
Kummoi-Umm: A Unique Harvesting Festival of the Maring Tribe of North-East India

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ABSTRACT

The Maring tribe, also known as the 'Keepers of the Eastern Gate', is one of the oldest and most primitive tribes of the north-eastern states of Manipur. Time immemorial, the community is known for its valour and prowess in guarding their ancestral land and the eastern border of India from external incursions with great pride and honour. They have a rich culture and traditions. Agriculture being their chief occupation and source of income, there has been a long-standing tradition of celebrating each season of the calendar year with activities related to agriculture, signifying its impact on the life of the community. 'Kummoi-umm', one of the biggest harvesting festivals in the Maring community, is celebrated at the end of every harvest season. It is a time for the villagers to come together and celebrate their culture and traditions with colourful attire. The festival embodied the success of a yearlong labour of toiling day and night, expressing the joy of a bountiful harvest. Through their harvest festivals, they believe they are connected with the spirits of their ancestors and offer prayers and sacrifices to them. This article is an attempt to furnish the inherent traditional harvesting festival of 'Kummoi-umm', passed down by their

forefathers, wherein they preserved and followed intact every idea of the community it defines. It also highlights the changes that follow with the imbibitions of industrial cultures, impacting the originality of the ancient culture as witnessed by the present generation.

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INTRODUCTION:

The state of Manipur, which is located in the north-eastern region of India, is famous for its rich tradition, art, and culture. Surrounded by green hills with an oval-shaped valley at the centre, it lies on a melting pot of culture. It covers an area of 22,327 square kilometres with a total population of 28,55,794 according to the 2011 census. It has 34 recognised tribes, mostly inhabited in the hilly districts. The geographical location of these tribes gives them special advantages and favours shifting agriculture, which is considered the backbone of the rural economy. For these tribal communities, agriculture is not just an occupation for livelihood. Their traditional festivals related to agriculture are important elements of their culture that define and magnify the ethnic identity of a tribe.

The Maring society being an agrarian society, agriculture was their primary occupation, and they have depended on it for their livelihood since time immemorial. Among the tribal communities of Manipur, two forms of cultivation are widely practiced: jhum/shifting/swidden/slash-burnt and terrace cultivation. The people (Marings) have been practicing from time immemorial a form of Jhum cultivation known as ‘Shontrum-Lou’ (Maring, M. D, 2014). Hodson (1911) observes that nearly every tribe has some terraced fields, but among the Kabuis, Quoirengs, Marrings and Chirus, jhum cultivation provides the bulk of their sustenance. In the jhum, or slash-burnt, method of cultivation among the Marings, the village council, during its assembly, would allot certain regions or areas of community land for cultivation for one agriculture season. But there are instances in some Maring villages where the land grant period is 2–3 years due to limited village land. The villagers cut down trees, made them dry, and finally set them on fire, making them ready for sowing. Their knowledge of seasons and climatic conditions helps them to know the best time for cultivation and types of paddy or crops to be cultivated, which ultimately gives them a plentiful harvest at the end. Farmers used different varieties of crops in this type of cultivation, which differs from region to region. However, among the Marings, their main staple crop is paddy.



As the Marings depend on agriculture for their livelihood, therefore, the cultural and traditional lives of the people revolve around agricultural activities celebrating each season throughout the year. These festivals generally mark the beginning of new agricultural seasons, harvesting crops, etc. Kummoi-umm festival is the biggest harvesting festival among the Maring community of the north-east. It is the celebration of the success of yearlong labour and a bountiful harvest by the villagers. The festival is marked with rites and rituals accompanied by a traditional feast and merry-making with colourful traditional attires. Some of the rituals connected with agriculture among the Marings are Chimkhe (worship of the granary house), Charan-martam (ceremony of testing newly harvested rice), Chada (seed sowing festival), Chaalungthui (rite to prevent insects from harming crops), etc. Das (1988) writes that the ritual life of the Maring now-a-days is mainly centered around those rituals connected with agriculture. By using ritual expressions, tradition is allowed to continue uninterrupted, though not always in the same style and form.

GLANCE OF THE MARING TRIBE:

The term 'Maring' is believed to be derived from the word 'Meiring' or 'Meiringba' which means "the people who keep the fire unquenched." Tradition has had that they obtained fire through a traditional method of making fire called 'Meihongtang' by using dry 'Rhus chinensis' (Khongma-heeng) with bamboo strips and dry grasses through friction. The fire thus produced is considered "Sacred Fire" (Meikhring) and was set up at sacred places like village altars (Kholamun/Rlhamun), village gates (Palshung/Palthung), and youth dormitories/Rakhaang (Assembly, M. U, 2015). The oral history traced their origin to Burma, in the vicinity of the Angkoching range. The legend says that the Marings once upon a time lived inside the cave and had a flourishing civilization called 'Chaammi Leipak'. Their first settlement on earth was believed to have begun at 'Waasaphai/Wanshangphai' in the Kulvi Song-Song region of present-day Burma after Shrim-paa-bungrang (Mithun with black and white patches) was able to push open the cave's exit, which is sealed by a big stone (Thlungthung in local terms). To elucidate this, Brown R. (1873) also states that "looking simply at the geographical positions of the tribe, their facial characteristics, customs, etc., it may be said that the Naga came originally from the north, the Kuki from the south and east, and the Maring, who closely resembles the Burmese in appearance, from the east" (Brown, R, 1873, reprint, 1975). Geographically, they are now concentrated mostly in the districts of Chandel and Tengnoupal but also scattered in other districts of Manipur, with a total

population of 26,023 according to the 2011 census (Director, Manipur, 2011). The Marings are a traditionally and culturally rich tribal community well known for their knowledge of cane and bamboo handicrafts, ethno-medicines, and colourful festivals. Linguistically, the Maring dialect falls under the Tibito-Burman languages (Grierson, D. G, 1903). Their distinctive features includes wearing ‘Murshum’ (forehead knotted hair), Haa-Shang (blackened teeth), and Lhousa (Maring War dance).

The harvesting festival of Kummoi-um is quite elaborate and follows a series of events that last for four alternate days which are as follows:

KUMMOI-NAM: CHOOSING THE HOST

During the ‘Lamlaai festival’ of Maring, a ritual ceremony of cleaning the village roads and pavements usually observed in the month of October, a host for the Kummoi-umm festival is chosen by the villagers. Based on the size of the field, livestock, property possessed, persona, and charisma, someone from among the villagers is requested and chosen to be the host of the festival. The host then, in his own wisdom, decides as to who shall be the leader. Shaala-upa (leader from married men), Puinu-Upa (leader from married women), Karlanga-Upa (leader from bachelors), and Nangaka-Upa (leader from maidens) are four options from which the host chooses. Whoever the host decides, he or she becomes the leader of the festival and also names the festival accordingly, such as Shaala-um, Puinu-um, Karlhanga-um, and Nangaka-Upa.



Fig. 1: Ritual of Kummoi-nam to the Maring Couple.

KUMMOI YEERA-AAT: REAPING THE PADDY

As the field turns golden with grains, a call for harvest comes; Kummoi Yeera-aat is performed. On the day the host family considered auspicious, the villagers, both young and old, volunteered a day to cut the host's paddy at no cost, using sickles prepared in advance for the purpose. All the villagers wore traditional attire and colourful dresses. Women wore a red-black colour waistcoat called 'Khemachi' over their casual shirts and a turban (Lingkhang) with adorable traditional ornaments like Rahoo and Lumlel-saa (traditionally made earrings) and a marigold flower on their left ear, which represents femininity. Men wore the same colourful turban but put on a marigold flower on their right ear, which indicates masculinity. A small portion of the standing paddy is kept reserved and is to be cut on the very morning of the day of threshing.



Fig. 2: Yeera-aat of the host paddy field.

At the end of the day, when the cutting of paddy is over, a call for choosing the leader of the festival follows. The host, in his conscience, finally chooses among the members of his clan to be the leader. He is the Kummoi-Upa, meaning the leader of the festival.

On the same day at night, after the festive feast served by the host family, the villagers joined for the Chadaang Khul, wherein the cut paddies are tied in bunches using Thimroo (bamboo strip) and are kept in groups. Some male workers would collect these and lay them over long bamboo poles placed horizontally and randomly (Chadaang) all over the field. The numbers of Chadaang are finally counted by experts to estimate an approximate amount of yield. A number of over 50 Chadaangs is considered highly productive and would give over 400 tins of paddy (each tin weighs 18 kg). The Chadaangs are left dried in the open field until other villagers complete their harvest. On the last day of the harvesting season in the village, Kummoi-umm is celebrated.

Laa-laal, an act of composing a song for the host by Laarung-Upa (the senior-most song master), is also performed on the night of Yeera-aat. This unique system is done in honour of the host. The words and lyrics used in this song are well articulated, which carries profound meaning, encompassing the overall character and charisma of both the host and the field.



Fig. 3: Laa-laal on the night of Yeera-aat.

RUISAA: SITE PREPARATION FOR THRESHING

On the second day of the event and one day ahead of threshing, all the villagers would gather to prepare the Ruilaa (threshing ground). A suitable site is chosen, taking into account the space, plainness, centre of the field, transportation, etc. As every celebration of festivals is preceded by ritualistic prayer and oblations to the deity, a local priest at first seeks the blessings of the Almighty in choosing the site. He murmurs a magic spell sanctifying the place, offers libation to the forefathers, and asks all good to prevail. With this, all work gets started. The periphery of the Ruilaa is decorated with Paar-suk, a bamboo pole adorned with flowers found growing in the field such as Sanarei (*Tagetes sp.*), Yangwarei (*Celosia sp.*), etc. On the northern side of the Ruilaa, an arrangement is made where all the priests, folk singers, the leader of the festival, and the host will be sitting in rows during the celebration. This is the Saapul-shaang (a seat made of haystacks). Ann-raai, a place to store meat during the festival, is also prepared in the vicinity of Ruilaa. The ground is thus left level and seamless, with no footprints, grooves, or ridges for the next day.



Fig. 4: Threshing floor and bamboo poles adorned with flowers.

When all activities concerning the site preparation are completed, it is followed by a very special event known as the Saai-che, an act of soaking a handful of rice by the eldest female member of the host's clan. Nyula-upa, as she is known, is invited by the host family to grace the event. In case she gets married in other villages far from her own, she shall arrive in advance to do the honour. At one corner of the prepared site, she soaked a handful of rice using an earthen pot and covered it with seven layers of fresh leaves, each of Shaamna and Worna tied with three rounds of Ruivi (*Calamus sp.*).

Yorthal, a rodent belonging to the genus *Rattus*, is a part of the ritual. It is believed, as the mythology of the Maring tribe has it, that this animal first brought a panicle of paddy into the life of the nomadic Marings and thus embraced agriculture as their occupation and way of life.

CHAA-UMM: DAY OF THRESHING

It is the third day of the Kummoi-umm festival and represents the most important part of the whole festive event. Early in the morning, the host family will reap the remaining paddy that was left on the day of Yeera-aat. All the villagers, guests, relatives, and invitees from neighbouring villages arrived at the threshing site wearing traditional costumes. Before any activity of the day begins, it is preceded by laying a long, broad mat made of bamboo spread on the floor all over the Ruilaa. Around 15 to 20 such mats, measuring about 8 feet by 20 feet each in size, are used. The head of the host family took a bunch of paddies which was kept dried and threshed it on the floor over the bamboo mat, signalling the start of the threshing event. A public lunch is served in the morning by the host family. Dishes of different kinds are prepared for the masses. Interesting enough, an alternate curry of their choice called 'An-ngei' is also cooked for vegetarians or those who don't eat beef or pork. As a mark of respect and honour to the Modarpha and Maring

eldest female member (Nyula-upa) of the host's clan, a very special dish is prepared for her, serving the meal cooked from the rice that she had soaked the previous night.

After the public luncheon, 'Hoo-yao', a mass procession is held, attended by all members present at the event. Wearing colourful costumes and traditional attire, all men and women gathered at the distant top of the field. They marched towards the threshing site, led by the Kummoi-upa, holding a spear, tied on its top a dry bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) called Tulbon that contains rice beer. As they walked down the path, folk singers held spears in their hands, swinging side by side to the rhythm of the song. The rest of the masses followed and danced to the tunes of drums and gongs played by the drummers. All those taking part in the procession are required to carry traditional shawls. The shawls are held at each end by their hands, making a long stretch without any gaps in between. This is called Phi-shang Saa. It is believed that as they walked down towards Ruilalai, evils of all forms were left behind and warded off. As they reach the site, Lhaak-yuu is performed, wherein they shout all in unison, and the same is responded to by those at the Ruilalai. And there, threshing is resumed at noon with great pomp and fervor. Half of the participants would gather the paddy from the field while the rest at the Ruilalai, stand in a circle, threshing the paddy over a wooden log. They would continuously shout 'Hoi-haa, Hoiya-haa, Hoiya-haa haa, Hoiya-haa', which enabled them to work harder and quicker without pausing in the middle.



Fig. 5: Phi-shang Saa by the participants of the mass procession.

On the last trip of gathering the paddy, a race is performed between married men and bachelors, married women and maidens. They lined up at the bottom of the field, holding a bunch of paddies, and ran up the steep field towards the Ruilaa. Whoever gets the meat kept in the middle of the Ruilaa wins the race. When the threshing is completed, the grains are gathered at the centre of Ruilaa, making a pyramid, on the top of which a ‘Tulbon’ covered with leaves and a Theipok (*Citrus macroptera*) fruit, is placed. Here too, the competition of jumping over the grain is performed which is followed by a grand public dinner.



Fig. 6: Winnowing and gathering grains in pyramid shape.

At night, beside the Ruilaa, Meerkheng is arranged. It is a place made of bamboo poles and straw stacks where men would sit together and sing Chaa-Laa, a folksong dedicated to the Deity of Paddy. Women gathered around bonfires and sang Yaron-nu Laa, a typical song of harvest.



Fig. 7: Men singing Chaa-Laa at Meerkheng.



PONG-SHIM/ RAHONG-SHIM: MAKING OF BARN/GRANARY

After all the grains are removed from the chaff by winnowing using a traditional bamboo-made fan (Leikho) or a piece of clothing, Pong/Rahong, a breadbasket is prepared the next morning on the last day of the festival. It is made by coiling a bamboo mat placed vertically, supported by bamboo poles on the edge of the floor. Haystack, broad leaves, and scales of bamboo are used if necessary. A large, cylindrical-shaped container is thus ready. Using bamboo baskets and shovels, grains are collected and filled into the Pong. When all is done, the same Tulbon is placed in the middle at the top of the container. Then, Rahong Mathang Laa, a song praising the magnanimity of the Rahong, is sung. The yield of the harvest is then measured.

LAM-CHAA: DECLARATION OF THE YIELD

An announcement to the general public is made declaring the yield of the grain. The circumference of the cylindrical Pong is measured using the stretch of both arms. ‘Lam’ is a stretch of length measured from the fingertip of one arm to the fingertip of the other arm. The approximate height of the Pong is about 8 feet. The number of Lams declared is one less than the actual count. As many as Lam-6 and even Lam-7 or more have been recorded in the Kummoi-umm festival, and these are considered productive and fruitful.

Chaa-lhang, a good share of paddy, is given to the outsiders as a token of gratitude for their participation in the festival. Each outsider members would be given a paddy of 2–3 tins by the host family. Anna-daa is also performed during lunch on the last day of the festival where the magirists would distribute cooked meat over plantains to all who partake in the feast. It symbolises the repayment of all debts of all forms indebted by the host. This act of obligation strengthens the ties between the two parties and amplifies the spirit of closeness.

KHONG-SAL: RETURNING OF THE VILLAGERS

It is time for all the participants to return to their respective homes and villages. Khong-sal implies the journey back to their homes. Before leaving the village, the leader of the festival would again arrange a grand feast for the participants, prepared from the meat given by the host family. It is an act of charity and generosity on his part for him being made the leader of the festival. The members, after having lunch, would exchange bidding farewell and good wishes with one another and with this ended the four-day grand Kummoi-umm festival.

SOCIAL STATUS AND RECOGNITION:

Lou-pu (the host):

A high level of societal regard and respect is conferred upon the host of the festival. The festival, which takes four significant days, is celebrated by killing mithuns, pigs, cattle, serving rice beers and different dishes, and incurring lots of expenditures. This would not have happened without the generosity and sacrificing heart and spirit of the host family. The jhumming field on which the festival is celebrated is observed and remembered by the villagers. Elders used such a significant event as a base year for counting years and the age of a person. It became a landmark geographical area (Loumaa) in the future course of any rituals related to farming activities. In case the host wants so, a monolith can be erected, symbolising the grandeur of an act of such magnitude for all to see and cherish. In the event of the death of the host, on his remembrance stone, the festival "Kummoi-umm," along with the year, is engraved big and bold. He is recognised as someone who has the spirit of preserving the identity, culture, and tradition of the community to which he belongs. Everyone, both young and old, acknowledged his act of benevolence during his lifetime and after.

Kummoi-Upa: The Leader of the Festival

Kummoi-Upa, the leader of the festival, is by no way less significant than the host in terms of status and worthy of esteem. He has played a pivotal role in ensuring the smooth sailing of the sequence during the festival since day one. Every minute of the rituals is overlooked by him. He leads the way, ensuring all is well and keeping the idea intact. For his one-upmanship, people acknowledge him. In the succeeding year, a day is spared working in his field by villagers during harvest season. He is also given the priority of hosting the Kummoi-umm festival in the year that follows. It is the dream of every capable person to become the leader of the Kummoi-umm festival.

CONCLUSION:

The uniqueness and identity of all tribes, whether big or small, are defined by their old cultures and traditions, more so in preserving and protecting every bit of them without diluting them with the advent of modern industrial culture. Keeping it alive and vibrant, intact in its form and fervour, is determined by the people who embrace and value it to the core of their hearts. Agricultural activities will continue to exist so long as human civilization persists, so are the rituals and festivals associated with it.



However, the sanctity to the idea of each occasion and celebrations seems to be fading away with the rapid pace of urbanization coupled with technological replacement for manual works. The ideas of tribalism in society shrink in with the introduction of Christianity as a religion. This posed a greater risk of eroding the long-cherished traditions handed down by our forefathers and we are on the verged of compromising that very idea of uniqueness of the community which it defines. Very soon the originality and authenticity of the so-called different tribes would be irrelevant till that time when no point of distinction could be made between these communities and left with no reason to celebrate and take pride of being that community which once, he is proud of. This generation thus shouldered a heavy responsibility in preserving the tenets of every legacy inherited from our forefathers and keeping it resilient for the coming generations to see and live to it.

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- b. Kj. Angrung (62), Laarung from Rilram Centre Village, Dated: 23.10.2023
- c. Pipa Morung Charanga (64), Leader of Charanga Paacha of Kambang Khunou Village, Dated: 18.11.2023
- d. Ch. Menaishim (66), Kharou Khunou Village, Dated: 20.11.2023