



IJAHSS



Copyright@IJAHSS

The Traditional Religious Beliefs of The Zous of Manipur

Thangsuanhang^{*1}; Dr. Khwairakpam Premjit Singh²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of History & Ethnography, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of History & Ethnography, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram, India

*Corresponding Author

Thangsuanhang

ABSTRACT

The Zous, one of the ethnic tribes of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group, are inhabiting in the southern part of Manipur in North East India. They have traditional religious beliefs from time immemorial which shaped their way of life. The Zous believed in the existence of Supreme Being and Spirits of ancestors. They also believed that the world was inhabited by various spirits which were either benevolent or malignant to man. The daily life of the Zous was revolved around appeasing the malevolent spirits that dwelt in dense forest, streams, mountains, water, rocks, rivers, etc. They believed that after death, the soul of man would go through *misikhuo* (the abode of dead) and *pielgal* (place beyond *misikhuo*) to reach heaven. This paper attempts to study the religious beliefs of the Zous in the pre-Christian times.

Key Words: *Zou, Pasien, Lungzai, Pusa, Spirit, Clan, Pielgal.*

I. INTRODUCTION:

The Zous with a population of 24,294 (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011) are recognized as one of the Scheduled Tribes in Manipur by the Government of India (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1956). They are mostly found in the districts of Churachandpur, Chandel and Tengnoupal in Manipur.

The Zous of Manipur have a rich heritage of traditional religious beliefs and practices which they have been following and preserving over a long period of time. With the spread of Christianity in the beginning of the 20th century, the entire population of the Zous embraced the new faith. Consequently, the traditional religious beliefs were discarded and it began to be replaced by that of the Christianity. In spite of having a rich heritage in their religious beliefs, no authentic research work on the traditional religious beliefs on the Zous of Manipur has been undertaken. The only available written records are the general account of the Zous. This paper is not an attempt to revive the old beliefs of the Zous, it rather attempts to study in detail their traditional religious beliefs so that such rich heritage would not be lost and could be preserved for the future generations.

II. METHODOLOGY

The work is based on descriptive method. As the work is confined to the traditional religious beliefs of the Zous in their pre-Christian times, related materials from published books, thesis, souvenirs, magazines, etc. in some cases electronic materials are collected, referred and used. Both open-ended and close-ended interviews are employed to get primary data.

III. TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEF

The Zous believed in the existence of one Supreme Being, who was addressed as *Pasien*. There was another God, called *Lungzai*. The main traditional religion of the early Zous was *Pusa* (spirits of ancestors). They were also superstitious in their beliefs and considered that the spirits that inhabited the world possessed supernatural and divine powers. Therefore, the daily life of the Zou was revolved around appeasing the spirits in order to avoid their wrath.

1. Belief in Supreme Being

Belief in the existence of one Supreme Being is central in the religion of the early Zous. He is considered to be the highest benevolent God. The Supreme Being is addressed as *Pasien* (Holy Father) or *Tung Pasien* (Holy Father of the above). *Tung* means 'above', denoting the abode of *Pasien* which is believed to be high up in the sky. He is the creator of the heaven and the earth, and all the living beings and non-living things. He is also believed to be possessing power over natural forces. For instance, when a violent storm blew or earthquake occurred, the Zous would say, "*KaPasienuh, zangai aw*" (Our God, be merciful). It was believed that *Pasien* is watching human beings from the above and always

uphold justice. When injustice was administered upon them, they would say, “*Pasien in theina*” that means ‘God knows’ (MangkhasatKipgen, 1997). The Zous invoked *Pasien* on every important festival and social occasions.

The Zous also believed in the existence of another God, called ‘*Lungzai*’. There is a belief that ‘*Pasien*’ and ‘*Lungzai*’ coexisted in equality. For instance, while making offerings, the Zous usually uttered, “*KaPasienkaLungzaina tai aw...*” (Be satisfied my *Pasien* and my *Lungzai*. Some believed that *Lungzai* is an assistant of God, while another believed him as the brother of *Pasien* (Thanglienmang, 2012). Generally, *Lungzai* with a lesser powerful spirit is regarded as the god of this world and *Pasien* is the god of the above (S.Prim, 1975).

Both *Pasien* and *Lungzai* were the judges of living beings during their lifetime. This has been proved by the traditional folktale of the Zous called ‘*Neinou and Nantal*’ where a man called *Nantal* and a tiger-man were engaged in a fierce fight over a girl called *Neino*. Both the Gods decided to help the man who always thanked them as givers of food and drink. The result was that the tiger-man was defeated and killed.

Though *Pasien* and *Lungzai* were considered benevolent beings who had little interest or influence in the life of ordinary human life, the Zous always appeased them and not forgotten them even in small functions (M. Langchinlien, personal communication, March 23, 2018). They were invoked on all important festivals and social occasions. Both of them were always invoked to drink rice beer and eat the meat in any ritual function (Khamchinkhai, 2004).

2. Spirit of Ancestors

Pusa was the main traditional religion of the Zous since time immemorial. It was the deity of every household of the Zous. In the term *Pusa*, *Pu* means ancestors/forefathers and *Sa* means spirit. Therefore, *pusa* means the spirit of the forefathers. Every clan had their own *pusa* which was placated and appeased during festivals. The central pillar, called *sutpi*, was used as an altar for offering food and drinks in every house. It is not known exactly how the *pusa* originated. It is likely that ‘*Sa*’ have been once the guardian spirit of the Zous’ ancestors and later on it was probably conceived and handed down from generation to generation as if it represented the personal spirits of the ancestors (Ginneiching, 2012).

Tradition believed that the *pusa* had the power of blessing or cursing. The prosperity and fortune of the individual or a family depended on whether the *pusa* was pleased with them or not. In the worship of ancestors, the spirits of the ancestors were invoked to shower great blessings in wealth, health and good harvest to every household or clan. It was the *pusa* who built up, protected and cared for the family. If one neglected these sacrifices the *pusa* would become angry and they would withdraw their protection. Withdrawal of protection could result in frequent illness and misfortune in the family.

It is believed that the spirits of the dead ancestors in their human nature continued to visit their family. The *Tulpi*, who was the lineage head as well as the clan priest kept the ancestral spirits in good humour and he was the only person who could officiate in the rites and rituals of the ancestral worship. In his absence, his wife could administer the rites and rituals. If a family was residing in a distant village, the clan priest could entrust a senior most man of his clan of that village to administer the rites and rituals on his behalf. When the rites and rituals of ancestral worship were administered, the clan priest appeased the spirits of his ancestors by recounting the personal names of the pedigrees of successive generations, one by one, and after each name was recounted, he poured a gourd scoop of water in the altar (Mannuamching, 2012). It is to be noted that the clan priest should make sure that no name was missed while recounting the personal names of the pedigrees of successive generations. When a person fell ill suspected to be caused by *pusa*, a tube of water was placed at the central pillar and the hands of the patient were washed in that tube. A promise was made to the *pusa*, saying, “*Pusa, pusa bawl na hi le hing dam sah in, kiasalpi, kabawngpi, kavawhpihingthavang*” (If the spirits of grandfather and father caused the illness let it be cured, I would kill my full grown gayal, I would kill cow, I would kill my pig). If the condition of the patient was improved, an animal either *sialpi*, *bawngpi* or *vawhpi* was slaughtered to be used as a sacrificial animal.

3. Beliefs in supernatural spirits.

The early Zous believed that the world was inhabited by various kinds of supernatural spirits. While some spirits were benevolent, the others were malevolent. The benevolent spirits blessed human beings with wealth, health, rich harvest. The malevolent spirits were supposed to dwell in the thick forests, mountains, trees, streams, water, rivers, springs, etc. They were believed to be wicked and inimical to human beings. However, they would not harm man unless provoked. When men unknowingly encroached upon the areas of their habitation, it made them angry and they caused sufferings, hardships, diseases, etc. Destructive natural forces such as thunder, storm, earthquake, lightning, epidemic, disease, famine, etc. were considered the manifestations of the wrath of the malevolent spirits.

There are a number of myths and legends about mountain spirits and river spirits. If they were not appeased they would harm travellers passing through their inhabited areas. Every village had a priest and it was his duty to perform

rites and rituals by chanting and offering sacrifice for the appeasement of the spirits (KamchinkhupTungdim, Personal Communication, March 7, 2018).

As the early Zous feared that the malevolent spirits would bring harm to them if not appeased, they devoted much of their time and energy to propitiate them. However, they did not feel the need to appease the benevolent spirits. Some of the benevolent and malevolent spirits are as follows:

a) Zinmang

Zinmang is an underworld spirit. It is both malevolent or benevolent depending upon the way it was propitiated (Thanglienmang, 2012). This underworld spirit is believed to rule a very dark underworld kingdom. This wicked spirit was responsible for various types of illness, pestilence, plague, etc., thereby causing suffering and death. In order to avoid its wrath the spirit had to be appeased through incantations and offerings.

b) Kau

Kau is a malevolent spirit. It is possessed by certain persons. There is a legend about how *kau* originated. The legend goes as - Once a wealthy person sent his men to another village to purchase a gayal for sacrificial purpose. The men were returning home with the gayal. On their way back home, the animal began to speak out saying, 'Alas! I feel too tired and I will be killed when I reach home'. The gayal was killed for sacrificial purpose. It is believed that the animal possessed the evil spirit and the persons whoever ate the meat began to possess the spirit called *kau* (Zou Literature Society, 2002).

Kau is a greedy spirit that attacked mostly persons who are eating delicious food and, wearing beautiful clothes and ornaments. Once it entered inside a person's body, there are changes in the victim's personality. It changed the victim's voice, behaviour and strength. Such attack caused uneasiness, stomach-ache and even death. This spirit is said to be of two kinds. One kind of *kau* is having a horn, can enter inside a person's body but cannot stay, and the other has no horn, can enter inside a person's body and also can stay forever (M.Liensuonkap, 2016). The early Zous believed these evil spirits were present everywhere and as such before eating or drinking, they would drop or pour a little share of their food or drinks, saying - '*Kausiatepawt aw*' which means 'Go away evil spirits' (Khamchinkhai, 2004).

The spirit could be released from a person's body either by appeasing in fulfilling what it required or by threatening to kill it. The spirit was promised whatever it wishes if it discloses itself. The spirit was also threatened with a knife, horn of deer or covers the person with fishing net. It is belief that if the victim was covered with fishing net till death, the person who possessed the evil spirit would die too. Sometimes, the evil spirit could not be released from the victim's body by such acts of appeasement and threat. Thus, the evil spirit killed the person.

It is believed that *kau* could be inherited from generation to generation. It is said that if a girl married a boy who possessed such evil spirit, she too would possess it once she step into the house of the boy. But if a boy married a girl with evil spirit, he would get it only after a son was born.

c) Gamkau

Gamkau means 'wild evil spirit'. *Gam* means wild and *kau* means evil spirit. It is an evil spirit that is seen at night in a particular area of a jungle. Person who encountered such spirits could suffer severe illness. *Gamkau* used to charm man and suck his blood. When fire on the hillside was seen it was believed that *Gamkau* was flying in search of food. The fire emitted by the evil spirit that is flying in the jungle is known as '*Kau-meide*' that means 'evil spirit-carrying fire' (Enkthoang Mate, personal Communication, March 10, 2018)

d) Misau

Misau is a dangerous male spirit. It is said to be elastic in the body so that it could be tall or short as it wishes. When it made its appearance it could be as tall as any tree nearby, and person who encountered got frightened and some even died out of shock. It is said to be very fond of sucking the blood of domestic fowls and used to hunt them at night in the village (M.Henkholun, personal Communication, March 10, 2018).

e) Pheisam

Pheisam is a spirit with one thigh only. *Phei* means thigh and *sam* means deficit. Thus, *Pheisam* literally means 'deficit of one thigh'. Though this spirit has only one leg, it is not lacking in physical strength. It can fly from one big tree to another. This spirit is said to fly at night. A trail of only one footprint left behind by it is usually seen on the sand bed of rivers. *Pheisam* is believed to have power to control wild animals. Hunters are not successful unless they are permitted by this spirit.

This spirit was also reared at home (Thongkhanthang, 2004). They could appear to man either in the form of human beings or revealed itself in dream. It also had the powers of making people rich or poor. Person who worshipped it were blessed with wealth in the form of property, money, cattle, etc. But if the worship was stopped, *pheisam* became

revengeful and withdrew all the blessings which it had given to the worshipper and could even cause extinction of all his family members (Chongloi, 2008).

f) *Thadam*

The literal meaning of *thadam* is spirit. They are the souls of dead people. The Zous believed that some souls of dead people did not go to heaven but remained on this earth. This spirit disturbed men in the village at night. It also threatened the people when they went to the jungle. They were heard as a sound like the weeping of a man or a woman in the jungle (KamchinkhupTungdim, Personal Communication, March 7, 2018). It is said that the *thadam* never disturbed person who could not be frightened by it.

g) *Gulsamnu*

Gulsamnu is a female dragon. The *Gulsamnu* guarded the narrow bridge between *Misikhuo* and *Pielgal*. This fiery spirit with her tongues and swords harassed the spirits of the dead who did not kill even a deer during their lifetime. But the spirits of persons who attained special position in their lifetime escaped such harassment.

h) *Siha*

Siha is the ghost of a dead person that could be seen at night in either male and female forms. The word *Si* means death and *ha* means ghost. Hence, *Siha* means 'ghost of a dead person'. After a dead body was buried, the spirit, having a body like that of human being could be seen at night.

i) *Dawi*

Literally, *dawi* means demon/spirit. It could appear in a shape that resembles human being. But these spirits are said to have had face of various shapes and nails that resemble the nails of wild animals. Some of them had pointed face, while other had curved face. The Zous believed that a person who disappeared was kidnapped by these spirits. In the early 1960s one man belonging to the Zou community disappeared at Valpakawt, a place near Saikot (Khamchinkhai, 2004). It was believed that the man was kidnapped by the demons.

j) *Khang*

Khang is a malevolent spirit. It could not be seen by human beings. This evil spirit used to torment a person while in deep sleep.

k) *Aw*

The term *Aw* means eclipse. The early Zous considered *aw* to be a giant spirit that dwelled in the heavens. When the lunar or solar eclipses occurred, they believed that the giant spirit was swallowing the moon or the sun. Drums were beaten and horns were blown to frighten and drove away the giant spirit. People fired guns into the air and shouted at the top of their voices threatening the spirit.

4. Life after death

The Zous believed in the existence of life beyond the grave in the form of invisible spirit and as such one's journey continues even after one's death on earth. They also believed in the existence of three after-worlds - *Misikhuo* (village of the death), *Pielgal* (land beyond *Piel* river) and *Vangam* (heaven). After death, one's spirit or soul wandered in the vicinity of the village for three months, and then the journey towards *vangam* (heaven) began. However, the journey of the soul to *Vangam* through *Misikhuo* and *Pielgal*, and the life after death would be hard or easy, depending on what was accomplished by them in their life time.

The soul of man with all his belongings crossed the *gun* river and then reached *Misikhuo*. Beyond *Misikhuo*, there is a place called *Pielgal*. To reach *Pielgal*, the soul had to compulsorily pass through a narrow bridge. The bridge was said to be guarded by a female dragon or spirit, called *Gulsamnu*. The spirits of the commoners dared not cross the bridge for fear of her. The Zous believed that the animals killed by a person in a chase during his life time guarded him from the dragon and helped him to cross the bridge. The first-born children who died at infancy and were buried without ceremony also escape such harassment. The spirits of the persons who entered this place were expected to enjoy supply of rice, meat and liquor.

There is still another place called *vangam* (Heaven). *Vangam* is the topmost abode of the spirits and is considered to be a beautiful and joyous place. It is the final abode where all the souls of the good ones were expected to live through eternity. It is the most blissful place and was also called Paradise.

IV. Role of the Priests and the Clan priest

The *Siempu* played important part in the socio-political and religious life of the early Zous. In the Zou society, there were two types of priest. One was the Clan Priest, known as *Tulpi*, and the other was village priest. The *Tulpi* is the head of the clan. He performed all the rituals and sacrifices connected with the worship of household deity, called *Pusa*. The village priest was a medicine man of the entire village. In former years the priest was usually from the *Lianzaw* clan

(Khamchinkhai, 1996). Later, the village priest could be from any clan or family. The post of *siempu* was hereditary; this was because that the secret words of medicine were unknown to the common households as the *siempu* taught these words to his sons and grandsons only. He occupied a respectable position in the village.

The village priest was in charge of the community's health. He attended the households in times of sickness and officiated over social and religious ceremonies (Kamchinkhup, personal Communication, March 7, 2018). He was believed to tell certain sickness by touching the pulse of a person and would prescribe the animal to be sacrificed in order to appease the evil spirits. The village priest usually depended on the directions he got through his dream during night while sleeping. He would receive all the directions as what he should do, when and with what materials, and the kind of animal to be killed from the spirit who appeared in his dream. He also acted as mediator between the people and the evil spirits (Mannuamching, 2000). With his magical incantation, he was believed to cure various diseases and he also performed all sorts of rites and rituals in the village.

V. Conclusion

The study of the traditional religious beliefs of the Zous in pre-Christian times reveals the existence of one Supreme Being, called *Pasienand* a lesser God called *Lungzai*. Both of them were invoked on every important festivals and social occasions. The Zous believed that *pusahad* the power of blessing or cursing. It was the *pusa* who built up, protected and cared for the family. The fortune of an individual or a family depended on whether the *pusa* was pleased with them or not. It was also beliefs and considered by them that the spirits that inhabited the world possessed supernatural and divine powers. While some of these spirits were good to them, the other spirits caused harm to them. They believed that all kinds of illness and misfortunes were caused by the malevolent spirits. Therefore, the daily life of the Zous revolved around appeasing the spirits in order to avoid their wrath.

The Zous believed in life after death. However, the journey of the soul to *Pielgaland* the life after death would be hard or easy, depending on what was accomplished by them in their life time. The Zous believed after dead man would have the same kind of life as he was before, and as the material things that he required when he was alive were buried with him. Therefore, life of man after death was conjectured as the continuation of the worldly life. However, the final place of the dead differed according to one's status and achievements in one's life time. *Vangam*, which according to the Zou beliefs, is a blissful and final abode where all the souls of the good ones were expected to live through eternity.

Though the early Zous were superstitious in their beliefs and considered the spirits that dwelt in the world possessed supernatural and divine powers and also believed that the *pusahad* the power of blessing or cursing, yet the beliefs in the existence of a Supreme Being i.e. God and how the souls of good men after dead would live through eternity is somewhat same as the beliefs that are followed in Christianity. Therefore, it can be said that the early Zous were conscious of the existence of God, who is superior to those spirits, even in their pre-Christian times. With the spread of Christianity, almost the entire population of the Zous were converted to the new faith within four to five decades.

REFERENCES:

1. Chongloi, Hemkhochon. (2008). *Indoi: A Study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism in the Hermeneutical Framework of Mircea Eliade*. Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
2. Ginneiching. (2012). The History and Culture of the Simtes of Manipur. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Manipur University.
3. Khamchinkhai. (1996). A Study of the History of Christianity among the Zou Tribe in Manipur. (B.D. Thesis, Eastern Theological College.
4. Khamchinkhai. (2004). Transition of Zou society from Animism to Christianity: A Socio- Economic, Political and Cultural Analysis. M.Th. Thesis, Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary.
5. Kipgen, Mangkhosat. (1997). *Christianity and Mizo Culture: The Encounter between Christianity and Zo Culture in Mizoram*. Mizo Theological Conference.
6. Liensuonkap, M. (2016). Dawileh Kau. In Mark Thangkhanai & T.C. Tungnung (Eds.) *Chinthu Zaila-IX* (pp.21-28), Zou Literature Society.
7. Mannuamching. (2012). Pulepate Biehna. (Ancestors' Worship). In M. Liensuonkap & T. Nehkhojang (Eds.), *Chinthu-Zaila Prose & Poetry* (pp.4-6), Zou Literature Society.
8. Mannuamching. (2000). *Zou Culture (Past & Present)*, Author
9. Thanglienmang, Philip. (2012). A Descriptive Grammar of Zo Language. Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
10. Vaiphei, S. Prim. (1975). *The Vaiphei Tribe*.
11. Zou, Christopher Thongkhangthang. (2004). Zou Religious Tradition. In Thangchinsuan (Ed.), *United Zomi Organization Golden Jubilee Souvenir* (pp. 146-148)
12. P. Tongthang Zou. Zou Literature Society. (2002). *Chinthu Zaila - IX*, Diamond offset.

Notification

Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India .*Notification Order No. SRO 2477A, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification) Order, 1956, Manipur, Sl. No. xvii*, New Delhi, 29 October 1956.

Internet Sources

Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

(2011), *Census of India: Primary Census Highlight India*

2011/http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/PCA_Highlights/pca_highlights_file/India/Chapter-1.pdf,

(accessed on September 23, 2023).

Persons interviewed:

Enkhotang Mate (80yrs.), Chief of M.Khaukual, Sangaikot Sub-Division, Churachandpur District, Manipur, interviewed by Thangsuanhang on 10th March 2018.

Henkholun (72 yrs.), Chief of M.Khawlmual village, Sangaikot Sub-Division, Churachandpur District, Manipur, interviewed by Thangsuanhang on 10th March 2018.

KamchinkhupTungdim (70 yrs.), Sugnu, Chandel District, Manipur, interviewed by Thangsuanhang on 7th March 2018.

LangchinlienMantuong (75 yrs.), Nangkateih, Sagaing Region, Myanmar, interviewed by Thangsuanhang on 23rd March 2018.