

***Laiphô*: Mara Traditional Social Institution**

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Abstract

Laiphô was a traditional Mara social institution in which young bachelors selected the house of a particular unmarried girl, for resting and sleeping at night. It was here that the young Men learnt social traits and moral values. This paper is essentially analytical and ethno-historical in nature. Apart from secondary sources, oral tradition was invoked for generating sources and information in order to bring about a coherent understanding of the subject.

Key words: *Laiphô*, Courting, Valour, Melancholy.

Introduction

Social institutions are a system of behavioral and relationship patterns that are intricately interconnected and durable, they are complex, integrated and structured set of norms that ensured the existence and the survival of societal values. Each of the elements is assigned certain duties and ultimately has responsibilities that contribute to the overall functioning and stability of the society (Kimberly Devore). Though it may differ in matters of functioning and responsibilities, however all societies have set of institutions that governed the overall working and performance of the society (Kimberly Devore). These are the primary institutions that are found among all human groups and had universal characteristics and therefore deeply rooted in human nature and that they are essential in the 'development and maintenance of orders'.

Laiphô was an important social institution amongst the pre-literate Mara society. It may be considered as somewhat different from the usual bachelor's dormitory found in other tribal societies of Northeast India. *Laiphô* was a celebrated institution wherein, *satlia*, who are young adult unmarried men acquired knowledge, skills and ideas from others through discussions and practices and also learnt the art of courting.¹ It was also known as *Laiphô chô*, (R.A. Lorrain: 1988, 154) a kind of practice in which young and adult unmarried males over the age of 14 selected a particular house², especially an unmarried girl's house having good and reputable background, by carrying with them their beddings for sleeping and spending the night (Nôhro Hmôkô: 2011, 97). In the case of larger villages where there was more number of unmarried girls, there were several *laiphô*

or houses selected as *laiphô*. As a rule and generally speaking young men would choose a well to do family having a big house, a number of pigs, plenty of rice-beer and of course beautiful *laihsa*, unmarried maiden, as their *laiphô*. However, they would avoid the home of those girls whose parents appear to be harsh, unwelcoming and inhospitable (Nôhro Hmôkô: 2011, 108). Therefore, every family that have unmarried girl would strive hard to have *laiphô* station at their house.

The unmarried girl, *laihsa* would perform the role of a host to the *laiphô* members. However, she had no influence whatsoever over the right of affiliation and membership to the *laiphô* (K. Zohra: 2013, 23). The *laiphô* girl was generally expected to be above reproach and she had to be considerate and well-mannered in her dealings with the members (P.T. Hlychho: 2007, 90). She must at all time show heartiness, polite and yet remain respectful to all members of the group. She had to be impartial and receptive and if possible the girl would also provide sleeping materials like animals skins and a space to sleep for every *laiphô* members in her house. Similarly, the parents of the girl had to accord good manners with consideration and also provide rice-beer, nicotine water and sometimes even food to all the members (K. Zohra: 2013, 22).

It was a kind of practice in which parents would prepare beddings and urge their children who have attained the age of 14 to set out for *Laiphô chô*. It was considered as an important marker of

personal development when a person set out for *laiphô chô*. Young boys were generally very much eager and anxious to experience *laiphô chô* as it marked the beginning of adolescence and maturity in one's life. Therefore, even before attaining the appropriate age, young boys would ask their parents to allow them for *laiphô chô*. (K. Zohra: 2013, 98)

Laiphô chô was not an easy practice since one has to be self-reliant in terms of beddings; has to give up the warm and comfort of home and many years of sleeping with the parents; now that one has to endure sleeping alone without sharing with friends in the cold and dark of the night³ and also require daring courage and valour to relief oneself often at times from nature's call even in the dark of the night. Moreover, it was an extremely difficult work-out especially for those families having a number of boys since providing separate sleeping materials for all the young boys was something not easily available. One has to have bed spread as well as an extra cover to keep oneself warm at night which was all scarce and costly materials made from indigenous cotton.⁴

It has been argued by some local writers that the early Maras also had *Zawbu*, popularly known as *vâpâh-o*, and which was very much identical with the celebrated social institution of the neighbouring Lusei tribe called *Zawlbuk* (Nôhro Hmôkô:2011, 99). However, the validity of the existence of *zawbu* among the Maras appears to be rather doubtful and

it could be more of a conjectural parallel drawn from the age old social institution and practice of the Lusei known as *zawlbuk*. Among the early Maras, *laiphô* was an all-male oriented exercise where young boys learnt independent life, valour and courage, speech, moral values, customs and traditions, respect for elders, imitating the conduct and practices of elders etc.

It taught them integrity, courage, love and compassion towards the poor and downtrodden, towards the elders and the infirm, towards widows, orphans even towards animals, plants and nature. It was a place where senior men invoked customs and traditions and younger members of the group would listen thoughtfully about the deeds of wise and brave men, about hunting and raids, stories and legends of numerous kinds. At night they would often light bonfire outside the courtyard and play games under the moonlit night and compete with another in different sporting and entertaining activities like wrestling, tug of war, high jump, long jump, pestle twisting, arm wrestling, (John Hamlet Hlychho: 2009, 143) weight lifting, tree climbing, singing, dancing etc. They would even compete with members of other *laiphô* groups to win prize and trophies. Therefore, it was a perfect place where one learns and develops personality, manner, behavior, qualities and character as they interact with one another and it was an age-old institution cherished by every Maras.

Laiphô was an institution that also provided help and security to the people and the village as well. If a person constructs a

house, help would be sought from members and groups affiliated to a particular *laiphô* for procuring boulders, wooden poles, frames and other construction materials from the river and forest. In times of emergency like war, raids, hunting and even in times of calamities, *liaphô* members would quickly rally-around and assemble and be ever-ready to confront any eventuality. If somebody happens to die in another village, they would be quick to receive or carry the dead body to and from the village whenever required. In times of distress, the entire village would look and depend upon different *laiphô* groups for taking safety measures like defense, protection and security.⁵

There could be a performing and a non-performing *laiphô*. A *laiphô* may be considered performing whose members are full of life and energetic, gallant, selfless, altruistic and humane. On the other hand, it may be considered non-performing if whose members are found to be lethargic and sluggish, proud and indolent. Those *laiphô* would soon lose popularity and wean away in no time. Therefore, *laiphô* membership, though voluntary, was rather critical and a person of negative and lackluster qualities would find it difficult to affiliate and fit into any *laiphô*.⁶ Every *laiphô* member would make every effort to outdo others in order to impress upon the *laiphô* girl and her family.

Should there be any incident affecting the reputation and conduct of the girl on certain grounds, the *laiphô* may be terminated and a new *laiphô* may be formed. Moreover, when young bachelors entered into wedlock, they automatically

ceased to become members of the group. *Laiphô* inevitably ceased to exist as and when the *laiphô* girl entered into matrimony or in the event of the death of the girl. Whatever may be the case or when *laiphô* got terminated, members would then return home and seek afresh for another *laiphô* or look for affiliation to other existing *laiphô* groups. They would lament their experiences in the earlier *laiphô* with nostalgia and would often visit the house and express their reminiscence and melancholy with sadness and longing for their former *laiphô*.⁷

Notes

¹Based on information provided by S. Paaw of Tisopi village and currently a resident of Khatla, Aizawl on 18 March, 2014.

²Based on information provided by Mylai Hlychho of Saikao village and N. Zahry, New colony Siaha on 10th September 2015 at Aizawl.

³Based on information provided by Thasia T. Azyu, resident of Siaha Vaihpi on 15th September 2014.

⁴Based on information provided by S. Hrachu (L) of Chhaolô and resident of college vaih, Siaha on 12th December 2013.

⁵Based on information provided by K. Ngokhai of Phura and resident of College vaih, Siaha on 25th January 2014.

⁶Based on information provided by A. Zakia of Siaha Vaihpi on 11th September, 2014

⁷*Ibid.*

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