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Symbolism of bride wealth and gift-giving in marriage system of the Darlongs

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Abstract

The paper examines the symbolism of bride wealth and gift-giving in the Darlong marriage system through a web of questions: How does the exchange of gifts reflect and recreate interpersonal relationships? How does this transaction reflect and recreate social understanding of the nature of gifted objects? The materials given as bride-wealth in the Darlong marriage system have changed over time in terms of form and meaning. The value and sentiment associated with traditionally prescribed objects that are gifted are no longer present in today's new articles. As a result, the exchange does not unite the giver and the receiver, but rather separates them from the object that was exchanged.

Keywords: Darlong, bride wealth, marriage, gift-giving, inheritance

Introduction

The Darlong people are known as Kuki's in Tripura (Darlong 1995). The Darlongs do not call themselves as Kukis' ^[1]. The terminology Kuki is generic and foreign to them. They called themselves as 'hriam' or 'Manmasi' literally meaning 'people' (Darlong, 1995). The Darlongs belong to Tibeto-Burman offshoot of Mongolian race. The dialect spoken by the Darlongs people is Kuki-Chin Group of Tibeto-Burman family.

The Darlong inhabits north-eastern region of Tripura and at present, largely the three districts of the state namely Dhalai, Unokoti, and North Tripura is the Darlongs. With a population of around 8000 approx ^[2], the Darlongs are a quantitatively insignificant small tribal community ^[3]. But this does not in any way take away the fact that they carry a rich socio-cultural history of their own. They have a distinct lifestyle and knowledge system.

The paper investigates the practise of bride wealth and gift-giving in Darlong society through a series of questions: How does the gift transaction reflect and recreate the relationships between people? What social understanding of the nature of gifts is reflected in this transaction, and how is it recreated? The study has used both primary and secondary data in its methodology. Government publications like census reports and population statistics, along with colonial administrative reports, ethnographic studies, and academic monographs, are used to supplement secondary readings. Interviews with important resource people who were chosen for their expertise as cultural specialists or because they hold leadership positions in particular associations in the society under study strengthened the analysis.

According to Westermarck (1937, p 5), "Marriage and family sociologically signify the stage of greater social advancement." The Darlong society believes that marriage is an important institution in the life cycle rituals. Owing to patrilineal rules, the Darlongs say that through the marriage ceremony, a woman is united with a man. For the Darlongs, marriage, is an important social institution that serves as a means of legitimate procreation and establishing a family and thus continuing the lineage. It is performed according to the customs and traditions completed with blessings in the church.

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¹<http://darlonghub.com/about.html> on 13/08/2022

² According to Darlong Hnam Inzom or Darlong Apex Court

³ Explained: What does including Tripura's Darlong community, <https://indianexpress.com>

Societies differ considerably with respect to the rules governing the roles of husband and wife and with respect to the specific rights and obligations for these roles, as well as the behavioural attributes of the affinal roles created by marriage (Marshall, 1968, p. 9). In Darlong society, marriage is a social contract and they mainly practice Christian marriage today.

When a family has eligible sons, the parents or relatives look for a bride. The Darlongs strictly follow clan exogamy. Any marriage between two persons belonging to the same clan is considered incest, as already pointed out. Laws regarding marriage are very extensive. They begin with the selection of the bride, initiation by parents, especially from the groom's side. His family then sends a trustworthy negotiator/mediator known as Palai^[4]. The consent of the girl as well as the boy is required before the final decision.

1. Bride price

The practice of bride price in the old days was prevalent which was termed as "Tuirung dar". However, the medium of exchange or giving bride price was not in cash as monetary form of economy was non-existent. Hence, the bride price mainly consisted of whatever resources one could acquire, a person having an ox would gift an ox, 'a mithun' (sial), among others. It is in this connection that the word 'sial' originated in association with the gifting of a bride price.

Types of Bride price

During the chieftainship era, bride price was categorized into two types; "Sekhoiloi" or the "unsplit" and "Sekhoi" or the "split". The "Sekhoiloi" is equivalent to one 'mithun' which amounted to Rs 10/- in cash and the "Sekhoi" of one 'mithun' equals to Rs 8/- in cash. Since at that time, people were divided into high and low strata in the social hierarchy, bride price was also categorized according to their position in the social hierarchy. Of all the different clans of the tribe, the 'Thangur' clan would have the most expensive bride price, holding the highest position in the social strata. This is because the 'Thangur' clan belongs to the chieftainship lineage. In the second strata, the 'Pachuai' stood as second to the 'Thangur'. The 'Pachuai' clan is considered as the grandfather clan of the 'Thangur'. In the third position of the strata is the 'Chungthlangin' clan as it is said to be the grandmother of the Thangura (Thangur).

Categorization of bride price according to clan

1. The daughter of a 'Thangur' chief (Rs.10x10=Rs100/-)
2. The daughter of a 'Pachuai' clan (Rs.10x8=Rs. 80/-)
3. The daughter of a 'Chungthlang' clan (Rs.8x8=Rs.64/-)
4. The daughter of an 'Omhroi' clan (Rs.8x7=Rs.56/-)

In the year 1937-1938, with the formation and enactment of the Darlong Customary laws, new modifications and changes were made pertaining to the bride price where the "Omhroi" bride price was formulated to be the general bride price for all the Darlong community. Hence, the bride price for all the Darlong brides came down to Rs. 8x7=56/- with the dissolution of the other three categories mentioned above.

2. Rules and procedure for the bride price today

When a bride is about to leave her parents' home to her in-law's house, it is usually then that the bride price is given to

the bride's parents. At the moment of the bride's departure from her home, all her relatives and family members will be present and as such, the "palai" or "go-between" will do his part of distributing the "chanhrang" (an individual fee to the bride's family & relatives) to every concerned person from the bride's party. In this way, the exchange of bride price will be completed.

Hmantluan

The bride price of a young woman is Rs.8x7= Rs.56. However, the procedure for a bride price cannot be completed without the "hmantirsial" process, which is the initial stage for engagement or in other word it is a pre-bride price. Only after the process is completed will the term bride price acquire its meaning in full context.

Hmantang

The word "hmantang" can also be associated with bride price or the price given to the bride's family and relatives by the groom's family. Different types of "hmantang" (a share of the bride's price to bride's relatives & families) are as follows:

Pu hrang (a share of the bride's price to her grandfather): Rs.12/-

Nu hrang (a share of the bride's price to her mother): Rs.4/-

Ni hrang (a share of the amount to her aunt) Rs.4/-

U hrang (a share of the amount to her sibling) Rs.2/-

Thuihman

The term "Thuihman" is nothing but the "hmantang" or the bride price which is given at the time of the bride's departure from her natal house to the groom's residence. The actual origin of the term "Thuihman" roughly translates to the cost price for the bride's carriage to her in law's house. However, the term "thuihman" and "hmantang" often overlap which can be confusing as the meanings coincide with each other. The similarity between the two terms can be seen from the fact that the "hmantang" (bride price) is a mandatory requirement for the groom's family to pay at the time of taking the bride to their house. Unless the "hmantang" process has been completed, the "Thuihman" by custom remains unfulfilled. Hence, the terms "Thuihman" and "hmantang" are related to each other.

Moi inlawi

One of the most important and valued occasions among the Darlong community at the time of marriage and elopement is the time when the young woman departs from her home to be someone else's daughter-in-law. According to the age old folklore, there is a belief that the best time for a young woman to get married or elope with her lover is during the night when the sky is glowing with bright and shining stars. A story is often told and narrated among the Darlongs about two lovers who are named "Hransunga" (male) and "Chongmawii" (female) whose love and affection towards each other was very strong. The reason for this strong connection is believed to be that Chongmawii eloped with her lover at night when the sky was full of bright and shining stars. She is believed to have been blessed with charms and luck in her married life. Hence, it was generally believed that the best time for a happy and prosperous marriage was when the night sky is filled with uncountable glowing stars.

According to the customary law, there are two steps for a bride to depart; one is before officially becoming husband

⁴ Middle man, anyone can be chosen as marriage negotiator

and wife when solemnization is to be conducted with rites and rituals administered by the priest at the groom's residence and the second, after the final solemnization, when the wife is to depart for her husband's house and live there until her death. The above-mentioned practices are age old and some changes may be observed in the contemporary customary laws.

Zawlkhum

When a young woman is married to a man from other village and she departs from her parental home to her husband's house, her friends, relatives and neighbours may gift her a memento as a token of remembrance which maybe in any form; a traditional shawl, necklace, ornaments or any other thing. This memento or gifts given to the bride as a token of love and happiness is termed as "Zawlkhum". However, it is to be noted here that a girl marrying a boy from the same village will not get the same privilege of "Zawlkhum".

Zudeng sut

When the newly wedded bride is to depart from her home accompanied by the groom's family, the village youth will ask the "go-between" who acts on behalf of the groom's family for alcohol and if he refuses, they will playfully threaten him to stop them from taking the newly wedded bride. Upon insisting, they would snatch his bottle of alcohol from his possession which would then be shared by the youths among them.

In the olden days, locally made rice beer played an important role in celebration of events in times of happiness and merry making. Hence, both the bride and the groom's party used to stock bottles of alcohol for the village elders and the "palai" or "middle man". The demand of alcohol by the young members to the "palai" was not to be taken seriously as it was done with the intention of happiness and enjoyment.

Different forms of marriage practices by the Darlongs according to their customary law are discussed in the following section.

3. Different Forms of Marriage among the Darlongs

i) Marriage by mutual consent

When a boy develops affection for a girl, he typically confides in his peers or an older brother, who subsequently informs their parents. The boy's parents visit the girl's residence to present a marriage proposal upon learning this information. Historically, liquor was presented as a customary gift; however, it has now been supplanted by tea and other consumables.

The girl's parents on hearing this ask the girl for her consent. The second time boy's parents send "Palai" (middle man). So, the Palai carries their "bawng" (a kind of agreement for bride price) and a sum of Rs 250 (Bride Price) is given to the girl's parents. That means that it is an engagement sign that the boys could send another proposal during that period. The third time is when the Palai goes to the girl's house and a suitable date is fixed.

ii) Love Marriage (Arm it in)

The Pui Thiam kills a chicken and looks into the eye till he declares that everything is alright. The Pui Thiam was the traditional priest of the Darlong and before Christianity, they would depend on Pui Thiam to perform all ceremonies

for all occasion. But now the blessing of the ceremony is done by the Pastor or Priest in the church.

iii) Child Marriage (Chawng Moi Lak)

In the past, when a boy's parents found a girl they thought would be a good match for their son, they would get in touch with the girl's family to set up a future marriage. If the girl's parents agreed, the marriage was made official, and the girl then moved in with the boy. But sexual activity between the two was not allowed until they were both teenagers. This type of pre-pubertal arranged cohabitation was predominantly observed among the principal families of the Darlong village. This marriage ritual, however, has vanished in modern times and is no longer practiced among the Darlongs.

In the present context, if an underage boy or girl elope or run away with the intention of marrying, according to the constitutional law and the church norms it is illegal and prohibited. Even the Darlong Hnam Inzom (DHI) forbids this act and has abolished the Chog Moi Lak (child marriage) which was practiced in traditional society of the Darlongs. However, underage marriage is a common phenomenon in the contemporary Darlong society and even the DHI or Village council could not do much to curb this trend. If a situation of this sort arises, the village council will be summoned by the concerned parents where the village council has the least part to play, and the only thing they can do is to accept the Ruk Kha (a form of fee for the village council) and the marriage cannot officially take place as per the customary rules unless they have attained certain legal age for this purpose.

iv) Mak Lut

If a possible groom can't pay a lot of money for a bride, the Darlong tribe has a history of arranging other plans for the wedding. In some cases, the young man decides to live with the bride's family for three years. This type of living arrangement, which is frequently called uxorilocal residence, lets the groom work and serve instead of paying the bride wealth that he can't afford.

During this three-year period, the groom becomes an active member of the household, assisting with farming, home work, and any other tasks deemed significant by the family. His service is a way to make up for the money that is generally associated with the bride price. After the agreed-upon period is up, the bride's father officially sets up a separate residence for the couple. This usually entails giving them land, property, and other critical things they need to live on their own.

The father-in-law is in charge of the couple's first house in this kind of marriage, which includes all of their basic requirements including food, shelter, and other things they need. This system not only lets young men from poor families get married, but it also encourages families to work together and everyone in the community to help each other. People still talk about it, but it's not as frequent or essential in Darlong society now due of changes in the economy and marriage conventions.

v) Levirate marriage

Historically, the practice of levirate marriage involved the union with a brother's widow. Nevertheless, an elder brother is prohibited from marrying the widow of his deceased younger brother. The younger brother is permitted to marry

his elder brother's bride. If the elder brother cancels his engagement with his fiancée due to certain conditions, the younger brother may assume the engagement. Furthermore, if the bride price has already been paid by the elder brother, he will not be obligated to pay again to the bride's family. In the event of an elder brother's death, leaving his widow, if the younger brother desires to marry her, he must remit a sum termed "tharlak" to the widow's parents. However, should the woman return to her parents' home, he will be required to initiate the marriage process anew. This type of marriage is no longer practiced anymore.

4. Rules and regulations of engagement

i) Zawl rel

After a girl has been engaged to someone, she is obliged to remain faithful and trustworthy. However, in certain cases if the girl who has already been engaged is again asked by another party for marriage, the second party is obliged to pay some fine as a penalty for such act and it is termed as "Zawl rel".

ii) Sum hmainaw

When the girl who is already engaged, cancels the engagement at the last moment and returns back the "hmantirsial" (the initial bride price given in advance) to the boy's family, it is termed as "sum hmainaw". As a consequence, the girl's family will bear a fine known as the "sum hmainaw lei".

iii) Relthlem

This is just the opposite of the Sum hmainaw. Here, the condition is that when a girl and boy are engaged and the boy at the last moment cancels the engagement, the boy's family will bear the all the bride price expenses and will pay the fine (relthlem lei).

iv) Sumhrui pal

When a girl already engaged to someone comes and interferes between the two, this is known as "Sumhrui pal". Whatever the boy had paid to girls' family for the engagement procedure will be returned back to the boy's family and the person who interfered will bear a fine known as the "sumhrui pal lei".

v) Biakram

When a girl who is already engaged to someone dies before the marriage, it is known as "Biakram". The "Hmantirsial" given at the initial stage will not be returned back. However, if the bride price was already given in full amount, half of the amount will be returned back to the boy's family.

vi) Ral insun

When a boy and a girl are engaged and the boy untimely dies leaving the girl behind, this is known as "Ral insun". Whatever the boy had given to the girl as the bride price will not be returned back and the girl will provide a "tuam puan" or the traditional woven shawl for her deceased lover. In case if the deceased's brother wishes to marry the girl, he will bear the "tharlak" afresh and the bride price which was given by his deceased brother will be compromised.

vii) Zuarthul

When a girl is engaged to a boy and all the engagement procedure has been completed and the date for the marriage

event has also been fixed but the boy's family postpones or cancels the engagement, this is known as the "Zuarthul". Whatever amount the boy had given as a bride price and "hmantirsial" will not be refunded or returned to the boy's family, as a penalty for his action and shaming the girl's family he will bear the "Zuarthul lei" fine.

Gifts

Gifts bestowed upon a daughter after her marriage can possess varying significances based on the cultures that observe this tradition. Susan Visvanathan examined Stridhanam to investigate property rights and domestic interactions among the Orthodox/Jacobite Syrian Christians of Kerala (Visvanathan 1989/1993). Talented Within the Darlong community, the Bride Wealth required and the gifts bestowed upon a daughter during marriage are esteemed components of their society. The study elaborates on four categories of commodities that are commonly presented as gifts to a lady at her marriage: jewelry, agricultural tools, land, and textiles.

In the ancient Darlong society, ornaments made of pure silver and cornelian beads were highly prized. They play a significant role in women's special occasion jewellery. The customary laws allow willing parents who want to present their daughters with the family jewellery at the time of marriage because they are movable property. These ornaments have great sentimental value in addition to their monetary value because mothers have passed them down to daughters for many generations. The agricultural tools like a hoe and an axe, along with caned baskets, are the essentials that a newlywed couple needs to begin their new life together.

These tools have been included because of the context in which they have been provided. Furthermore, the Darlong had been bound to agriculture or cultivation through ties to tradition and sentiment since the beginning of time. Traditional Darlong society was predominately one based on agriculture. They had unique rituals to commemorate the different stages of crops grown in the field, including rituals for cleansing the land, calling upon good fortune, and giving thanks for a plentiful harvest.

A crucial component of matrimonial presents is attire, particularly knitted shawls. At the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, the bride, with the assistance of her mother-in-law, presents the goods she brought from her home to the groom's family. She is required to present woven shawls or paun to each sister on her husband's side. The gifts presented to a Darlong bride after her marriage are esteemed components throughout society, as indicated in the discussion. Marriage facilitates the establishment of new social and familial connections. The exchange of gifts and bride riches reinforces and validates the newly established relationship by binding the affines in a network of obligations and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Marriage is an event that facilitates the establishment of new kinship bonds and social connections. The transaction unites the parties in a network of obligations and responsibilities, with gift-giving and bridewealth-giving reinforcing and solidifying the established bond. An in-depth analysis of the material artifacts employed in the marriage ritual elucidates the foundational value system of the Darlong civilization. It inherently exposes social concerns including identity,

hierarchy, property, inheritance, status, familial networks, gender relations, and the functioning of patriarchy within society through many institutions, one of which is marriage. The gifts were not merely functional items; they also significantly contributed to the historical, cultural, and identity narratives of Darlong culture. The selection of land, agricultural tools, and woven garments as the quintessential gift for a daughter possesses greater importance than is immediately apparent. All of these elements possess a significant connection to nature in various respects.

This present possesses significant value and sentiment.

Affluent parents supply items that enable contemporary conveniences, like cribs, wardrobes, automobiles, gold jewellery, cookware, televisions, household furnishings, residences, and real estate, among others. Affluent families indulge in extravagant gifts for their daughters to showcase their money, luxury, and social standing. The objective is to guarantee that the daughter is honored and treated with dignity inside her husband's family. This has affected the economic circumstances of impoverished families aspiring for equivalent outcomes for their daughters. Consequently, the Darlong Hnam Inzom (the Darlong Apex Court) has endeavored to mitigate the expenses related to marriages. The congregation has united to endorse this effort.

Weaving techniques have changed to accommodate the demands of contemporary times. The prevalence of the loom and spinning wheel, which require significant labor and time, is being undermined by technological innovations like weaving machines and computer technologies. Nonetheless, woven garments continue to play a significant role in the exchange of bridal gifts. Consequently, the significance and sentiment linked to conventionally recommended gift items have diminished in contemporary articles. They lack an understanding of the populace's history and identity. They are presents provided as a means to a purpose, akin to the transactions in industrial cultures for a simply ostentatious display lacking any symbolic significance.

The techniques of weaving have also undergone changes to suit the demands of the changing times. The popularity of loin-loom and spinning wheel which is labour-intensive and time consuming is challenged by the development of technology in which weaving machines and computer technology is used. However, woven clothes are still an important element in the marriage's gift-giving and transaction. Consequently, the significance and sentiment linked to historically designated gift items are absent in contemporary transactions. They lack an understanding of the history and identity of the populace. They are presents provided as a means to an end, akin to the exchanges in industrial civilizations that only display affluence, devoid of any symbolic significance. The transaction's result estranges both the donor and the recipient from the swapped object.

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