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**COMMUNITY CRAFT SPECIALIZATION AMONG THE CHAKPAS: THE  
SPECIAL CASE OF ALCOHOLIC RICE BEVERAGE PRODUCTION**

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**Abstract**

Every community indulges in a craft or two. The evolution of a simple craft to being a specialized one is an attribute of the development of the complexity in a given society. Likewise the *Chakpas* of Manipur considered one of the earliest settlers of the state of Manipur practice the unique craft of indigenous alcoholic rice beverage right from early times. The *Chakpas* is a well-known community with regards to production of their rice beverages. We find mention of different types of the rice beverages in association with their various rituals, performed throughout the year. Here in this paper, the community craft specialization of alcoholic rice beverage production found practicing among the *Chakpas* is presented from an ethnographic model. The paper in particular examines the different stages in its production as found practising by this ethnic group till date. Secondly, this paper deals in the alcoholic rice beverage production among this community as an alternate to their main agricultural practice of wet rice cultivation and how the specialization in this craft has contributed in enhancing the subsistence pattern of this community.

**Keywords:** Craft, *Chakpas*, Manipur, beverage, specialization.

**Introduction**

The role of craft specialization being a vital part in the emergence of state has been a concern for archaeologists and ethnographers working in early simple societies still found in existence in its pristine conditions. Archaeologists consider craft specialization a keystone to social complexity as it plays a key role in the process that archaeologist believe may kick start the development of social complexity among human beings. However this craft specialization constitutes a common economic alternative to an exclusive reliance on farming strategies. (Netting ;1990)

Craft specialization often defined as the manufacture of goods in excess of personal or household needs (Costin 2000; Rice 1981), and has traditionally been framed around an evolutionary model whereby societies progress through stages of economic intensification, classified by the scale and intensity of production, starting from household based production for personal use and evolving to workshop based production and eventually large scale industry (Costin 1991; Van der Leeuw 1977). Individuals in a society may specialize in the production of particular goods, but the development of it into a community based specialization requires larger groups of households specialize in one or more alternative productive strategies since traditional agricultural pursuits alone couldn't provide all prerequisites to living( Rice 1987:189).

Production of local wine or alcoholic beverages by ethnic communities all over the world is a common phenomenon and reflects the cultural, religious and medicinal properties it posses right from prehistoric times. Although we find different sources for production for wine and alcoholic beverages such as barley, millet, grapes etc., based on the seasonal and regional availability; we find an abundant supply of rice in South East Asia which has led to the use of rice for the production of a wide variety of spirit, wine, and beer by the ethnic communities of this region. And regarding the tribes and communities of Central, Eastern Himalayan belt and the North Eastern States alcoholic beverages based on rice have even attained the status of sacred item. Among these tribes we find alcoholic rice beverages occupying an important place in rites of passage as well as in every agricultural occasion and festivals. Rice based alcoholic beverages are home products in the tribal belts of India and are offered as welcome drink in all households of many tribes in Eastern India. (Ahuja, U. *et.al.* 2005).This paper in particular deals with the community specialization in alcoholic rice beverage production by the *Chakpa* group of people of Manipur. Production of alcoholic beverages is one particular occupation associated with the SC/ ST groups and one can't find the general Meitei population dealing with this particular craft. The *Chakpa* group of people which is in study here belong to the conglomerate of communities grouped as Scheduled caste people and have been found indulging in this specialized household craft specialization right from time immemorial and have passed on this specialization expertise to subsequent generations until now.

The *Chakpas* considered one of the earliest indigenous groups of Manipur are found spread over eight villages located in five different districts. These *Chakpas* are mostly found inhabiting the foothills or the region bordering the valley and the hills of Manipur. The *Chakpas* which constitutes an integral part of the Meitei community are still found preserving and practicing their age old traditional beliefs unlike the general Meitei community which have more or less abandoned their old traditions in favour or the general Hindu religion. Among the *Chakpa* group we find their main mode of subsistence revolving around wet rice cultivation with alcoholic rice beverage production as an alternative to agricultural practice plus ceramic production among some *Chakpa* villages. Here based on the ethno archaeological perspective offered by community specialization found among the *Chakpas* of Manipur we are trying to present an insight look into this early traditional craft specialisation existing among this particular community and importance this specialization practice holds in the economic as well as cultural life of the people.

## Materials and Methods

First of all pilot survey was conducted in all *Chakpa* villages of Manipur from which the principal *Chakpa* villages of *Chakpa* Phayeng, Andro and Awang Sekmai was selected for in-depth study regarding the production of traditional alcoholic rice beverage as this villages are well known throughout the whole state when it comes to quantity as well as quality of their rice beverage. Interviews (both structured and unstructured) were employed, their methods and techniques while indulging in their daily alcoholic rice beverage production was also closely observed and documented and finally case study was also done with that of other *Chakpa* villages.

## Alcoholic Beverage Production

Sekmai, Andro and Phayeng are *Chakpa* villages which have become more of a household name when it comes to alcoholic beverage production in the state and the people are well versed with the intoxicating quality as well as the taste of liquor from these three *Chakpa* villages. Not undermining the other *Chakpa* and ST communities which also indulge in this special craft but when it comes to the taste, quality as well as quantity of local liquor produced in the state the alcoholic beverage produce from these three villages is quite unmatched and has high value well known compared to others. In the local dialect the alcoholic beverage produced is known by the term 'Yu'. The production process of alcoholic beverage commonly known as *yu-thongba* is mainly taken up by the womenfolk of this community. We could find mentions of three types of this alcoholic beverage namely *Pukyu*, *Waiyu* and *Leiyu* produced but at present we find these *Chakpa* groups having mainly focused only on the production of *leiyu* viz., one that is produced for general consumption and commercial purposes. The other two were earlier prepared only for special occasions of cultural and religious significance. Even though all three types of the alcoholic beverage is prepared from rice, it is *leiyu* which have popularly come to be known by the name *Yu* and have slowly replaced the other two even in cases of ceremonial use with the passage of time. This paper in particular explores the traditional skill of the *Chakpas* in the production of this alcoholic beverage called *leiyu* henceforth termed simply as *Yu*.

The process of distilling alcoholic rice beverage ( *Yu*) is locally known as *Yu-thongba* and normally takes about four to five depending on the season prevailing at the time of production. During summer (March – September) it usually takes four days, whereas in winter (October- February) it usually takes five days. Here the variation in the number of days rises from the fact that when the temperature rises during summer months, the fermentation process speeds up while during winter months the process of fermentation takes longer period owing to temperature dropping in winter.

For the production of good quality alcoholic beverage, two main ingredients are much needed viz. 1) Unpolished rice or *Chamang* and 2) *Hamei* some sort of a locally prepared catalyst or some kind of malt (fermenting agent). Here we find the use of unpolished rice and not the properly polished used for consumption daily mainly because the local belief among the people is that it is of much better quality believe the alcoholic beverage or *Yu* resulting from unpolished rice has higher nutrient content (*marek mahao khr henna yaoba*). They believe that nutrients such as vitamins, proteins etc are taken away if the rice is more polished.

*Hamei* on the other hand is made up of rice and *yangli* some sort of wild creeper (*Albizzia mycrophylla*). Here the *yangli* or wild creeper is dried properly before use and when the time comes for preparation of the *hamei* it is cut up into small pieces and kept soaked in water for two to three hours. Some unpolished rice which has also been kept soaked in water for a night or a minimum of 12 hrs is collected in a basket and dried for a while before pounded turning it into fine powder. The soaked pieces of *yangli* or *Albizzia mycrophylla* is then mixed with the rice powder to form thick flat 4-6 cm diameter x 0.5-1 cm thick rounded doughs which we called it as *hamei*.



*Hamei* (starter agent for alcoholic beverage production)

They are sundried before being put over for storage. For storage the *hameis* are usually stored in bamboo baskets with a lining of straw or paddy husk spread over the surface of the baskets so as to increase the warmth and also aid in fermentation. The *hameis* are placed over this surface of straw or husk in such a way that they do not overlap over one another. After placing the *hameis* above this mass of straw or paddy husk they are again covered with straw and finally by cloth. All this is done is to keep the *hameis* warm and free from extreme heat or cold. In winter more layers of cloth may be added considering the dipping temperature at this time of the year. After 4-5 days of fermentation we could observe fine water droplets appearing over its surface after which it is taken out and sundried. The *hamei* is considered ready for use only when a sense of alcoholic smell comes from it.

### **Preparation of *Yu* (alcoholic beverage)**

The first step in the preparation of *yu* involves the cooking of unpolished rice in a pot locally known as *chaphu* by the woman of the household preferably in the morning. The cooked rice is known as *chak* in local term and here we could see a slight difference in the cooking of rice for daily consumption and rice being cooked for alcoholic beverage production. In case of the rice cooked for alcohol production the rice is cooked in such a way that the *chak* (cooked rice) is little hard in comparison with the *chak* prepared for daily consumption. The cooked rice or *chak* is then poured out in a big bamboo basket locally known as *cheng sangbai* and then washed properly with water. Earlier in olden days contrary to this method of washing *chak* the people resorted to spreading of the *chak* on a big mat till the *chak* cooled down properly. However our informants informed us that the earlier method was not proper as it rendered the

*chak* grains more sticky hence resulting to a slower fermentation process. Although we find most of the *Chakpa* villages employing this washing technique we could also find a few *Chakpa* households belonging to different villages viz. Andro, Phayeng, Tairenpokpi continuing this age old tradition.

After the cooling process we mixed the cooked rice or *chak* with the *hamei* (probably in the ratio 30-40gm/10kg of rice) and then transferred into a bamboo basket, nowadays aluminium, tin or even plastic buckets which can contain 10 kg of rice or more based on the availability as well as the affordability of the household are found in use. Here the containers containing the mixture (*chak* and *hamei*) is covered with a clean cloth and kept in sunlight (preferably not direct sunlight) for 3-4 days depending on the season as previously mentioned. Sometimes if available and mainly during winter season, leaves of *Khangra* tree (*Butea monosperma*) can be used as inner linings of the containing the mixture to further aid fermentation which is quite slow in winter season compared to summer. This process of transferring the mixture into a basket or plastic bucket for fermentation is known as *Luthup chanba*, this is all completed on the morning of the first day itself.



Rice mixed with hamei kept for fermentation



Release of alcoholic spirit

On the second day (during summer) and third day (in case of winter season) we could see that the mixture of *chak* and *hamei* upon fermentation have started fizzling with bubbles indicating fermentation (fermentation comes from the French word 'fermentare' meaning to boil or seethe) releasing fluid droplets and collected in the tub in case of porous containers used for fermentation and in case of non porous containers as seen above collected along with the mixture itself. The quantity of *khari* released varies with less amount released in initial stages of the fermentation process and what is collected at later stages of fermentation. Proper fermentation of the mixture is of great importance as it has a direct bearing on the quality of and quantity of *Yu* produced. The properly fermented solid mixture of *chak* and *hamei* is referred to as *khajee* while the fluid droplets released is called *khari*. The properly fermented *khajee* along with the *khari* is then transferred into a larger container and further mixed with water in the ratio of 1:1. This process is known as *khajee khunba* and most probably performed on the evening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day during summer and 3<sup>rd</sup> day in winter season.



The mixture obtained is then allowed to undergo submerged fermentation for another 2-3days (depending on the weather conditions) followed by the distillation process. During distillation such submerged mixture is transferred into large containers which can probably hold about 30 kg of rice and then heated on a flame allowing the alcohol to evaporate. The vapour is then condensed by a pot containing cold water fitted above locally called *yukok* which serves as some sort of a condenser (as shown in fig) . The distillate (spirit or alcohol) converted into liquid form by condensation is then collected in pots placed aside connected with a small pipe. The initial dense distillate collected is what we called *machin* (high alcohol content) ; very strong, not suitable for general consumption but in great demand for its



Distillation Setup for extraction of alcohol

medicinal and healing properties. After the *machin* comes the one suited for drinking purposes. Generally based on our observation we find the rice fitted in containers with 10 kg of rice produces 8 litres of first class local liquor followed by the final second class liquor which is about 3-4 litres amounting to about 11-12 litres in total . Comparing the two classes of liquor the first one is more popular and demands a higher price compared to the second one.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Local alcoholic beverage production prepared traditionally at the household level is one unique skill prevalent among the *Chakpas* of Manipur. This unique trait or skill is something which has been found practicing among this particular group of people right from the early times. This heritage has been handed down through generations of this community making this particular group professed in this particular craft and have become more or less a specialization associated with this particular group of people. People of this community becoming specialized in this particular craft can also be drawn from the fact that this alcoholic beverage is one indispensable part of their cultural traditions. The fact that we find its usage in birth, death and other religious rituals associated with this community is a testimony of its association right from early days where societies mostly engaged in subsistence practices. Apart from its production for use in religious rituals and ceremonies, certain families of this community have started professing this craft as a means of sustaining their livelihood apart from depending solely on farming activities, which indicates a general increase in social complexity from the times where early human beings derived their subsistence simply from food gathering, hunting, and farming practices.

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