



Jihang- The Poison Ritual Festival of the Himong Tribe (Adi Tribe) of Arunachal Pradesh: A Decaying Indigenous Knowledge System of Sustainable Living Practice

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Abstract

This paper highlights the indigenous practice of the “Jihang” festival of Himong sub-tribe of Adi tribe residing in Arunachal Pradesh. Himong sub-tribe is a native of Upper Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh and their total population is approximately 10,000 or more. This paper intends to highlight the decaying indigenous knowledge system of the Jihang- The Poison Ritual Festival of the Himong Tribe (Adi Tribe) of Arunachal Pradesh. The Jihang festival is a significant cultural and religious celebration of the Himong tribe. It is very much deep rooted in the tribe’s traditional beliefs. The festival marks the gratefulness of the Himong people towards nature, their ancestors, and spiritual deities. This ancient festival, celebrated with reverence and mystery, is centered on the collection and utilization of a potent poison called ‘emo’ and they are found in the colder region away from Simong village in Upper Siang district. The Himong tribe has identified the ‘emo’ and has developed the use of this poison. And this knowledge is passed down from generations to generations. In ancient times, these poisons were used in wars, battles, hunting and rituals. Moreover, it involves elaborate rituals, traditional music, dance performances and communal feasting. The Himong tribe claims that the ‘Emo’ is one of the deadliest poisons found in the entire Adi belt. The festival serves as a vital occasion for social bonding and the preservation of indigenous customs. It also highlights the tribes’ deep connection with their environment, reflecting their reverence for nature and sustainable living practice and also reinforces the Himong tribes’ cultural identity to the broader world. The researcher collected and analyzed the data through indigenous perspectives and field survey. In this backdrop, the paper also underlines implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: Culture, Emo, Himong, Jihang, Poison, Rituals, etc.

Introduction:

The Jihang Festival is a significant cultural celebration of the Himong tribe. Rooted in tribe’s traditional beliefs, the festival marks the gratitude of the Himong people towards nature, their ancestors and their spiritual deities. The Jihang Festival is a poison festival celebrated in every 3 years to 4 years usually in the month of October. The festival centers around the collection and use of natural poison for battles in the ancient times, hunting, rituals, symbolizing bravery and communal unity. The Himong tribe resides in Himong village near Yingkiong in Arunachal Pradesh, India. They are one of the subgroups of the

Adi tribe, known for their rich traditions and deep connection to nature. Nestled in the remote corners of Arunachal Pradesh, their unique cultural practice known as Jihang is usually observe for collection of Emo and for cutting of Tanang in the name of the male children from the Komji Lipi region which is like registration of their male children. This ancient festival, celebrated with reverence and mystery, is centered on the collection and utilization of a potent poison derived from a rare plant known as 'Emo'. Jihang is a poison festival of the Himong tribe. This tribe is one of the sub tribes of Adi tribe. Only males go for collection of 'Emo' to Yuppu, Komji Lipi, Eko Dumbing and Himong Patang region. Upto Yuppu both men and women folks helps in carrying eatable items such as rice , meat, apong (rice beer) , water, vegetables, salts so on. But from Yuppu region onward only those men who have decided to go for collection of Emo and to cut Tanang (in the name of their male children travel alone which is like registration of their male children). Himong people consider Yuppu, Komji Lipi, Eko Dumbing and Himong Patang as sacred because their Jihang festival is connected to these regions as well. Origin of the Jihang Festival is shrouded in legend. According to the Himong people, the festival began centuries ago when their ancestors discovered the powerful properties of the Emo plant. This plant is native to the forests far away from the villages in a colder region in Upper Siang District and it produces a toxin so potent that it has been used both in hunting and as a form of weapon to protect themselves from protection against animals and enemies. The poison from this plant was used in wars among tribes in the olden times and also by other tribes such as Panggi sub tribe of Adi tribe. Because of this Emo (poison) there were alliances and business ties among different tribes.

Significance of the Study

The study will help in preserving the culture and traditional knowledge of the Himong tribe related to Jihang festival and also it will help us to know the importance of the Jihang festival.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the rich traditions and cultures related to Jihang of the Himong Tribe.
2. To study the indigenous and ancient knowledge system to prepare poison.
3. To understand why the practice of the Jihang should be necessary and why the festival is deteriorating.

Methodology

In the present study, the researcher collected and analysed the data through indigenous perspective and field survey. The researcher also adopted a qualitative method of research and used descriptive research to interpret and examine the data gathered from the respondents. Primary data were collected and gathered through informal interviews and telephonic interviews. Some of the data related to the Jihang festival has been collected from the notes made during personal visit to Himong village, Upper Siang District and interviews were taken with the indigenous people of Himong Tribe.

Operational Definitions:

Emo: It is a wild root which is very poisonous.

Ipak: Local Rituals

Tanang: Look like small bamboo

Talap: Wild edible local onion

Gokbat: Shouting and chanting olden ritual songs

The Himong Tribe and their traditions:

Himong Tribe

The Himong tribe is one of the many indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh, living in harmony with the dense forests and rugged terrains of the Eastern Himalayas. This tribe prefers to call themselves as Himong tribe instead of Simong tribe. Himong tribe is one of the sub tribes of Adi tribe. Their traditions are deeply intertwined with nature, and the Jihang Festival is a testament to their profound respect for the natural world and its resources.



Origin of the Jihang Festival

No one knows exactly when the festival started as the festival is very ancient in nature. Himong tribe is celebrating the Jihang festival since time immemorial. The Adi tribes, an indigenous group in Arunachal Pradesh has a long history of inter-tribal conflicts dating back to ancient times. These battles were primarily fought over territory, resources, honor, and disputes between clans. There were various causes of conflicts such as territorial disputes, resource scarcity, revenge and honor, and trade and alliances. Clans often fought over fertile land and hunting grounds. Competition for water sources, agricultural land and forest productions often led to conflicts. The Adis also followed a strict code of honor and acts of perceived injustice like murder or insult could trigger wars. Disagreements

over trade routes and alliance with neighboring tribes also led to skirmishes. The warfare was typically small-scale and involved traditional weapons like bows, arrows, spear, and swords. Warriors used strategic guerrilla tactics, taking advantage of the hilly terrain. Though some conflicts settled through negotiations, mediated by village elders or traditional councils like the *Kebang*. The olden times were the era of survival of the fittest. And during that era this poison (*emo*) was discovered and used in the battles. It is said that without this *emo* it was impossible to win battles. The *emo* gave the Himong tribe and other allied tribes of Himong community a way to protect themselves from other tribes. With the help of this *emo* (poison) they could win battles and expand their territories. *Emo* is a rare and elusive plant that grows in the dense forests especially in colder region of Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The plant's toxicity is concentrated in its roots which, when processed correctly, can produce poison capable of killing large animals or incapacitating an enemy. However, there are certain rituals that are carried out while collecting and preparing the poison. There are two varieties of *Emo*. This festival is also a way of appeasing their deity (nature god) to ensure the continued safety and prosperity of the tribe. With the collection of the '*emo*' and use of the '*Emo*' and to keep the tradition alive the festival started.



Emo



Emo



Talap



Dark green colour which look like small bamboos tight together are called tanangs. And it also has small bushes in the tip of it.



A boy holding Tanangs at Jihang Festival.

The Jihang Festival and its rich Traditions and Cultures:

The festival begins with hunting where the tribe's best hunters venture into the forest for hunting and other men go for collection of the "emo". This ancient festival is celebrated with reverence and mystery is centered around the collection and utilization of a potent poison derived from a rare plant called 'Emo' found in the regions of Yuppu, Komji Lipi, Eko Dumbing and Himong Patang in the Upper Siang District. They consider these regions as sacred. The festival takes place for almost 4 to 5 days. It takes four days to go and come back with the Emo. On the 5th day, they celebrate the festival in the Himong community hall. The group of men goes starts travelling from a place near Himong village and reaches Yuppu and then they goes to Komji Lipik. From Komji lipik some travels to Himong Patang by touching the Eko Dumbing. Himong Pattang is in the side of the Eko Dumbing mountain. From Himong patang they also collects roots called 'Talap' in Adi dialect . After collecting emo and talap, while returning back they cut and bring Tanangs

from a region called Hammin Tekko. Tanangs look like young bamboos and two Tanangs are cut down in the name of each male child. The cutting down of two look alike 'Tanangs' of same 3 fret is like registering the male child to the region. While cutting down the Tanangs, the 3 frets of the Tanang should be of similar length and height and it should be cut down in just one shot, otherwise it is believe that the future of the male child may not be bright. And if the two similar Tanangs could be found and cut down very easily that means that the child will have a very successful and bright future. The emo can be collected from all these above mentioned places. During these four days of journey they are not allowed to talk loudly. They can whisper or talk to each other in low voices as a mark of respect and honour towards their nature god. While returning back they are allowed to talk in a normal way only after "gokbat" that gokbat is done after reaching a place called Kolo Tuktar. During gokbat, lot of folklores, sayings/ proverbs, old ritualistic chanting are done to appease the nature god and to make the emo poisonous. From Kolo Tuktar place they can talk in a normal way. The women and men of the Himong community welcome them back with local beers, meat, salad, food, tea, water, local rice cake called etting ,biscuits, fruits, eggs , cold drinks, wine so on. So, on the 4th day both hunters and those men who went for collection of 'emo' come back. It also believes that only after gokbat the 'Emo' becomes poisonous. Locals also tell that the 'Emo' is edible just after digging out from the ground and it becomes poisonous only after 'gokbat'. And on the 5th day, the mass gathering and celebration is done at the community hall of Himong village. Folk dances by the men, folk songs and ritual chantings are done. Hunted animals and birds are displayed. Local black beers, local white rice beers, eggs with ginger, meats, foods, etc are prepared and are brought by those families whose sons or men went to Jihang to collect 'emo' and to bring 'tanang' to the community hall. They bring all those food items and drinks for community feasting.

In modern times, the poison is known as aconite and it is regarded as one of the most deadly poison in the world. The festival involves elaborate rituals, chanting of histories, unified shouting, singing, traditional dance performance, traditional music and communal feasting.



Women and men waiting for those men who went for Jihang to collect emo, talap and tanangs



Villagers and family members are waiting for reception of those men who went for collection of emo, talap and tanangs for Jihang festival.



This is tali and, on the tip, the naper (looks like bushes) is tied to. Along with it there is a small petir tied with it and the emo (poison) is kept inside the petir.



Men holding tali , tali and bow preparing for Jihang festival



Jihang Festival - Himong young men holding tali with naper and small petir, Tapi and wearing traditional attires for traditional dance



Men performing traditional dance at Jihang Festival

Men performing traditional dances at Jihang festival



Traditional dance at Jihang festival



Traditional Dance at Jihang Festival



Jihang Festival

The festival serves as a vital occasion for social bonding and the preservation of indigenous customs. It also highlights the tribes' deep connection with their environment, reflecting their reverence for nature and sustainable living practices and also reinforces the Himong tribes' cultural identity to the broader world. The festival is also a symbol of bravery and communal unity. And it is also like registration of every male child in the region, preservation of ancestral practices, customs and cultures. The Jihang Festival serves as a living testament to the tribe's resilience and commitment to preserving their unique customs amidst modern influence. The entire village participates, with preparations reflecting their collective heritage and respect for ancestral practices.

Significance and Contemporary relevance:

The Jihang Festival is not only a celebration of the Himong tribe's heritage but also a reminder of their symbiotic relationship with nature. The rituals and traditions associated with the festival underscore the tribe's respect for the environment and their understanding of its power. In recent years, the Himong tribe has faced challenges in preserving their traditions in the face of modernization and environmental changes. However, the Jihang Festival remains a vital part of their culture identity, drawing attention from anthropologists and cultural enthusiasts interested in understanding and preserving this unique aspect of human heritage. It is the need of the hour to preserve such rich cultural heritage and proper documentation of the festival should be made because with the coming of the modernization and many governmental rules and regulations related to hunting of wild animals, the Jihang festival is no longer celebrated with pomp and sounds. A time may also come that the Himong tribe like other sub tribes of Adi tribe may no longer celebrate this poison festival any more. These days, Padam community and Dalbing community do not celebrate this poison festival anymore. Arunachal Pradesh cannot afford another loss of culture in the state as the saying goes "Loss of Culture is Loss of Identity".

The need for Jihang Festival celebration and its role in cultural Preservation:

Jihang festival plays a significant role in society, serving as occasions for joy, unity, and reflection. They bring people together, strengthen social bonds, and allow communities to express their shared values. Beyond their immediate celebratory aspects, festivals are also crucial for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across generations.

Why Jihang festival celebration is needed?

The Jihang festival provides opportunities for people to come together, celebrate shared traditions, and build a sense of belonging. They foster unity, bringing families, friends, and even entire communities closer.

1. Emotional and Mental Well-being :

Celebrations act as a break from routine life, reducing stress and promoting happiness. The festive atmosphere filled with music, dance, food, and rituals creates positive emotions and a sense of fulfillment. So, the Jihang festival helps in regulating the emotions and mental wellbeing because the entire community comes forward for this celebration.

2. Boosting Economic Activity :

Festivals contribute to local economies by increasing demand for goods and services such as food, decorations, clothing, and travel. Many small businesses and artisans thrive during festival seasons. So, directly or indirectly Jihang festival boost economic because many traditional clothes and animals get sold during the season.

3. Promote moral and ethical values:

During the Jihang festival many old histories, oral histories, old proverbs are sung and narrated which teaches the present generations about kindness, gratitude and compassion.

4. Encouraging Cultural Exchange :

Festivals often attract people from diverse backgrounds, promoting cultural exchange and understanding. So, Jihang festival provides a platform where people from other communities can join and witness the celebration, which indirectly help in cultural exchange and advocates friendly ties among different groups.

5. Keeping traditions alive: Jihang festival includes rituals, music, dance and cuisine passed down through generations. By celebrating such festival the Himong communities ensure that these cultural practices do not fade over time.

6. Passing cultural knowledge to future generations :

Children learn about their heritage through festival participation. They understand the significance of customs, legends, and rituals maintaining a link between past and present. So, the Jihang festival helps in passing cultural knowledge to future generations.

7. Reviving Indigenous and local practices :

Many traditional arts, crafts, and performances are showcased during Jihang festival. This helps in preserving indigenous cultures and supports artisans and performers who might otherwise struggle to sustain their traditions.

8. Maintaining Linguistic and Religious Identity: Jihang festival also helps in maintaining linguistic and religious identity as the festival's rituals involve lot of chanting in olden Adi dialogues (gomku) and it also reinforces cultural identity.

9. Conserving Historic Sites and Artifacts: Some festivals take place at certain historic sites and involve traditional costumes and relics. These celebrations often encourage preservation efforts, ensuring that historical landmarks and artifacts remain relevant. For the celebration of the Jihang festival they go to certain regions to collect poisonous roots (emo), edible wild onions, for registration of their male children and for hunting and again they come back to Himong village for the celebration. So, directly or indirectly Jihang festival helps in conserving these historical regions and artifacts.

10. Forensic and Toxicological Studies- Traditional poisons can also help forensic experts analyse cases of poisoning and develop better antidotes.

11. Ethical use and Education- Teaching the safe, ethical and responsible application of traditional poisons for medicinal and conservation purposes can give lot of insight to medical and scientific world.
12. Cultural Performances: The festival features traditional dances, songs and communal feasts, reinforcing social bonds and cultural identity.
13. Medicinal Applications- Many toxic substances from plants, animals, and minerals have been transformed into life- saving drugs. So, this emo too can turn out to be a lifesaving drug. For example, curare, a South American arrow poison , has contributed to modern anesthesia
14. By preserving the knowledge of traditional poisons responsibly, we can bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern science while ensuring ethical and sustainable use. So the Jihang, the poison ritual festival of the Himong tribe (Adi Tribe) of Arunachal Pradesh should be preserved and documented as part of their cultural heritage.

Apart from all the above, sustainable harvesting and ecological practice should be encourage to ensure the survival of specie called 'emo' in Adi dialect. Legal protection i.e recognizing the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities should be given. Documentation and Research such as recording the indigenous methods in scientific literature and ethno-botanical studies should be encourage. The traditional system of making and discovering poison is a very rare knowledge and are important part of the indigenous and historical wisdom. These practices have been developed over centuries by various cultures for hunting, warfare, medicine, and even can be used for antidote preparation. While the use of the poisons for harmful purposes should be regulated and this knowledge should be preserved because it is crucial for scientific, medicinal, and ecological research. Understanding the traditional poisons will help in identifying and conserving plant species with unique biochemical properties.

Reasons why Jihang is fading away?

The Himong community is actively seeking ways to balance tradition with contemporary values, ensuring the festival's relevance for future generations. Jihang festival is decaying because of many reasons. Younger generations, exposed to external cultures, sometimes question the necessity of traditional practice like hunting, collection of emo (poison) and use of emo in the contemporary times. Younger generations are less interested in traditional festivals, preferring modern forms of entertainment. As people move to cities for work, participation in rural and community - based festivals starts to decline. Digital entertainment and global cultural influences also make the younger generation loss interest in local traditions. Lack of awareness, lack of proper promotion and lack of proper documentation also leads to decaying of the Jihang festival.

Conclusion

The Jihang Festival of the Himong tribe is a fascinating example of how indigenous communities have developed intricate and respectful relationships with their natural surroundings. Through the careful collection and use of the 'emo' (poison), the Himong people continue to honor their ancestors and the powerful forces of nature that sustain them. In a world increasing disconnected from its roots, the Jihang Festival stands as a

powerful reminder of the enduring bond between humans and the natural world. Himong festival celebration is more than just joyful event. It is essential for social cohesion, emotional well-being, economic growth, and cultural preservation. The Himong festival helps in connecting the past with the present ensuring that traditions, values and cultural identities endure for future generations. As globalization influences societies, celebration of festival like Jihang has become very critical specially in maintaining the cultural heritage and customary ritual and slowly and slowly it seems to be fading away with time.

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