Chapter V

Food Culture, Power and Gender

5.1 Foods and everyday life

Food is as much culturally constructed as materially produced (Århem, 1989). So in most patriarchal societies, gender identities are constructed by food practices (Xu, 2007). These food practices are also often associated with culinary myths. For instance, most Americans are familiar with such a myth that red meat is a masculine food and that sugar is for women and children and similarly, for the French eaters, “turnips induced spinelessness,” and thus are a feminine food (Fischler, 1988). Following Pierre Bourdieu, David Swartz (1997) argued that all practices are fundamentally “interested” whether directed toward material or symbolic items, and oriented towards the maximization of material or symbolic profit. These interested practices are also implicitly or explicitly encoded in the food practices of the society and (re)produce from one generation to another through habitus.

Similarly, Jones (2007) argues that human meals of all kinds are framed within moral codes about sex, age, rank and ethnicity and the diners do not typically sense that these rules are negotiable. They are set at some point of time, by some other authority, partly human and partly divine. The rules of conduct are passed down from each generation to the next (Jones, 2007:37-38). Besides, encircling the food is
an intimate group, whose seating depends on rank and gender according to a mutually understood code.

Among the Kabuis, too, the food culture reflects the underlying cultural principles that shape gender, class and rank. Rice is their staple food and they love foods prepared by simple methods of cooking food like boiling, roasting and steaming. Mention may be made of Ganhoi (food made of vegetables with meat and coarse powder of rice) and Tam or chutney (prepared by boiling vegetables or meat with fermented vegetables and meat, chili, salt and indigenous spices), are the traditional delicious food items of the Kabuis. It is not only eaten in the normal days but also served in the festivals too. They also sometimes embellish their dishes with fermented foods like Janlumpui (fermented meats) and Gankheng khui (fermented seeds of Hibiscus cannabinus). They also consume vegetables (wild as well as domesticated) and other food items like fruits, tubers and fishes. Edible oil was rarely used in the food preparation in early days but now it becomes an unavoidable recipe.

In the past, the Kabuis used cups made of bamboo. Drinks were served with those bamboo cups. People used bamboo container even to carry kerosene and other liquidities. Cups made of plastic and glasses were hardly used. Mustard oil started using in 1970s. Before that they used to eat curry simply by boiling. They also used bitter gourds as bottles for storing and carrying rice beers and local wine such as Zoungao (pounded rice beer), Zoudui (fermented rice beer) and Zouju (distillated wine). They washed and cleaned the gourds very well with water before use. It reduces the absorption of liquid.

Moreover, most of the occasions, may be in the ceremony of Banrumei (feast of merit) or Pagaidai Zeishanmei (feast of merit), they used cup made from bamboos
and horns (bulls and buffaloes). It was a nostalgic event to eat rice cooked in the bamboo shoot which is locally known as Utong chak (utong means pipe; chak means rice in Meitei language). The Kabuis hardly used onion (believed to cause swelling of throat or tonsillitis), garlic (because of its smell) and mustard oil while preparing the food. Among the Kabuis, there is a popular saying that Tunani laroulamak, Ganamni turoulamak, which means failure both in getting a girl and eating garlic. The underlying meaning is that eating garlic produces unusual bad smells and it is not good in dating with girls. They simply don’t love it. Men usually keep it in mind especially during the courtship. But they sometimes regretted that it was far better to eat garlic if they did not have to get the girls.

They use locally available spices like Bang Maroi (Eryngium foetidum) in cooking meat, said one of the key informants Phaomeidun Phaomei, Khullakpa (chief administrator) of Sawombung Kabui village. He further narrated that they used to keep fats of animals (Kara-Karon or Gakpham) to use during the scarcity of foods and repellants of mosquitoes while sleeping. They could hardly afford kerosene oil and mosquito net. They used to sleep by burning pieces of cloth with dry fats.

Nevertheless, with the introduction of modern education and as an impact of westernization among the Kabuis, there is a change in their “material culture”. For instance, most of the kitchen wares like dish, bowls, tongs, spoon, etc. which were prepared from bamboo and woods in the past have now been replaced by steel and silver utensils. The simple boiling and roasting foods are now being replaced by deep fry and spicy foods. “In our times, there was not even a tea stall so that we could have a cup of tea in the morning before working. But now we rose with morning tea and all. There is a lot of change in our food habit as well” said one elder in the field.
Amidst these changes, the basic power structures and patriarchal value system associated with foods remain however, intact even today among the Kabuis. This patriarchal structure is being (re)produced from one generation to another through the habitus which is reflected in daily mundane gender roles and eating habits in the society.

Among the Kabuis, meat is often considered to be an extra ordinary food and consumes in special occasions like Gan Ngai, Nanu Ngai and other socio-religious ceremonies like Maku-Banru, Tarangkai and Thousume (worship). They often eat meat in connection with rites and rituals. Food is shared in a communal meal. Traditionally only men may slaughter a beast and are exclusively responsible for the allocation of its meat. Besides, the slaughter and consumption of meat is surrounded by a complex set of rules and restrictions. For instance, a beast should never be killed as food except at ritual occasions. However, though they have high religious tone in consumption and killing of animals, these rules seem a little bit relaxed in case of animals that died naturally (locally known as Mintujan).

They generally enjoy two meals, one in the morning and another in the evening. Amidst modern luxurious cutlery, they are more comfortable with fingers and are the main tools of consumption. Sometimes they used to take tiffin or high tea when they worked in the field or with children when they returned from school. The basic structure of this daily food cycle can however, be embellished or varied by complex ritual calendar of festivals and ceremonies in which the different contexts of worship are marked by a variety of special ceremonial meals.

Among the Kabuis, cooking is a private and a domain of the women. In general, people look in despair way when a man cook in the family. He is often
considered to be a hen peck. A woman is expected to render her service for the husband in the family. It may indicate their general subordination to the men in the society. In this sense, Arjun Appadurai (1981) rightly argued that this is a generalized extension of the basic idea that cooking and sexual intercourse are appropriate and symbolically interconnected services performed by a wife for a husband. Nevertheless, in many social and religious gatherings like marriage, feast, etc. where men’s hands are needed, men also cooked but not in the kitchen which is considered to be a specified place for women in the family. In such occasions, women cook rice (assumed to be simple, physically least involved and passive and private) while men cook curry which is considered to be complex, physically more involved and active and public. Men’s superiority is largely expressed through not only their priority in being served foods and the physical positions they occupy but also their disengagement from the daily domestic chores like cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. And similarly among the women the hierarchy which manifested in the management of the cooking process is basically organized on the principle of seniority.

A woman especially a new bride is expected to play a meek, subordinate, and labor-intensive role in her husband house. She became the instrument of her mother-in-law’s desires (her father-in-law’s desires to be précised), especially in the culinary domain. She has been trained to master the specific ritual and aesthetic codes that govern her new household. However, this balance of power may change in course of time as she gains seniority and when her mother-in-law begins to relinquish her active control of the hearth.
During her apprentice, she may be underfed, the last to eat, and often must eat alone, she may eventually end up eating well and eating in the company of her mother-in-law after the men have been fed. With the modernization, certain disharmonies or conflicts crept up in food related activities in the family. For instance, the mother-in-law likes her daughter-in-law to remain in the role of loyal apprentice, both in production and the consumption of food.

And on the part of the daughter-in-law expresses her resentment over the relevant role expectations in the form of recalcitrance in the labor of cooking, sabotage of critical items of the meal in the kitchen, foot dragging, and subtle misbehavior in the public context of food serving and deliberately aggressive in eating by refusing the role of the last and lonely eater, by insisting on generous portions.

However, children of both sexes, stand to some degree outside the arena in which above rules are systematically applied. However, male children and female children are differently socialized the culinary etiquette. Female children are increasingly socialized into the subordinate, passive and taught to behave like little wives or daughters-in-law, and their counterparts are encouraged to become active, aggressive and taught to behave like husbands.

So, children, in their early years, whether male or female, are treated by analogy with deities: they often eat first, their leaving (food) at least for their mothers, are not considered degraded but rather transvalued and their tastes, like those of divinities, are paid serious attention. But as they grow up and become decisively “human”, male children are taught to behave like husbands and their female counterparts are encouraged to become little women (or more precisely, little wives).
However, when they entered their respective dormitories, a sharp distinction begins to be made between male and female children. The value system of the society is inculcated to young by beating with stick or cloths in the dormitories in the past. It was taught that “Nang nangpoununjam pot loklang/lokpande, lokpande sayine, lokpande Apou sa o”. It means that “will you help your Napou (meaning, your uncle, among the Kabuis the Apou is used contextually, for instance, all the men from other clan is usually known by the term Apou irrespective of age, Apou is addressed to mother’s brothers, father’s father or grandfathers, elder sister’s husband, etc.) yes I will, don’t say I will but say I will do Apou (my uncle).”¹ Respect and discipline were learned from elders in the dormitories. We didn’t feel free to pass through when the elders were there, said one of the informants.²

Women or wives accede to the choice and the dietary demands of their husbands, the heads of the families. The handling of food within the household is cemented by a basic set of widely shared principles. It is based on age and sex grading with primacy to the older and male members of the hearth group. A family, male oriented institution thus, takes a critical role in maintaining the patriarchal social order. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, a family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social or biological reproduction, i.e. reproduction of the structure of the social space and social relations. It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms and its transmission between the generations. It safeguards its unity for and through this transmission. It is the main subject of reproduction of strategies (Bourdieu, 1996). Besides, this patriarchal social order is also being reified by the food practices or transactions in many social, cultural and religious practices like birth rite, marriage, festivals, funerals and feast of merit.
5.2 Distribution of meat: what is your cut?

In normal everyday life, it seems that there is almost no gender disparity (food habit) and no differential power relations among themselves. However, a strict normative order or rules and power relations, when intrinsically dissected, are revealed which channelized in the logic of meat distribution among the elders or village functionaries. Starting from the killing of a pig till the eating of the same, this normative order or rules are strictly adhered to. An extra care, therefore has to be given in the preparation (in cutting the meats into portions) and it is usually supervised by elders who are expert in the field. The task in short, needs a great skill and practices. It defines the competency to become a man and a son-in-law in the society.

Traditionally speaking, there are generally nine important portions of meat in a pig or a cow. Age, grade and sex are the basic criteria which define what portion of meat goes to whom. On the top of that, the elders of the village or chief village functionaries like Nampou (owner of the village), Nampei (chief administrator), Taku (eldest male in the village), etc. are believed to be divine beings in the society. They are freed from any kinds of collective labor in the society. But their existence cannot be ignored in all circumstances, from village administration or decision making to consumption of food in the society. Even the celebration of the festivals is under the supervision of Banja (village elders) or Pei (village authority). The elders of the Khangchu manage all the affairs (maintenance of discipline, respect, collective labor, training youths to become a good member of society, warriors, etc.) of Khangchu on behalf of Banja. The priority of elders is thus not only in the realms of decision making but also in the serving and allocation of foods in the society.
Therefore, meats are allocated to some important functionaries in the Khangchu and also to some important institutions of elders like Ganchang Banja Kaibang during the festival of Gan Ngai. Accordingly, the two eldest members of Khangchu (Khangbon) are being acknowledged their services giving one hind leg of pig each to them. However, the first priority is given to the members of the Khangchu who died just before the festival.

The next two elders get one front leg each. Meat is given to one who is going to be promoted from Khangbon (head of Khangchu) to Ganchang (new member of the Banja). And the penis and spleen (of the pig) are compulsorily given to Taku or Chaku (a man who is the eldest in the village) of the village. It defines his power and leadership in the field of spirituality. This is traditionally known as Kakharek Kajanrek (prescriptive or normative order of giving meat). The Khangchu gives a portion of meat for Luchu and also for the owner of the Khangchu as Kaibang Jan (meat for the owner). The meat consists of Katingtei (flesh of the back bone), Kanakpai (rib bones), Katingrou (backbone), Karingkoklou (bone of the pelvic girdles), Laikhum (breast bone), Kalungthu (heart), Jaapdai Jaapna (flesh cut out of the abdomen), Kalungtingtei (flesh attached to the inner side of the backbone), Kathapaklaona (piece of fats or adipose tissue), etc. of the pig. Moreover, it honors Banja (elders of the village) by giving a good portion of meat which is locally known as Shanang or ChakhongJan (honor meat). As a tradition, Kengjapei (old women) and Karapou or Banja (old men) used to come and earn meat pretending to be ill and die, dancing the dance of kite (on the day of Tamchanmei, the day distribution of foods to the house of elders to get blessing) and in returns, elders used to give blessings to their children. In a very rare and exceptional case, in some village like
Kakhulong, a girl who is going to get married in the coming year will get a big leg of pig traditionally known as Gaknang Kanunna Timet.  

The Khangchu has the privilege to recruit the new members of the dormitories among boys and girls of the village who attained their puberty giving a piece of meat (a size of a hand). It is traditionally known as Janphop Phaimei (giving of recruitment meat).

On the day of Janphakmei (killing and allocation of meat), the elders (age group of Ganchang Banja) have a special food locally known as Zeigan (a curry prepared from blood, intestines, head of the pig and some meats together) in the Khangchu and young members of the Khangchu reach the left over foods of the elders to their respective families. Traditionally the eldest will start eating the food after Ho-Hoing before lunch and the young people in the Khangchu will serve them and help reaching home the food they left. Moreover, they recite a mantra (a sacred utterance) before and after eating the foods especially in the festivals and ceremonial eating where elders and seniors are privileged. Before eating, they recite as, “Khaini, Khaini, Khaini, Khaini. Tugai Janggaimakshini Tuthaoloudukhou Jangthaoloudukhou Aputho Achaitho, Nap Maja Pangpuishan Pangbamdukhou. Ouh...!” (Literal meaning, though the food is delicious or not, respected elders and seniors, let us eat the food. Let the life always sustain as long as Nap Maja (rice or paddy) is there) (Kabui, 2011:14). And after the food, they say another mantra as, “Tugai Janggaipudingthoi, Napkok Khatkhourui Joubong Khatkhourui Tukham Charu Riknabamkaduthou. Napkang banglui Laibu Shu Khana Paklui Kanukatshu Nabamkaduthou. Ouh...!” (Meaning, it is delicious. Out of a single plate of food and a glass of drink, let the food be there for those who will eat later on. As some pieces
of boiled rice are the soul of the cooking pot, let helping one another be the epitome or prototype of knowledge) (Kabui, 2011:15).

Besides following a normative order in the distribution of meat, they have a practice, especially in the festival of Gan Ngai, which defines on which day what portion of meat will be eaten in the Khangchu. For instance, on the day of Tamchanmei, some portion of lungs and liver, and on the day of Rangpatmei, the head of the pig must be included in the cooking of the food.  

As a tradition the elders (Banja) get the privilege to eat the food before anybody else in the Khangchu and other ceremonial eating as well. It is often said among the Kabuis that “Gandao keiti sengnap sengjou tu ye” which means with aged, the elders eat sengnap and sengjou (cursed or envious foods that come by virtue of one’s age and position in the society). The family without elders usually does not have the chance to have such foods. Such food is believed to be filled with curses and envies. A person worshiped to protect him from evil eyes when he started eating Khutung Phaktung (divine foods). This worship is locally known as Rou Karareimei and performed when he first entered or promoted to the post of Ganchang Banja in the society. Moreover, power disparity in transactions and consumption of foods are also reflected in the folk song which is usually sung by the junior members of the Khangchu at the end of the Gan Ngai festival. It sings as, “Gan Ngai gang goiru doukeiki nangkhang katei akhang karoumeita ai thaiye. Akun chanateimu kummeipu nangta gantisinlage. Nap pot ru soukeiki nangkhang nianglaijou akhang hanlaijou” (literal translation: when we killed ten cattle, we know that you got muscles while we got bones. We won’t give you the charges of food in the next coming festival. Brewing wines from ten bags of rice, you got wines keeping in the earthen pot and we
got wines keeping in bitter gourds. The wines keeping in the earthen pot are comparatively more palatable and good in consumption. They go singing to the house of elders who took the charge of foods.  

5.3 Power hierarchy and food sharing

Basically the main functionaries of Pei are Nampou, Nampei and other other Banja (elders) of the village belonging to different clans having different portfolios. In the past, Nampou allocated cultivating fields to his fellow villagers and in return, his fellow villagers presented him some of what they produced like Bi (Colocasia esculenta), Ru (yam), Katoi-Kating (sesame), Tingsaisu (chilies), Pokma (pumpkin), every year as a tribute to the Nampou. They believed that their village is ruined if Nampou cursed. A village without a Nampou is not possible. Even if he migrated to other village, the fellow villagers used to try to convince him and bring him back to the village again. He is very important in the decision making of the village and believed to be chosen by God. Among the Kabuis, village functionaries are believed to be chosen by Ragang, the supreme God himself and Peikai (house of law) as a sacred place. And also its members are believed to be in the status of divine beings. Their decision is final and undeniable in the society.

One who entered the hierarchy of Banja, he has been freed from any sort of Jangkummei (collective labor or other responsibilities of the Khangchu) but increased his privilege and power in the decision making of the village. In the past, Khangchu used to earn its funds out of its collective labor locally known as Jangkummei. And the earning is again used in the festivals or wherever it is necessary. This collective labor not only provides group solidarity but also a sense belongingness and respect among the members of the Khangchu. Though Banja relaxed their responsibilities in
collective labor, their responsibilities towards rites and rituals of the society increased. They become the mentor of customs and traditions of the society. They impart their knowledge of customs and traditions to the young during the festivals. They taught dancing, singing and legend stories to the young. In this manner, the customs and traditions of the society (re)produced from one generation to another through habitus in the process of socialization.

In the Kabui jurisprudence, food plays a critical role. Any trial starts and ends with foods. Food serves both the medium application and the resolution of the case. The case usually initiated bringing a pot of rice beer or a bottle of wine to the Pei. The final decision or verdict is announced after meticulous observation and analysis of the matter by authority concerned. The guilty is being punished by imposing a fine locally known as Ronggairak. A fine may be a pig or a cattle depending upon the gravity of the crime committed. The members of the Pei instantly killed the pig and distributed the meat without removing its hairs in the Pei. One hind leg each is given to the Nampou and Nampei, the key decision makers of the Pei. The other two front legs of the pig go to Nammupou and Duikhun Khumei. Two Karoudon (bones of the hind leg) and two Kaphrou (bones of front leg or shoulder blade) are allocated to Ganchang on seniority. Around one by fourth of the meat cut such as Japdai Japna (muscle removed from belly), Karungting (meat removed from ventral side of the pig), Pangting (meat removed from dorsal side of the pig), Kanakpai (ribs) Kathin (liver), Karungthu (heart), etc. is given to the host or owner of the Pei.

The senior most Banja or Taku eats the penis of the pig killed which marks the end of hierarchy and his ultimate power. It is locally known as Khutung Phaktung Tumei or Karon Thuimei. The rest of the meats are cut into pieces and distributed to
all the households other the convicted family. It is believed that eating such foods reminds the degree of penalty and discourages such crime in the society. Even some families avoid such foods in the fear of its effects toward the family. The elders end the day eating Jeigan in the Pei and the junior members of the Pei reached the left over foods of the elders to their respective families. The eating of pig however, depends on the decisions of the Pei authority. They can give amnesty as well as protection if need be. Individual family hardly fights with the Pei other than asking for the reduction of degree of penalty. And once the members of the Pei started their Rilai Hoi (a form of Ho-Hoing), they have the very right to kill the biggest pig in the village other than the pigs rearing for feast of merit and marriage ceremony and the family (guilty) should pay the price of the pig. If they have not paid in time then the members of the Pei kill another pig in the village. And still the convicted person or the family was not ready or not able to pay the price then the person or the family must be ex-communicated or expelled from the village. The village Pei must pay the prices of the pig killed. So the family often asks for the reduction of degree of penalty before the Rilai Hoi started.

The Pei authority sometimes acts an interventional body between two disputed families of the village. Among the Kabuis, a husband has the full right to kill the person who eloped his wife on the way and even to destroy the house of the person up to Kaijao (common room which is considered to be secular, public and male) but not Kainung (living room is often considered to be sacred, private and female). And had touched the place, then the husband has to be treated as guilty and should be punished by the Pei. There were two forms of Kasoumei Noukao (elopement of others’ wife), one was Langdai Nousou (elopement of other’s wife) and other was Khamthan Nousou (elopement of engaged girl). In such circumstances,
the *Pei* authority resolves the issues by mediating the disputed families. The guilty has to pay *Ronggairak* (for breaching the customary laws) to the *Pei* and if need be *Munthum* (for involving in the conspiracy or in the misleading of a girl) to the victim family. Among the Kabuis, the elopement of a girl as well as persons who accomplice in the elopement carries the same gravity as that of the crime of selling one’s daughter without the knowledge of her parents or without the consent of the parents. The payment of *Munthum* is undeniable but when is depended upon the agreement of the two families or the decision of the *Pei* authority. Moreover, in case of *Khamthan Nousou*, the new husband has to return the bride wealth already paid to the bride’s father in double times. For example, if the first person paid a bull to the bride’s father, then the second person has return two bulls to him as a wealth of defamation. And the degree of penalty is more rigorous in case of murder. It was told that it is ten times that of adultery, theft, witchcraft, etc.

Men are the decision makers both in the family as well as in the local *Pei*. The androcentric social structure denies women both authority and possibility of their participation in the *Pei*. Women hardly come to the *Pei*. They have to be interviewed by the representatives (*Changloi*) of the *Pei*, even if they involved in a crime. The representatives narrated the facts to the authority. Fellow villagers highly respect those families that never involved in any crimes but look down and laugh at those families that frequently punished by the village *Pei*. No family is ready for marriage with them. Women are expected to live at the whims of society (men). Besides, a husband never expects to tarnish the image of his family involving his daughters or sisters or wife in a crime. "Women are highly honored and privileged in the society. The society imposes an equivalent punishment against those who accidentally trampling or treading her ankle of a woman or for holding the edge of her cloth or for
holding her hands or her hair as that inflicted at the charge of kidnapping charge of women in the society”, said Phaomeidun, a key informant.

This is an extension of patriarchal ideology that women are sub human, capital bearing objects (for husband), weak and needed protection. Women in Kabui society stood outside the age set of men and main political system of the society. In short, married women are socially and politically deprived of. They do not get any shares of meat, may be in the festivals or in the ceremonial eating of the society. When they got some, it is from the dispensation of their husbands. A woman sacrifices her starvation for her husband and her family. As the allocation of meat increases and reinforces the privilege and prestige of men in the society, the denying of the share of meat demoted the status of women. Women helped matriarchs of Luchu and Khangchu at the end of the Gan Ngai festival. They cleaned the refuse used in the festival. They sing, dance, cut jokes and eat the left over foods on the day. This is locally known as Zou Karonna (drinking or eating together or Khangchu Luchupei Ngaidongna (enjoy with matriarch of Luchu and Khangchu) or Luitomkang Luina (cleaning of refuses of plantain leaf).

We tried to give the best services, the best part of the foods for elders to get their blessings. Young people of today do not respect elders. So they die in young ages. Elders taught us not to break the rules of eating foods. Everyone gets the chance to eat the foods through age, said one key informant.

5.4 Foods and child rites

However, they (married women) reached the category of Kengjapei (old women), they have some privilege of eating but from the shares of Banja. Kengjapei
get a little share of foods like that of Changlamjan (meat in the worship of God of seven brothers), Najumjan (meat in child rite), and Mairakjian (meat in the marriage ceremony). The term itself derived from the word Kakek (a piece) and literally a group of people who gets a little share of food. Hence they are named as Kengjapei.\textsuperscript{10}

They are midwives of the village. They helped Banja in the child birth in the village. As a tribute, the family brings some foods such as Bi (Colocasia esculenta), Ru (yam, Dioscorea alata), Napnang Tamti (food made of black rice with sesame seeds and salt) and other edible items as a gift for the elders in the Kengjapei Kaibang in the festival of Nanu Ngai (festival of fertility cult). This is known as Nathan Tamcha (gift for elders from the family of new born baby). Such food items are believed to possess the quality of aphrodisiac and good for fertility. In Sawombung Kabui village, all the families of Nashan Kanmei (in their first ever born baby) brought a leg of dog in the house of Kengjapei and a head of dog to the Khangchu (boy’s dormitory). And each family brought some curry of chicken, dog meat and rice beers to the house of elders (Banja). The gifts (foods) brought to the house of Kengjapei are eaten or shared among the Banja (old men) and Kengjapei (old women).\textsuperscript{11}

Among the Kabuis, when a child is birth, they perform a series of child rites. As a part of it, the rite of Nashan Kanmei is performed in the festival of Nanu Ngai. In this rite they killed two fowl; one is hen which locally known as Shangloou and another one is cock which is locally named as Shangdai. The priest, holding a khoiju leaf (Isodon ternifolius), blessed the child with a religious chanting. He also put some boiled rice, boiled liver of the hen and cock and pours some wine over the child’s
forehead. The chanting is however, differed between male child and female child. The male child is blessed to become a warrior, conqueror or winner of wars, one who could get married many wives or other’s wives and protector of the family. And female child is blessed to be a faithful, decent, meek, soft spoken, workaholic, patience, calm and cool and kind hearted.

Before the rite of *Nashan Kanmei*, they perform the rites of *Pengbam reimei* (on the fifth day of the baby) and *Najungaimei* (after fifteen days). Babies are breast fed. They learned to eat after six or seven months. They started with boiled rice with some meat or fish with water. This is locally known as *Nashammei*. It is believed that the child attains the quality of the stuff they first ate. So the female child started with the meat of the animal or fish which is beautiful, cool and calm and the male child started with something strong and masculine foods. They worship *Parakhang* (god of descent, wisdom, strong and handsome) and *Paralu* (goddess of beauty and faithful) when they attained their puberty. The God *Parakhang* feel envious of girls whereas goddess *Paralu* envious of boys. They lost appetite if they were being attacked by these gods. But when a child does eat food, it is said that the child is encountered or saw by *Dampapui* (goddess in charge who created man). It is treated by offering a piece of boiled rice cake and white scaled fish. It is also worship *Pungra* (god in charge of earth) by offering a pigeon when the child started eating earth or mud.\(^\text{12}\)

**5.5 Food taboos (prohibitions)**

Among the Kabuis, there are so many *Numei* and *Neimei* (genna). Some of them are still in practice and so does in food. Food taboo is universal in all human societies and it is so deeply rooted that it is hard to retrieve whence it came.
Basically the restrictions are more on the consumption of meat (one of the most important sources of protein in the society). These restrictions also place more on women than on men. One informant jokingly said that it will be better if the food restriction is put on vegetables but it is hard to observe the food taboos as it is on most palatable foods like meat. Kabuis believed that eating tabooed foods (consciously or unconsciously), made a person early graying of hairs and falling of teeth. It was also told that the person will easily slip down when he climbed the tree. Since the tabooed foods are often happened to be meat of chicken and pork, they are very much enticing. He lost his control and that is why he lost his teeth early.  

A man’s social position is reflected in what he consumes in the society. In Sawombung Kabui village, elders (Banja) eat Zeigan (curry cooked with blood and internal organs of the pig) and some curry (pork) before anybody else in the festival of Gan Ngai. The share of the food reached for elders who absent in the eating. They also eat Zeigan in the occasion of Mat Tumei (giving of fine by the guilty). When the boys and girls entered the dormitories, they observe certain food taboos. They cannot consume the foods of Changlammei (foods in worship of god of seven brothers), Mairakjan (food in the marriage rite) and Najumjan (food in the child rite). They were even tabooed to use bad words in the dormitories. In the past, there was a distinct line between what the elders should eat and what the young people should not eat. Young people eat now indiscriminately. When elders said that that is not good, they answered elders are greedy and gluttonous, said one of the Banja in the village. However, children of both sexes stood outside these restrictions. Kengjapei (old women) and children (who hardly know what is good or bad in the society) eat the foods but not with Banja. They sit separate.
The Kabuis believed that those who decide to perform feast of merit or those who want to be success in life observe certain food taboos. It is also believed that there is certain qualification for eating certain foods in the society. Eating the tabooed foods without the qualification rather brings failure or misfortune which is locally known as Phai-Ban Deomei (inefficient in fishing and hunting). Whenever a villager took a head of an enemy or killed a tiger, he must announce it to all the villagers and village elders confirm it with incantation and invocation. All the men in the village who could hold weapon come and chop or hit the head by saying that I am also the one who could take the head of the enemy or tiger. Those who did not chop or hit the head of the enemy or tiger are not allowed to participate in digging the grave of the person locally known as Make Mare Pekna. It is believed that those who chopped or hit the head will be treated as they also took the head of the enemy. It assumes to be a perfect man in the society.

In that case, all the members of the Khangchu will come to the house of the person, and he will be protected. All the villagers will remain awakening him for five days. He (hunter) keeps certain food taboos. He eats only boiled rice for five days. He must be restricted from any food items except boiled rice. If he failed to do so, he will also die in the hand of his enemy. And he does not eat the animal he killed if he likes further success in the hunting. A hind leg must be given to the Nampou and the rest will be distributed to all his sisters who got married, and to all fellow villagers. His sisters will bring some foods like wines, chicken for his brother. He will eat the food brought by his married sisters. It is believed that if he ate the game he killed, he could not kill animal anymore. The head of the animal will be hung at the door, he will pour wine on the head and pray and perform the ritual for another game. Hence he observes the taboo.¹⁴
Besides, there was a typical tradition of rearing a boy to become a future warrior of a particular clan which is locally known as Gan Kaibammei.

A member of family or clan with good physique and excellence in sports is chosen and sent him to revenge the person or the village that killed his forefathers in the blood feud. He had been reared feeding good foods. He had fed in such a manner that he cannot walk without support. It was told that his skinfold corroded with sweats and dried it up with cotton. He kills his enemy shouting a word, Riye (It is a war). Similarly, there was a tradition of Tuna Kaibammei (rearing of a girl pompously). She had been reared just letting her to learn weaving, singing, etc. but without letting her to do hard works like weeding, harvesting, etc. in the field. In the romantic and tragic story of Lamningpou, a poor Lamningpou, who is being reared by his grandmother only and one Tuna Kaibammei, a girl from a well to do family were in love.

One day his lover is being killed in the blood feud. After few years, he came to his enemy’s village and took shelter in the house of a warrior when he was away from the house. Traditionally among the Kabuis, one who took shelter in one’s house and had eaten the food of the house where one sheltered cannot be killed but rather will treat him as a son or a member of the family. So when the warrior returned, he asked his wife that whether the man already had eaten the foods and she answered yes. Accordingly he cannot kill the man but helped him in taking the revenge of his lover.15

A couple prohibited the food of Charum Chara Jan (impure foods) and participation of funeral ceremony of others as well as relatives before the ceremony of Duiluiduk Loukeimei (reconciliation ceremony between the two marriage parties). He
cannot eat even the foods of Duikhang and Laokhangmei. Ragang (God) refuses to accept anything offered by the couples when they broke of this food taboo. The couples also avoid conjugal relation for five days when they just got married. A person (who wants to be success) needs to avoid certain foods such as creepers like beans, pumpkin, gourds, etc. and the vegetables which grow under the earth like potato, Bi (Colocasia esculenta), Ru (yam, Dioscorea alata), etc. He even needs to avoid unhatched eggs and meat of natural dead. Such foods bring negative results. Creepers tangle in the competitions. The evil spirits can easily harm the persons who ate the tabooed foods. However, the persons with relevant qualification can have the foods because they are promoted to such positions by holding Laogai (iron hoe believed to possess sacred power) in the name of Ragang. Men prohibit the foods when scoop is broken while cooking or serving the foods. Among Kabuis, straight symbolized as penis while concave scoop as vagina. Thus eating of such foods is believed to bring misfortune or failure to men. But women can have the food.

5.6 Food taboo and women

Among the Kabuis, women observe certain food taboos before and after the delivery of a child. In Chingmeirong Kabui village, a pregnant woman performs a prayer known as Lakpui Kara Kalummei. It is a prayer to protect the mother and child and usually performed by the evening wearing white clothes. After the prayer she will enter the house by sprinkling water and she cannot work, drink and eat anything till the morning. Breaking this food taboo causes problems in the delivery. Hence she tries to sleep as soon as possible. This worship can predict that child will be a male or female by observing the divination of cock’s legs.
When she is pregnant, she prohibits all the aphrodisiac and bitter food items. She avoids kampai (Parkia roxburghii), koklei (Centella asiatica), Khempuinui (Adhatoda vasica), etc. She also avoids broad beans (Fava vicia), mangra (Manihot esculenta), bi (colocasia esculenta), lapuh tharo (inflorescence of banana), erang kha (Esomus manipurensis), etc. Mangra (Manihot esculenta) is believed to be the symbol of penis and so it is not allowed to have during the pregnancy. Besides foods, she cannot have conjugal relationship when she is conceived for three months. It reduces the milk production of the mother. Similarly after the delivery, she cannot consume fresh meat and fish, fruits and other food items like Ganhoi (food made of vegetables with meat and coarse powder of rice), Uti (a local recipe consists of vegetables, soda and coarse power of rice) Bi (Colocasia esculenta), etc. for three months. She eats simple foods. She eats dried and preserved meat and fish and vegetables like mustard leaves, cow pea (Phaseolus vulgaris) and banana tree. She even chooses the types of utensil for cooking in the fear of Chakmangmei (a symptom associated with an extreme cases of diarhorea, loss of appetite, dizziness and other changes in body thereby causing loss of complexion, speedy aging, wrinkles, melanin pigmentations, dark spotted, etc). 19

“I had never been experienced Chakmangmei in my life but still really scared of it. So I kept this food taboo with outmost care”, said Achanpi, a key informant. Sometimes husband also observes certain food taboo in the first baby. He eats only boiled rice for a week or five days or ends symbolically having five mouthfuls boiled rice. It is believed to purify the body. “I ate only boiled rice for five days when I got my first son”, said Sanahal Kamer 20.
Young women are tabooed to eat the meat wild animals in the fear of being retained the wildness. They also abstained from the meat of animals having babies and unhatched eggs. It believed to cause trouble in the delivery of child. Women do not eat Zeigan and Matjan. “I never touch the meat of Matjan, Zeigan, changlamjan and Mairakjan because it may cause early greying of hairs and falling of teeth. I really afraid of it”, said Langanglu.

Besides, the penises of bull or ox, pig, goat, etc. are usually not eaten by women. Eating such foods by women is often attacked by animals. Umbilical cord of animals and birds, twin fruits or inflorescence of banana which comes in the middle of the body, lips of pig is prohibited by young. It is eaten by elders and is locally known as Kara Gantak (prerogative food for elders). The one who going to be a spoke person does not eat head of the cock and the cock attacked the person while trying to speak.

Women are tabooed to worship and cook foods when they are in the period of menstruation. They were even abstained from the other domestic works like drawing of water and collection of firewood. When she is in menstruation, she said she is not good today. She prohibits sour fruits such as Tamu (Rhus chinensis), Tamjin (Spondias pinnata), amla (Emblica officinalis), milk, etc. during her period. Even the worship of god is not allowed during the menstruation. God does not response the prayer, said Achanpli.

Among the Kabuis, it is believed that menstruation may pollute or ruin the sanctity or the power of men in the society. The sleeping of young members in the Khangchu (boy’s dormitory) during the festival of Gan Ngai is to free from such pollution. Those who do not sleep in the Khangchu are being ridiculed. The rite of
*Rang Pammei*, a sacred principal part of migration and settlement of the Kabuis, cannot be performed if men are being polluted. Moreover, it is also not possible if one member of the owner of *Khangchu* is being pregnant.

In the Chingmeirong Kabui village, Men prohibited foods prepared by the women in the last day of the *Ri Ngai* (festival of war). In this festival, they perform a rite of *Chong Phenmei* (the throwing of spear on the effigy made of banana plant) and evaluated the year. Hitting the private part of the effigy brings high fertility in the village for instance.

It is followed by a rite of *Thu- Thu Datmei* (a throwing away of small stone spatting on it). It is a prayer to ward off the evil spirits from the village. Young girls fast and worship wearing white dresses in the village gate. They are tabooed to talk and eat during the prayer. This prayer protects the evil eyes in their girlhood and worship when they just attained their puberty. It was told that men avoid sexual intercourse and the foods cooked by women the night before hunting expedition. Breaking this taboo brought misfortune or failure in the expedition.

In Sawombung, women are tabooed to enter the place of *Rangpatmei* (worship of god of seven brothers) who came to deliver *Banja Tamcha* (a Banja’s contribution of food which consists some delicious food items like fried fish, pork, chicken, boiled eggs and wine). When a woman unknowing entered the place, one of the elders shouted with angry. She would be punished but she begged pardon. Women are also tabooed to eat the foods of *Kairaouthou* (ancestor worship) when got married because they belonged to clan of their husband. It is also believed that the breaking of this taboo bears no fruits. Rather it brings trouble, illness and frequent dead of animals in the family.
Strategically, the refusal to eat certain categories of perfectly edible food marks one out as belonging to one particular group. Culturally food restriction is more on women than men in the society. Jones (2007) argues that feeding prescriptions and food avoidance are not only strategically employed to delineate communities and ethnic groups, but also to separate people by class, age, and gender.

Men eat, chew and drink with lesser degree of restrictions in the society. “I drank when I wanted to enjoy with friends but not as a compulsion. Friends never love my company as I got drunk easily. Sometimes I got drunk to keep the party manner among the members of the Pei”, said a key informant Phaomeidun. People look and talk in despise ways when a woman drank. Tanthailu drinks every day. She is alone. Her husband marries another woman. She used to be a dream diviner. And all her daughters also got married. People laugh and call her Zoubapei (female drunkard).

Ajaomuna Kameipui is another woman who drank every day. She looks older than me, a 76 yrs. old woman of the village said. In most cases, women are to be blamed. It is in the hands of women that the members of the family is united or divided. The Kabuis thus, said that “Laosi loi ganthuimak, nousi kao muthuimak; tukho karou, gankho Jan”. It means one cannot be leaving behind his bad crops in the field and similarly his bad wife. It cannot be thrown away because it is a meat and at the same time it cannot be eaten because it is a bone. And it is also said that “Tumeirui gametei jei shenphai kamme, Tumeirui gaitei pum suna karui ye”. It means if a wife is bad, the family lost its tranquility, peace and cooperation and brings fighting and bloodshed. But a good wife brings not only peace and prosperity
in the family but also helps in cooperating among brothers and other family members like a bridge between two river banks.26

5.7 Food and priests

Religion is a key force in production of structure and religious specialists as dynamic agents, not as interpellated subjects (Bourdieu, 1991; Dianteill, 2005). It contributes to the (hidden) imposition of the principles of structuration of the perception and thinking of the world and of the social world in particular, in so far it imposes a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively found on a principle of political division, present itself as the natural-supernatural of the cosmos (Bourdieu, 1991; Verter, 2003). And this symbolic system becomes embodied on the individual level in the form of habitus. Internalized and naturalized as a mode of thought and behavior, the habitus precedes conscious thought, ordering one’s choices and structuring one’s activities.

There is a structural homology between theological and ecclesiastical interests, on one hand, and political and economic interests on the other: to inculcate, implicit and explicit education, respect for the "logical" disciplines such as those that support the mythico-ritual system or religious ideology and liturgy, and more precisely, to impose ritual observances which lived as the condition of the safeguard of cosmic order and of the subsistence of the group,…tends in fact perpetuate the fundamental relations of the social order (Bourdieu, 1991; Verter, 2003).

Among the Kabuis, Mangtatmei (dream diviner) perform three important sacred tasks in the society. They are namely Mangbanmei, Mangloumei and Pumshutmei. Mangbanmei refers to the process of asking something about the
family, village or country in the dream to Ragang, the Almighty. Mangloumei means asking something about the dead person in the dream. And Punshutmei is the process of bringing back the lost spirit of sick person requesting the Almighty. Mangtatmei is an inborn and believed to possess some supernatural power. Before becoming a Mangtatmei, he/she performs a rite known as Kareng Jaijimei (a social recognition of his/her position worshiping god of seven brothers) and tested the reliability of his/her divination.27

Namshanpei was believed to be one of the famous lady dream diviner and she is believed to possess the supernatural power to talk with the spirits of the dead persons. It is told that she could even exchange the things with the spirits. One day when the members of a family requested her to exchange the anklets which had been buried with the dead body of their daughter and daughter thrown out with anger from the land of dead.

Kabuis also believed that when a person is sick, his/her spirit goes to the place of Ragang becoming a Goi (cow or bull). There is a myth of Mangbanmei (dream divination). One day a person was sick and he became a bull in the place of Ragang. He was killed and distributed his meat among the gods. But anyhow the dream diviner convinced the Ragang and brought back the spirit of the sick person. He recovered from the sick but found a depression on his thigh. It is believed to be the portion of meat which had already been eaten.28

Kabuis believed that Mangtatmei is a person who is chosen by Ragang. They observe certain food taboos in the society. However, this food taboo differs individual to individual. Namkhondai, 80 yrs. of age of Namthanlong Kabui village is male dream diviner. He is an illiterate and became dream diviner after marriage. He was
very poor before he became a dream diviner. He got a job when he became a
dream diviner. He told that god advised him not to eat certain foods. He prohibited
scale less fishes like eels (*Monopterus albus*), *ngakijou* (*Lepidcephalichthys guntea*)
*ngasep* (*Mystus ngasep.*nov), *kora* (Indian walking catfish, *Clarias batrachus*), and
meat such as beef and pork. He is being tortured and made dream divination blurred
when he ate the tabooed foods. He can eat chicken, meat of dog, cat and vegetables.
He is also tabooed to eat food in the funeral and when the house is polluted with child
birth.

*Pumshutmei* requires some rice, ginger, a *pheisoi* (a lady wrapper) in case of a
woman or a *mashin pheipong* (a cloth wears by men) and in case of a man a cock
having all red or all white in color and *Mangbanmei* (dream divination) needs some
wine and rice with ginger. He is also tabooed to sleep with his wife on the day of
dream divination.

Akena Gangmei, 52yrs of age, a lady key informant, is a disciple of Namkhondai.
She possessed the divine power since she was a little girl. She became a dream
diviner at the age of 40. She saw many things but hard to be interpreted before the
performance of rite of *Kareng Jaijimei*. She even forgot to take bath for many days.
She was in a serious trance when one of her daughter died. She tried hard to escape
from the divine possession but failed every time. God tortured her many times to
become his servant. Ultimately she decided to serve people and God. She is tabooed
to consume pork, eels, garlic and *ganpru* (*Houttuynia cordata* Thunb). Breaking of
this food taboo gives serious body pain and also spoiled her day of divination. She
argues that a true dream diviner should not eat beef because human being became a
cow or a bull in the place of God. Gods eat mankind as a beef. Her family was hard to run before she became a servant of god. It is alright now.\textsuperscript{30}

Thaballei Kamei, a key informant, 56 yrs. of age is another lady dream diviner of the village. She is an illiterate widow. She is tabooed to eat pork, beef, scale less fishes, etc. She eats the meat of cat and dog. Eating beef and scale less fishes leads her pain, irritating, tickling of joints and fever. And eating of pork causes her scabies and allergy. She served god and people for more than twenty years. She gave everything up because god took away her and husband. She even threw away the wooden temple into the river on the day of her son’s funeral.\textsuperscript{31}

In past, the religion ruled the people. It is a politics. It binds people together. It gives psychological compensation to mankind. It pleads things as if they really exist. It makes possible the domination of others. For instance, don’t kill the frog or the frog will not swim you out of the Kanung duipang (a river on the way to heaven and hell). Once people believed that the king is being sent by God. No one can talk against him. To talk against him means to talk against God. Everyone is afraid of being cursed by him.

Among the Kabuis, there was a post of priest in every village which is locally known as Mu. Traditionally a new priest starts his duty from the simplest duty like Tampithou (worshiping of Apou Ragang for the prosperity and plentiful of life sacrificing three fowl for Ragang, Bisnu and Bambu) which is less harmful to the family and to him when he commits some mistakes in the performance.\textsuperscript{32} Priests were good orators of magical rites and rituals in the society. They possessed the power to hypnotize people by reciting the long chants, said Munthaga Kamei, a key informant.\textsuperscript{33}
He used to perform all the sacred duties like Thoutanmei (worship), Rakhangmei (prayer to cure illness of evil eyes) and Punkanmei (prayer for protection) other than Keirao Thousumei (ancestor worship) and Lankaomei (worship of god of wealth) on behalf of village Pei. Sometimes male dream diviner became a village priest as well. He had been paid by Pei which is locally known as Bon Tammei. And Pei authority collected tribute from every household to pay him. He could resign the post if need be. It is a contract. He gets a share of meat as well and used to keep dry some of it to feed elders of the village. It is believed that feeding and serving elders could redeem the sins and mistakes committed in the performance of his duties. However, female dream diviner cannot become a priest of the village. She remains as a Mangtatmei.34

5.8 Food and marriage ceremony

Marriage is a patriarchal institution where men often try to accumulate maximum capitals (cultural, social, economic and symbolic) making alliances between two clans in the society. Among the Kabuis, engaged marriage ceremony is usually performed after the festival of Gan Ngai. It performs with a series of rites. It is also associated with feasting. Members of the Khangchu and the Luchu sing lamenting song a day before the marriage.

In the morning of the day of marriage, a pig is killed and observed the omens of the spleen that whether the bride and groom will be forever. Bangdun (square shaped piece of pork) and head of the pig are prepared for bridal march. Traditionally wife-taking group is inferior in position in the society. So they (sons-in-law of wife taking group) perform most of the tasks starting from killing a pig to the feeding of guests in the marriage ceremony. They are to be blame when there is any problem in
the ceremony. But when they did something good, the prestige goes to the father-in-law (wife-giving group).

Culturally speaking, all the sons-in-law (Lugan) belonging to the groom’s family or clan enjoy more privilege than those of the bride’s in terms of food items and sharing of food items such as Gangkam (meat from the neck region), meat from the belly region, Gakpham. The Gangkam eaters are more privileged in the society. And the relatives (Chanao) of the bride have the privilege to eat the heart of the pig.\textsuperscript{35}

After the payment of bride wealth, the bride must ready for bridal march. After bathing, she dines with friends and reached the groom’s place before darkness. The bridal march is usually led by two sons in laws carrying the head of the pig. And others carry the bride’s property. When they just crossed the village gate, they perform a rite known as Khana Napdom Thamei (offering of food to the spirit of child who died in the womb).

When the bride reached the village gate of the groom, son in-law in groom side ran and informed the arrival of the bride to the family. The villagers welcome the bride and rest a while drinking rice beers in the gate. Son in-law received the bride wealth brought by son in-law in the bride side. The groom’s mother brings her inside the house and performed the marriage rite known as Mairakmei (pronounce to be husband and wife in the name of God) holding a cock. The priest killed the cock strangulating and observed the divination of the cock’s legs (if the right is over the left, it says they will be forever) that whether they will be forever. Sons-in-law cooked the chicken and distributed among the village elders. The head of the cock is given to the priest or to the Taku (the eldest male in the village) at the request of him.
After the rite, (that is, Mairakmei) both the parties eat the head of the pig in the groom’s house. And members of Khangchu consume rice beers and boiled liver of the pig brought by the bride. Bangdun were distributed to the families of the village. Women of the groom’s family eat the Kaipui Napdom (food packets for women in the groom’s family) brought by the bride. It is said that a woman dies twice in her life time because she has been offered seven packet of rice and meat curry, one in her marriage and other in her dead (Kamson, 2013). It is also traditionally assumed her to be dead from the moment when she first accepted for marriage.

The bride and groom sleep separately for five days after the marriage. She is helped by her friends for five days till she is familiar with members of the family. She brought some pocket money (Khuklan Shen) and some edible items like dried meat, fishes or eels to cook when she is not familiar with the things in the kitchen. On the fifth day, both the parties eat together the delicious foods brought by bride’s parents. Friends who helped the bride returned with the bride’s parents.

Among the Kabuis, senior daughters who already got married received some meat in the marriage known as Luchang Jan (meat for senior daughters). It is believed to strengthen the marriage ties between the two clans. Similarly, the marriage between cross-cousin (Kanei Pidoi) is a prescriptive marriage. It not only reduces the burden of bride wealth, it reinforced the existing alliances between the two clans.

In the entire process of engaged marriage, Nouthanpou (marriage negotiator) plays a critical role. The Pei authority chose him on the request of the groom’s family. It is also often chosen one (having wife) who is smart in the field of negotiation among the member of Pei. It is said that bride’s parents cannot decline
the marriage proposal if the Nouthanpou dealt with them smartly in the process. He also involves in the negotiation of bride price. So he is honored giving Nouthancha (giving Bangdun as tribute) in the society.

Maternal uncle wears Pouphan (a traditional cloth for maternal uncle) and he also gives something valuable to the bride. Besides, the mother’s brother is symbolically a sun and his niece or nephew is edible food items in the sense that vegetables and other food items are withered or spoiled in the heat of sun. If the maternal uncles cursed the nephews and nieces, their lives will be ruined. It is often said that nephews and nieces afraid of even the hen of their maternal uncles. The illness of Ganramei is due to a curse of maternal uncle and it is believed to be cured only through the treatment of Kapou Ganoloumei. There is a myth of Kapou ganloumei. One Bungekpu and his maternal uncle were argued and fought over the encroachment of cultivating field of his uncle. His uncle finally cursed him and it was told that Bungekpu’s ass had fallen and he was lying sick for long time without knowing any cure. When asked to the local medicine men and oracles, it was said that he got the curse of his uncle and he will be cure if he performed the prayer of Kapou Ganloumei. He came to his uncle for asking apology and the food item for the prayer. His uncle gave him one piece of ginger, however it could be given a hen or pig or a goat or whatever he has or likes and the illness will be cured. Bungekpu said that I am really afraid of my uncle and I really afraid of uncle’s hen even. It is also often said that when one’s palm is dried and peeling of skin it is because of Kapou gan ramei.36

5.9 Feast of merit

Meal is a kind of structured language (Jones, 2007). The Kabuis perform feast of merit when one is chronically sick. It is believed that any form of sickness or
illness can be cured when one got the blessing of elders and fellow villagers. One can perform *Lagai Zou Jangmei* (feeding and offering of wine to elders in the name of God) when one is not able to perform the feast of merit like *Banrumei* and *Jeishanmei*. It is the simplest form of prayer to *Ragang*.

One used to perform a feast of merit when something unusual things occur in the animals or plants of the family. One day in Longdai village, there was a mysterious creature on the pillar of a house; all the family members were very much frightened and panicky that it was an omen of something bad. They feared that something misfortune might happen to the family. Some village elders came and observed the same. They suggested performing a feast of merit instantly. The family immediately killed a big pig and feed the villagers. Everyone came claimed it is nothing but for good. Finally the creature flew away from the house.

The family may also perform a feast of merit when there is bounty harvest or when the family likes to earn some pride and prestige in the society. The sacrifice of mithun (*Bos frontalis*) in such occasion is more appreciated and also elevated one’s status in the society. Among the Kabuis, mithun (*Bos frontalis*) is believed to be a sacred animal. This animal is not used in the agricultural works but in the ritual sacrifice. Before the performance of feast of merit, husband and wife observe certain food taboos. They even avoid conjugal relation till the end of the ceremony. One elder member of the clan is chosen as a priest. He sits in a sacred place till the end of the ceremony. He initiates any rites and continues with his due permission. He eats clean and sacred foods and he is being served by two unpolluted persons. He keeps praying to God for not causing any trouble during the ceremony. In this ceremony, all the guests are fed and participated in the rite of *Zourumei* (distribution of food items
to the participants as a gift). Sons in law distribute food items like rice beers, pumpkin, paddy, Bi (Calocasia esculenta), Ru (Dioscorea alata), cotton seeds, Bangdun (square shaped piece of pork), etc. to the entire guest. The foods distributed in this ceremony is believed to be clean and blessed. Everyone is encouraged to eat such foods to get the blessing of God. With his blessing, one gets the chance to perform such feast of merit.37

In the legend of Amang, he had two sisters one his blood sister named Butamruna and another one is step sister named Adalu who used to treat her step brother cruelly. One day Amang invited his sisters to a feast of merit. His blood sister brought many good foods for her brother but his step sister never believed that her step brother could perform a feast of merit because he was so poor. So, she brought a gourd (used as a container) of water used in washing rice as wine and drained away somewhere in the courtyard before her brother came to know. And she also felt guilty. At the end of the ceremony, Amang packed some foods for his sisters, Adalu and Butamruna. In the packing, he kept muscles of the meat at the bottom and bone on the top in the packet of Butamruna and for Adalu he kept bone at the bottom and muscle on the top. On the way, they were being run after by a tiger, Adalu thrown the muscles to the tiger and the tiger instantly ate the meat up and started following her again but Butamruna thrown the bone of the meat and she reached her home safely while the tiger trying to eat the bones. However, the Adalu was killed by the tiger. It is not a prerogative to give the legs of the animal in the feast of merit. However, there is a tradition of giving packet of food for their sisters to eat on their way to home38. As a residue of that tradition; father or brother gives some paddy locally known as Tan Shokmei and some meat to married daughters or sisters. And sisters also brought some delicious food items like rice beers, chicken and pork curry to the occasion.
Besides feast of merit, parents used to give a packet of food for their married daughters to eat on their way to home when they got tired of walking as there is no vehicle for transportation.

The Kabuis perform different types of feast of merits. They are namely Banru (when bounty harvest of paddy), Lang Muleng Kimei (when bounty harvest of cotton), Mu Muleng Kimei (bounty harvest of bitter gourds), Tingsaisu Muleng Kimei (when bounty harvest of chillies), Katoi Muleng Kimei (when bounty harvest of seasame) and Gu Muleng Kimei (when bounty harvest of gingers). If one offers many things to fellow villagers, he will be free from any kind of sickness and diseases. Rather he will be more prosperous and plentiful. This is the concept in the feast of merit among the Kabuis.39

Thus, a feast of merit not only defines one’s economic status in the society, it also enhances social, cultural and symbolic capital in many ways. He is honored in the society when he is alive. His dead body marches with honor in the village street before buried him. People follow him singing, dancing and Ho-Hoing. His soul is believed to reach the place of Ragang, the Almighty with melodious sounds of drum beating and Ho-Hoing.

5.10 Food and funeral:

Among the Kabuis, body and soul are believed to be separated after the dead and believed to go to the place of god or to the land of dead. These two places are something far superior to the living world of mankind. The land of dead something like the living world but everything is opposite to living world of mankind. So the Kabuis honor the dead and offer food to eat on the way to the land of dead. When a
person is died, the body is buried performing a series of rites such as *Kaholoumei* (a rite performed not to fear going to the land of dead), *Gu Kaset Keiloumei* (a rite performed to go straight to the land of dead without any trouble), *Duiloumei* (bathing) and *Khoi Lammei* (cutting of *Khoi* plant which is used as bathing soap). After bathing the dead, the body is dressed with traditional attires, but opposite to the living, and laid on the bed covering with *Pheingao*, a traditional white shawl or cloth. The family offers wine locally known as *Ponsuzou* to all the participants. The digging of grave (an iron hoe) is symbolically started by a father or a son or a male relative of the dead offering wine to the spirit of the dead. Among the Kabuis, the spirit of the dead person is being propitiated offering *Zou* (wine) for not causing any troubles in the digging of the grave.

The family offers animals like pig, cow or dog for the dead as *Takan* (sacrificial food for dead). It is believed that the offering of dog protects the dead from the evil spirits on the way to land of dead, *Taloilam*. Feasting the participants is also a part of funeral ceremony. They talk about the person, which may be about what he/she had done for the family or for the society or about the feast of merit performed his/her life time before eating. The surviving relatives discussed and repaid the debt if the person died with debt of others. They started eating symbolically offering some foods to the dead. It may bring all the survivors together or may consider a rite of incorporation between living and dead. It may also interpret as a mark of honor (Kamei, 2013). A piece of meat (often ears or lips of pig or cow) is given to the friends or relatives who are not able to attend the ceremony. It says that he/she is no more in the family. Culturally it also interprets that friends or relatives should not forget what the deceased person did or said.\textsuperscript{40}
When a (married) woman died, her uncle or brother offers a pig for the dead which is locally known as *Theigui*. The family of the husband may ask the reason behind offering the *Theigui* and if the family is left to pay the bride wealth before eating the food of *Theigui*. The husband has to pay a cow or a bull to the relatives of his wife if he left to pay the bride wealth when she was alive. This is locally known as *Mandu Goigang pammei*. When the matter is settled, they eat the food. Sometimes it may also symbolically resolve just having a cup of tea or a glass of wine. But doing this leads the deceased soul free to the land of dead. On the top of that, the husband also gives a traditional cloth to the one who offered *Theigui*. Elders offer foods in honor of the deceased soul digging a hole near the bed of the deceased body locally known as *Paokeimei*. The offering starts with boiled rice and egg. It removes the hunger of the soul on his/her way to the land of dead.

When the grave and coffin are ready, one elder of the village killed a fowl mentioning the name of the deceased person. This is known as *Theipha Dapmei* and it is cooked by *Kengjapei* (old women) of the village. The body is traditionally buried with seven food packets (including the meat of *Theipha, Takan* and *Theigui* if the deceased is a female) which is believed to be eaten on his/her journey to the land of dead. It is believed that the first one eats when the spirit reached the village gate, the second on reaching a place known as *Bamdonpai*, the third on reaching a place known as *Kanung Duipang*, the fourth on reaching to the place of ancestors who died earlier, the fifth one for giving to *Ditham* (aborted child), the sixth one for *Khana Nakhang*, a child who died in the mother’s womb, and finally the seventh one for *Kameitei Latumei Rakhang*, the spirit who killed him/her. It is also a tradition to include cotton in the food packet of *Ditham* and piece of cloth in the packet of *Khana*.
Nakhang. A child who dies before Pengham reimei is known as Khana Na and simply buried outside the village without any funeral ceremonies.

And mother who dies in delivering the child or dies with a baby inside her womb is locally known as Theisi (evil dead). Her dead body also buries outside the village without any funeral ceremonies. Such dead is considered to be unnatural and abominably rejected in the society. It is often believed to be a result of a curse or a sin committed in her past life. The term “Nasi Theinimei (to die with unborn child)” is an extreme and tabooed word to use against each other in the society. Among the Kabuis, there is a belief that everybody go either to the place of Ragang or Taroilam, the land of dead when they died. And it is also believed that everybody doesn’t go to the place of Ragang after dead but one who performed the feast of merit in the name of Apou Ragang or one who gave charity in the name of Apou Ragang. So the person who is clean, decent, honest and lucky one can reach the place of Apou Ragang. It is also believed that the land of dead consists of seven points of destination and people go there according to the gravity of one’s actions. This last point of destination is locally known as Thunjijang. This myth works as one of the most important functions in shaping an ideal member of the society and intimidating its members to go against the normative values of the society.42

It is shown that gender based power is manifested not only in the realms of decision making and administration of the family and of the society. However, it is also manifested in the eating habits as well as in the pattern of food sharing of the society. Men enjoy the privilege to eat the best and the most. For instance, married women do not get any share of meat in the festival of Gan Ngai because they stood outside the age set of men and the main political system of the society. When they
got some, it is from the dispensation of their husbands. A woman sacrifices all her wants for her husband and family. But it is hardly counted in the society. Male oriented society put more restrictions on women in terms of food items and mode of consumption in the society. They cannot eat penises of pig, goat, bull, etc., and the meat of wild life. In their oral tradition, it is believe that they are often attacked by the animals. This sexism in eating pattern is also reflected in every rite and ritual associated with food as well. For instance, a woman when she dies cannot reach the land of dead, Taloilam unless the clansmen perform certain rites such as Mandu payment, offering of Theigui, etc. Even her death is defined in terms of patriarchal ideology such as whether it is a Theisi (evil dead) or Nasi Theimei (died with an unborn child).

Notes

1 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012, Hindi office, Imphal
2 Interviewed with Mr Munthaga Kamei, on 18th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
3 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012, Hindi office, Imphal
4 Interviewed with Mr Chaoba Kamson, on 4th January 2012, Kakhulong Paona Bazar, Imphal
5 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012, Hindi office, Imphal
6 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 31st December 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
7 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun phaomei, on 11th February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
8 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012, Hindi office, Imphal
9 Interviewed with Mr Munthaga Kamei, on 18th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
10 Interviewed with Mr Meijinlung Kamson, on 29th August 2012, Majorkhul, Imphal
11 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
12 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
13 Interviewed with Mr Kathuna Daimei on 20th April 2012 Chingmeirong Imphal
14 Interviewed with Mr Chandra Haomei, on 14th september 2012, Zeliangrong Union Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal
15 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
16 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal and interviewed with Mr Chandra Haomei, on 14th September 2012, Zeliangrong Union Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal
17 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
18 Interviewed with Mr Munthaga Kamei, on 18th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
19 Interviewed with Mrs Thambal, on 19th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
20 Interviewed with Mrs Thambal, on 19th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal;
Interviewed with Miss Luguilu Gonmei, on 1st April 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal;
Interviewed with Mrs Achanpi Maringmeipui, on 23rd March 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal; Interviewed with Mrs Karaona
Gonthangmeipui, on 20th January 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal; Interviewed with Miss Luguilu Gonmei, on 1st April 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

20 Interviewed with Mr. Sanahal Kamei, on 15th March 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

21 Interviewed with Mr Chandra Haomei, on 14th September 2012, Zeliangrong Union Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal

22 Interviewed with Miss Langanglu Maringmei, on 27th March 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

23 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 18th October 2012 Keishampat, Imphal

24 Interviewed with Mrs Achanpi Maringmeipui, on 23rd March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village

25 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

26 Interviewed with Mrs Achanpi Maringmeipui, on 23rd March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village;

Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 2nd January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

27 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012 at Hindi office, Imphal

28 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 5th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal; Interviewed with Mr Sanahal Kamei, on 15th March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

29 Interviewed with Mr Namkhondai Kamei, on 1st February 2012, Namthanlong, Imphal

30 Interviewed with Mrs Akena, on 20th February 2012 Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

31 Interviewed with Mrs Thaballei, on 23th February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal

32 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 29th November 2012, Hindi office, Imphal

33 Interviewed with Mr Munthaga Kamei, on 18th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
34 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 5th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
35 Interviewed with Mr Sanahal Kamei, on 15th March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
36 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 5th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal; Interviewed with Mr Sanahal Kamei, on 15th March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
37 Interviewed with Mr Chaoba Kamson, on 1st June 2013, Kakhulong, Paona Bazar, Imphal
38 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 19th July 2013, Hindi Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal
39 Interviewed with Mr Chandra Haomei, on 14th September 2012, Zeliangrong Union Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal
40 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 19th July 2013, Hindi Office, Paona Bazar, Imphal
41 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun phaomei, on 11th February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal