vicinity of the enemy village they offered a piece of ginger to the village presiding deity (*Gucheng Phaimai*) not to give trouble; the rite integrates them into the new environment/world. The whole mode of warfare of the Kabuis is to surprise the enemy. The warriors reached the village to be attacked, near which they did lie in ambush during the night till the break of day, when they did rush in upon it with a great noise, and spear the first they met with, and afterwards cut off the head, hands, and feet, of their enemies, as many as fell victims to their rage, which they carried back in triumph to their own village.²⁵ An attack is of very short duration, and over almost as soon as it has begun.

After successful raid/attack, they would return by crossing the neutral zone and stop a moment at the village gate where they were sanctified with smoke of *Kham*, a kind of leaf and fire (*Mhai*); after that a piece of ginger was offered to the *Bambu* as thanksgiving. Then, they moved inside the village by crossing the village gate. Thus, the warriors are separated from the foreign world and returned into the society. The war trophies enemies' heads or skulls locally called *Rihpi* which they brought home would be placed at the premises of *Ritu Kaibang*, and perform *Rihshang Tuna Kabaomei* ritual for whole day and night singing war songs such as *Sheilu*, *Rihlu* etc. to keep themselves awake. In the ritual celebration, they would throw rice, pork meat and spirits over the skulls and tell the skulls to call their relatives.

Among the Nagas inhabiting on the Burma side of the Patkoi Range, when heads had been taken in a raid, or while resisting an attack, the victory was celebrated as follow: The heads are placed at the bow, the braves who has assisted to procure the heads line up on either side of the war drum holding in their hands wooden stakes or paddy-pounders. With these they pound the drum together, with regular uniform strokes, at the same time chanting their song of victory and shouting loudly. It is said that the sound carried very far, from five to six miles, and could be heard in the enemy villages across the *Namphuk* Valley. At the end of the celebration the heads were removed and permanently affixed to a tree trunk in the vicinity of the village. During the course of the year, from time to time the braves are said to dance before the skulls, thus reviving the memories of the victory gained.²⁶ Among the Tinguians of north-western Luzon, Philippine Islands, the warriors, following the return of a successful war, "a great celebration attended with much singing, dancing and drinking of sugar-cane spirit, is held."²⁷ Among the Angami Nagas, the man who has cut off the head does place it under his bedstead five days and during that time the warriors eat no food prepared by women, and do not cook in their accustomed cooking pot. After the fifth day, however, the heads or skulls are buried, and a great feast is given of pigs and cows, after which they bathe and return to their avocations.²⁸

On the next day of *Rihshang Tuna Kabaomei*, the warriors would bury the war heads or skulls somewhere at the *Daanshanpung*, village jumping ground. After that an elder of *Pei* would sanctify the whole village with *Ten Mhaimit*, a kind of thatching grass. It is the responsibility of the *Nampe* and *Khangtanpou* to bring back the body of the warrior who lost in the fight; otherwise they were looked down for their irresponsibility. When the *Rih-ngai*, war festival comes the warriors will secretly remove the heads or skulls and perform *Ritak Ganna Kabaomei* ritual at the *Ritu Kaibang*. In the ritual performance, one is permitted to demonstrate his bravery through oral and action. In some societies, a man who has slain an enemy is given the right to distinguish himself wearing some special decoration or in other ways.²⁹ The man who could bring enemy head or slay enemy was highly honoured and respected as a warrior. It is alleged that they killed the enemy in order to protect the innocent women and children of the village; otherwise the enemy would slay them and devastate the village. And at the time of his (warrior) death, *Kabaomei* ritual would be performed in his house in the presence of villagers

including *Pei* elders and his body would be carried by the youths of dormitory from one end of the village to another exposing his courage and bravery before burial. The transportation of the warrior dead body is said to be comparable with the tiger who roams on the high mountain range (*Kamang Longpum Ruimei*) with growl. In view of S. N. Barua, the object of the tribal war is to “bring fame and economic gain to the chief and to decorate the warrior himself with tattoo marks and other awards in recognition of his valour and to enjoy special privilege”³⁰ in the society. It appears that tribal warfare is a combination of economic and headhunting. In this way, the Kabuis, in the ancient times, conducted raids/attacks on other villages and celebrated their victory.

Among the Angami Nagas, “if a man kills another in war, he wears three or four rows of cowries round the kilt, and ties up his hair with a cotton band. If a man has killed another in war, he is entitled to wear one feather of the dhune’s bird stuck in his hair, and one feather is added for every man he has killed, and these feathers are also fastened to their shields.”³¹ Wearing the cowries kilt or feather in his hair is a sign that he has killed someone.

Conclusion

In days of yore, inter-village war was a common occurrence in the hills area of Manipur. The boys of the dormitory at the cost of their lives defended the village from enemy’s attacks. It was gone. However, it is preserved in the form of narrative. Among the Kabuis, the war rituals continue in the forms of *Chong Kapmei* (shooting of or spearing of the human effigies made of the plaintain trees), *Kabaomei* and *Ritak Ganmei* without the violence during the *Rih-ngai* festival for abundant of crops.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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