Chapter IV

Women in Kabui Society

In patriarchal society, a woman is defined and located in the social structure with reference to a man. The relationship may be daughter, wife or even daughter-in-law. She is not recognized as an independent being; she is considered to be incidental, an inessential. He is subject; he is the absolute while she is the other (Beauvoir, 1953). In Kabui society, a patriarchal society, too, the “other-ness” of a woman is true. It is believed that God created women to help a man on the earth. A man is decision maker in a family and so does in the society. It is reflected in their mythical stories and also in their mode of addressing God (Apou Ragang) in the prayers. All the prayers other than evil spirits start with mentioning His name and power. The worship, during Lankaomei (a worship for prosperity and plentiful), is started with a chant, Apou Ragang Dikun Padei Lansinmeipu Lanjummeipu (God who is the master of all wealth and property of the Universe). Similarly Napkaomei, a ritual, also begins with Apou Ragang Nap Maja sinmeipu (God who is the master of paddy of the Universe).

In a mythical story, Nap Maja (paddy), the son of Ragang himself incarnated as a paddy in the world. After the creation of all living beings, Ragang, the Almighty asks to all the living being that what would be the food for mankind. Shinikon pan (Auricularia auricular) Tadutthai (Ficus cunia), Ganliak (Plantago erosa) and Tenloi (a wild plant) answer that they would be the food of mankind. They are rejected on
the ground that man could not survive eating them other than helping for time being
when starving. They are thrown into the woods. Ultimately God looks at his son and
orders him to be the food of mankind. His son resists sobbing that man’s stomach is
as deep as ocean.

His son disappears while everyone is shouting with overwhelm on his
decision. Everyone searches him here and there. Suddenly one of them said, “There
he is”. He runs down the hill slope and disappears again. Again, one of them shouts,
“There he is”. He dives in the Langmaiiei (a large water body). He is seen growing
and floating as a golden colored Majabang (paddy plant) on the surface of the water.
As it is beyond the reach of man’s capacity, they chalked a strategic means to bring
back the son of God. They took the help of a bird but failed. They requested Poktuna
(rat) and agreed upon one condition that man should give a share of paddy whenever
there is a cultivation of rice. The rat using a raft of banana plant brings back the
paddy that grows on the surface of sea. Accordingly men, till today, give some paddy
to rat. Ever since man started paddy plantation and worshiped him performing many
rites and rituals.

It is believed that the prayer bears no fruits if one forgets to mention the name
of paddy in the Langmaiiei, in the hymn of Napkaomei (worship for bounty harvest
and prosperity in the family). It is often recited that Langmaijejishen Napgaeismo
gangngo which means that please come the paddy that grew on the surface of the sea
of Langmaiiei. Traditionally even a stranger is being fed well if he/she sings the Maja
Lu (a praising hymn of the Nap Maja) wherever he/she visits.

Mythically speaking, in Kabui society, a woman is considered as a custodian
of his (God’s) creation. In the mythical story of Champei, woman’s custodian
position is reflected. It is also reflected in the hymn of Napgung Chuck. Goddess Champei is believed to be a custodian of all the wild animals in the jungle and granary in the house. One day seven sons of God go for hunting with seven wise dogs in a jungle. They explore seven ranges of mountain but could not hunt any single animal. All the animals are hidden by Lam Kapui (goddess of the woods) or goddess Champei (custodian of all the animals in the jungle).

While they are standing against the trees desperately, they hear an unusual barking sound of the dogs. They send one Gan Chakou Pangbeimei (a matured and intelligent youth) to enquire. He found dogs kill one Shugok-Jougok (an animal having a head of pig and feet of a dog) near the Noiden (a tree). They take animal and dressed the same in the field. The smoke from burning of the animal makes all the paddy plants fruitless. This make them surprised. They ask local medicine man and dream-diviner; but they could not find any answer of the mysterious happening. Finally they (seven brothers/sons of god) visit Ragang Mu Chara Khandi Mujungpu (a shaman in the palace of Ragang). The shaman tells them to offer a black fowl in the name Apou Ragang, the Almighty. They perform the same and the paddy bears fruit again\(^1\). Traditionally a female is imaged as soft, passive and faithful flower and a man as aggressive, strong being and capable of giving life. Female is a flower and man is a seed. It is recurrently reflected in romantic folk songs such as Chagangdou Luphai (a song composed by one Chagangdou, a romantic hero). In the song, he tries to convince the girl whom he loves saying that he is much better than other men. He would be more handsome when he wears the traditional headgear. When the complexion of a woman is just like a yellowish color of wax and blooming flower of Ta \(\text{a kind of plant bearing flowers and seeds)}\), his is that of Chagang seed (yellow seed of Chagang plant). He blames women that they know nothing other than trying
to make beauty themselves. But when he sees her, he wants to be a bachelor once again. He stealthily observes and tries to know her wishes. He observes a divination of Phakdan (a form of divination using Phak leaves) to know if she would be his wife. She is perfect just like a hornbill feather, may be in drawing water or collecting firewood. She is as beautiful as a flower of orchid. Even at the time of drawing water and finding firewood, she is perfect just like the feathers of hornbill. She is beautiful just the flower of orchids. “Friends, I like her to be my wife. Go and bid the price for girl whom I liked to”, he says. He further tries to convince her that men cannot be trusted. She should not trust anybody who tries to tame and befool her but him. She would never have the chance to see and touch the hands of the parents if she gets married to other village. He waits for her. However, she marries with another man who gives a big bride price, (which were usually measured in the number of cows or buffaloes)² (Society, 1984).

In patriarchal society, how powerful a woman may be, she is always subjected to the men’s authority. Her contributions towards the family and society are hardly noticed in the male dominated society. They are placed in the society to increase man’s capital (cultural, social, economic and symbolic) in the society. Bourdieu often argued that women’s status is as capital bearing objects, whose value accrues to the primary groups to which they belong (for him, the family), rather than as capital accumulating subjects in social space. Women strategic circulation plays a key role in the enhancement of the symbolic capital held by men, rarely having capital accumulating strategies of their own; they are repositories (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs, 2004).
Moreover, symbolic violence is, like in other patriarchal societies, even in the modern western societies, present in Kabui society. A symbolic violence is an ideology having the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken for granted forms. In using the term ‘symbolic violence’, Bourdieu stresses how the dominated people accept as legitimate their own condition of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1997). Men’s authority is left intact by economic and ideological forces. The marginalized socio-economic status of women as a group constrains their exercise of power. Women also experience the force of tradition in regulating their lives and selves and they sanction practices that define their assumed obligations, duties and roles. They consent to the ultimate authority of men in decision making, sanction paternal claims to children and accept the burden of responsibility to provide care and ensure that men’s sexual desires are realized (Sideris, 2004).

Like other patriarchal societies, women in Kabui society are also defined as a ‘weaker section’ (need to be protected), inferior members in the society and mere ‘baby makers’ broadly speaking (Ülkü Ü. Bates, 1983,2005). Their position in the society is not because of their biology. Rather it is because of their historical, cultural, economic and political experiences. However, in most cultures, biological facts like penis, breast, etc. are often used to define the gender (feminine and masculine) and the gender roles in the society. And these facts are again concretized and internalized because of their early socialization and cultural codes, transmitted from one generation to another through habitus. Apart from that the social roles, myths, rites and rituals, folklores and even the language used to express ideas support the definitions. Women also normally accept their positions legitimate. In the words of
Simone de Beauvoir (1953), ‘we are exhorted to be women, remain women and become women’.

The Kabui is one of the patriarchal societies of Manipur where age and sex are critical in the performance of gender roles in the society. Among the Kabuis, with age and sex they pass through different institutional positions and perform different gender roles in the society. And traditionally they wear different clothes according to age and sex. For instance, *Tunalaona* (girls before their puberty stage) wear *Lengli Pheisoi* (a wrapper) and *Tuna* (girls who become members of the girl’s dormitory) wear *Hu Pheisoi* (embroidered wrapper), *Hekkin Pheisoi* (multi-color wrapper), etc. So a male has to pass from *Ganlaona* (a boy before his puberty) to *Gan* (a boy who admitted in the boy’s dormitory), from *Gan* to *Ganpi* (leader of the Gan), from *Ganpi* to *Khangbon* (a leader of the boy’s dormitory), from *Khangbon* to *Ganchang* (a leader who frees from duties and responsibilities of the boy’s dormitory and newly entering in the office of Banja), from *Ganchang* to *Banja* (an elder of the village Pei) and finally *Taku* or *Chaku* (the eldest among the Banja) through time and space. Similarly a female has to pass *Tunalaona* (a girl before her puberty) to *Tuna* (a girl who admitted in the girl’s dormitory), from *Tuna* to *Lakpui* (married woman) and finally from *Lakpui* to *Kengjapei* (old woman). With their different institutional positions, they have different powers and functions in the society.

Kabui women are usually devoted to their family and took key roles in economic activity as well. Colonial people often wrote about the diligence of the female and lethargy of male. In the words of Colonel McCulloch, “in the grey of the morning, the females of the family are active and the village resounds with the blow of the long pestle in the wooden mortar beating out the rice from the husk.
finished, breakfast is cooked both for the family and pigs, for the latter the husk mixed with other refuse serves the purpose. Breakfast over, which it usually is about sunrise, the women proceed for water, which they fill into bamboo tubes and bring on their backs in baskets. Then, they go for firewood, and this brought, they set about the internal economy of the house; that is, to see to their husbands’ drink being in proper quantity and quality, to their spinning or to their weaving, or any of the other household occupations except sweeping the house clean, an act in which they have no pride. If not employed in the labors of the field or the chase, the men do little work than lull about the house during the day, drinking the peculiar drink, a harmless one consisting of pounded rice mixed with boiling water brought into fermentation by the addition of germinated paddy. In the morning and evening they will be generally found sitting in groups in front of their houses on large flat stones which covered the graves of deceased relatives. They then appear to be enjoying themselves greatly, they exceedingly loquacious and speak always in a loud tone” (Hodson, 1911).

However, whatever a woman does is hardly appreciated in the society. It is often considered to be a part her natural duties in the family as well as in the society. Ironically women are also accepted to be natural and legitimate. This is well reflected in a woman’s life story. Pantisinglu is 45yrs old widow who is still struggling with her fate. She is now surviving with a daughter studying seventh standard and a son reading fourth standard. She is living at her father’s place. She lived a very happy life when she was a young girl. She completed her matriculation only. She got married on 28th February, 1998 and unfortunately her husband died of liver cirrhosis in 2001. A woman’s life becomes dramatic and miserable when she became a widow in the society. She struggled a lot after her husband dead. She used to live with her children in the house situated near the main road which is not safe at night. She
hardly got care and assistance from her husband’s brothers and relatives who are rich. She got no share of land but lived on the mercy of others. She used to brew wine to run the family and used to ask help from her mother and father.

Finally her parents suggested her to come back home. With the help of her parents, she is now selling Singju (a food item prepared from vegetables, chili powder, sesame, union leaf, inflorescence of banana, etc.), Loirei Taomei (fried chicken intestines), smoked beef, chicken curry, Goigi Tam (chutney made out of boiled skin of cow or buffalo), etc. Tragically people look in despise ways whenever a widow runs a vendor. It is really hard.

“Generally among the Kabuis, males are hardly worked to support their family. They depend on the parents even after they got married. In other communities like Meitei, parents got rest when their sons were grown up. Women maintain the family but they are hardly counted in the society. Paradoxically those who help their wives are laughed at and consider them to be henpecked. When a woman does a business somewhere far from her home, people laugh at her and think in despise ways. Besides, people start monitoring her character or fidelity instead of thinking that it is a situational compulsion. People might say a lot about me as well. It is really hard to borrow a single coin among us. Males are lucky and they are master but the females are horrible and they are being used just like cattle”, Pantisinglu, a key informant, told.

Further, she recalled her experiences in the Luchu (girl’s dormitory). In our days, it was fantastic. They enjoyed very much. They used to sleep in their dormitory till the end of the festival. There were sharp divisions of labor between men and women during the festival. They followed the rules and performed the duties with
sincerity. Girls cooked and served food not only in the Luchu (girl’s dormitory) but also in the Khangchu (boy’s dormitory). Traditionally Khangchu and Luchu used to exchange curry to show respect to each other during the festival. Besides performing duties in the dormitories, they also enjoyed the festival with dancing and singing. “A girl’s life changes when she got married and became a mother. She hardly got the chance to enjoy when she is trying to maintain the family. She became an audience in most festivals”, she said.³

Lusinglu is a married woman of 55yrs of age who wept silently with her fate. She has four sons and three daughters. She used to brew wine to maintain the family. Weaving, collecting fire wood from the nearby hill and dig out the clump of the root of the trees, planning for a day menu, cooking, etc. were the order of the day in her life. She was haunted with a thinking that when she could be able to repay the debts. Her husband hardly helped in domestic chores and he didn’t even appreciate her, she told with a sigh. However, she could now maintain her family selling Zeitin (a food item prepared from blood including internal organs of a pig or a dog) in the local market. “Because of my works and hardship of my family, I am looking older than my age” she said.⁴

Chaoba, a widow, also experienced a hidden, painful and dreadful reality in her life. She is a widow of 40 yrs. of age. She is living with a daughter of around 8 yrs. of age. Though educated, she is unemployed. Sometimes she has been looked after by her younger brother, a mason labor. Besides maintaining, she sent her daughter to school out of the little profit of brewing and selling of wine. She failed in other business like rearing pigs. Her pigs died in epidemic. She used to blame her own misfortune. She concerns too much for her daughter.
“My daughter is growing up; the expenditure of the family has been multiplied day by day. I am very much concern for my daughter and her future”, she weft. She felt uncomfortable to ask help from others. Her husband was a secretary of the village Pei. He was very kind hearted and helped others by borrowing money from the Pei. Sometimes she used to consume only soup in feeding his friends by her husband. He used to say that she is a secondary and first priority should be given to the guests or friends as a mark of hospitality, she told.

When he was not there, nobody is there. Rather people started observing every step of a widow in the society instead of giving hands. That is a reality of the society, she said. Moreover, the fashion of giving monetary assistance to the families that going to celebrate the Lakpui Jaithaomei (a social recognition ceremony of newly married couple), Khangbon Jaikumei (promotion to a higher rank in the Khangchu), Nathanmei (a birth rite of a child), etc. gave extra burden to her family. Even the money to be used in the brewing business is often used up in such occasions. Those who give much are highly appreciated but those who could not give much because of their poverty are often considered to be outdated, asocial and uncivilized. It is a big challenge for a widow to maintain the question of modesty in one hand and to grapple with to survive in the middle of poverty on the other, she told. “I even forgot to wear beautiful clothes to thinking for my daughter and the family. My elder sister’s son told me once that aunty looked like a granny”, she said.⁵

Whenever a girl married to a man, traditionally she has to change her life style. She has to serve her father and mother in-laws. She cooks, brews wines, washes clothes and cleanses dishes. She serves food to her in-laws. She warms water for washing hands and legs for her in-laws and get ready bed for them when they were
about to go to bed. It is not necessary to teach again but to be learned. Mother-in-law taught her daughter-in-law what her father-in-law likes and dislikes. She has to learn what her father-in-law likes to eat and what he does not like to cook. She even must know the tastes of her father-in-laws. Mother-in-law also taught her manners, disciplines, and etiquette of the family. Daughter-in-law should take the responsibilities of all domestic chores under the supervision of her mother-in-law.

Mother-in-law used to teach that a woman starts her day with sweeping and mopping of the house in the morning. After that she has to clean and wash the utensils used last night. After taking bath, she starts cooking for the family. Feeding domestic animals like dogs, pigs, and cattle is a part of her unavoidable morning duties. Sometimes man sweeps the courtyard and splits the firewood before he goes anywhere. In the family, a woman’s duties are infinitesimally details but mostly domestic in nature. Male is public and he administers not only the family but also the village. It is said that “man is just like a sword”. He can do anything he likes. It is also said that the peaceful coexistence among the brothers and sisters, parents, and children and among other relatives depends on women. A daughter-in-law may spoil and divide the good relationship between brothers, sisters, and parents in the family. She is responsible for everything. But it is enough for a son-in-law, if he knows and shows some respect to his in-laws and other members of the family.

Apart from the domestic chores, she must also help in the worship of the family. But it is not allowed when she is in her menstruation. In the worship of *Lankaomei* (worship of god and goddess of wealth and treasure) and *Napkaomei* (worship of god and goddess of paddy), she performs *Napchanmei* (offers a piece of cooked liver of fowl, rice, and crushed ginger) *Kambuipui, Charaipui* and *Kairao*, god
and goddess in charge of wealth and treasure who are believed to be living in the house.

Women play important roles, though not widely appreciated in the society, in some festivals of the Kabuis. In the festival of NanuNgai (festival of fertility and child birth ceremony), Kengjapei (old women) fetch water using Mu (bitter gourd) tying a piece of dried meat on it for Nashan Kanmei ceremony (a birth rite for a child). It is traditionally known as Kakhudui Jumei (drawing of sacred water). The fetched water pours a little in the cooking of fowl and washes the face of the child. It is believed that the rite brings fortune and success in every walk of life of the child. The act of Nashan Kanmei is performed by the priest when the chicken is cooked. In the past, Kengjapei (old women) used to play the roles of midwife in the delivery of a child. But it has now been deputed to nurses and doctors. They have a major role in the funeral ceremony in case the dead is female starting from bathing to the dressing of the dead body, Thambal Kameipui, 75yrs old married woman narrated her experiences and duties of a woman towards the family and the society.6

Women have different social roles in the family as well as in the society. Whenever she got married, she is being expected different social roles. She has to move in the rhythm of the family where she belongs to. She has to change her manner, etiquette and dispositions. She cannot behave as earlier, said Miss Langanglu (57yrs old). Her Mother taught her weaving, cooking and everything which is in the domain of a woman. She told her that education alone didn’t work in this world. She used to help her father in the agricultural activities in the field and people appreciated her very much. Rice mill is a great boon for women in the society. Earlier husking and pounding of rice, was a big deal. Her mother used to bring her to get pig feeds
from the neighboring villages. She could not complete her education due to extensive engagement in the domestic chores and of poverty. Her parents were also not interested in sending girls to school. She remains unmarried to look after her brothers and sisters in the family. Men are freer in every way. They were in the first priority in the family as well as in the society. Her elder brother was sent to other place for his education in the hope that he will support the family in future. He was letting free from any kind of works in the family so that he could study freely. But he is hopeless. Extra pampered spoiled his life.

“I like women to be educated apart from the knowledge of domestic chores so that menfolk cannot think us as inferior creatures. Women should be careful in every foot step. Once I was working as a secretary of women society. Earlier most of office bearers of the women society in our village were unmarried educated girls. Married women were uneducated and they were restricted to go outside the family. Society worked hard to educate illiterate married women in the village. It also worked popularize and improve the traditional dresses through weaving cooperative society. However, with the starting of *Meira Paibi* (women who guard the village holding a torch) movement, the office bearers of the women society who are unmarried are not convenient to work at night. So, all the unmarried girl members have been replaced by married women as office bearers”, she added.7

The story of Karaona, another widow (83 year of age), also testified a woman’s reality over time and space. She got married at the age of 20. In the past, women were not sent to school. A woman who went to school was looked in despise ways. Her mother once scolded her that why should she go to school. She liked to go to school so that she could give love letter to her boyfriends, she said. But her brother
went to school. Besides cooking and weaving, she used to help her mother finding pig’s feed from the neighboring villages every day. They used to eat sugarcane or *Nappong* (locally available edible item made of popped rice and sugarcane juice) and *Zoungao* (pounded rice beer) when they were exhausted. But she never touches wine.

Her mother also advised her to have the habit of rising early in the morning and doing domestic chores. When a woman got married, she cannot behave as she was with her parents in the family. A girl should learn husking and pounding rice and the art of brewing properly when she was with her parents. There is a popular Kabui saying that *Ten-mimei Tumeihei Lattai Hongtemthe* (marriage is just a change of spoon for females). It means that marriage is a change in life style. When a girl gets married to a man, she has to change everything. She cannot act as she did before. She has to behave and act according to her husband’s wishes. A mother has no right to come and advise her daughter after her marriage. She is now living in a different hearth. This is traditionally known as *Lattai Hongmei* (literally, changed of the spoon), she recollected her early socialization in the family.

She used to work even in her pregnancy. She used to do husking pounding of rice. It is believed that working during the pregnancy made easier in the delivery of a child. And it was also believed that it made the delivery easier. She strictly observed food taboos during her pregnancy, she further said.⁸

Thaballei, 56yrs.of age is also an illiterate widow. She is now living with her son and daughters doing wine business. Earlier she was a dream diviner. Her divine possession however, started when she was 14 yrs. of age. “Perhaps it would be alright if I had been separated from the divine spirits. Our village elders once planned to worship the *Hiyangthang Lairembi* (a goddess) and they forgot it for time being. The
goddess came in my dreams and told me to remind them when I was a young girl. Accordingly they worshiped the goddess immediately”, she narrated.

Her husband and son died of cancer. Since then she quitted the service of dream divination. She was serving god for more than twenty years as a dream diviner. The wooden temple once situated in the courtyard had been thrown into the river before the funeral ceremony of her son. She used to advise others that God gives everything one who is devoted to him. She possessed some supernatural powers. She could even feel the person who is going to die in the village.

She believed that her son is killed using black arts. Cancer patient never dies that soon. If there is money, a cancer patient can survive a little bit longer. She is desperate and seemingly she lost everything.

One day a Maibi (a local shaman) asked her to work with her. She will be famous and powerful if she worked with her. She replied she didn’t like to be famous and powerful. God took her beloved son away from her. She did not mind too much when he took her husband away from her because he fully enjoyed his life when he was alive. He ate the best and the most, and wore the best. Whatever he was, may be good or bad, she treated and served him as a good husband and good father of her children. Her son died at the age of thirty. “I don’t want to be a famous and powerful woman. Besides if I do work under one guru, people might think otherwise. They will say this woman is a witch. Don’t go to her. They won’t trust me”, she said.

Her husband and his family were hardly believed in god. He used to complain that what I was doing is nothing but it was my intention to become a Maibi only. One day he got drunk and slept in the shrine of goddess Leimarel (goddess in the house).
Probably he got some warning from the goddess and he ran out shouting. From that day onward, he didn’t talk against the God anymore. Whatever might he be, she felt herself very much down when he (husband) was gone. She could not sleep and eat well. Physically and mentally she felt very weak now. Sometimes she thought that it would be better if she were a man. Whenever a dog barked at night, she started feeling insecure. She started asking about her son to her daughters. But she felt secured only when she came to know that her son is at home. And sometimes she could not sleep the whole night to think about her sons and daughters in the family. Most of the times, she lit the fire early to brew the wine. This is how she spent her time last few years.

Apart from that, she used to weep sitting in between the graves of her son and husband. She lives a very down, miserable life because she is a woman, a wife and a mother and perhaps she would never think too much if she were a man whether she lost a son or a husband. This is the difference between a man and a woman, she said.

Her son died in very unforgettable circumstances. Before her son died, she used to go to the temple of Tingkao Ragang, the Supreme God and used to sing his hymns. She quitted everything now.

The life of a widow in patriarchal society is not easy. People watch every footstep of a widow. Even children can do anything they like to do whenever the father was. But it is different now. She usually told her children to return home soon and to know what people would say kinds of bad things happened. Usually girls are cooperative and responsive to the advices. Boys are tough and she worried more for them. Sometimes her daughters used to complain her that she loves sons more than daughters. Besides learning to love each other among the brothers and sisters, earning
and saving money are also important when there is a little mouth to feed; she used to advise her children.

She had the habit of gardening besides brewing and rearing of pigs to support the family. Her husband had not the habit of working and exercise but drinking. Earlier he had landed property but he lost everything in election. Not only her husband, most of the men, in Kabui society, hardly work and died of alcohol. She fed her husband brewing wine. He sat all day doing nothing but bullying to her every day. He squeezed all her energy when she was young. So she doesn’t care much about him but for her son who died young. He didn’t even know what the life is. She remembered him every day. Now she is getting old and became hard to work with spade. She has no landed property but to live on the mercy of luck, she told. Though the village Pei gives every household a chance to become a tenant, the tenancy is of course a rotational and takes times to get the turn. She will die first before getting her turn, she said.

For a woman her family is everything. One day during the cease fire between National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Issac-Muiva), an insurgent group operating in Nagaland and Assam, and Government of India, “I was in my sister’s place in Ragailong (a Kabui village in the Imphal city) to take some waste foods for pigs. On my way to home, I was stuck up in the middle of tear gas and all. It was horrible. I thought I will not be able to meet my children any more. Though I have relatives in the hearth of Imphal city (Kakhulong and Ragailong), I never thought of to staying back there but to go home and to see my children. Meanwhile fortunately a rickshaw puller came and drove me up to Lamlong Bazar, Imphal east then I walked around
seven km to reach home. God is always there when we were in troubled”, she recollected her experience."

Achanpi, 76yrs old is an illiterate mother of five sons and three daughters who got married in her early age. She was born as a precious gift of two lovers before the marriage of her father and mother. Tragically her biological father was not ready to get married with her mother and she was given as Kapui Ngamkhang (to support her mother) when she was a baby. She was brought up by her maternal uncle. Her father got married with another woman. Her step mother gave birth to five sons and two daughters. After a long back, when she got sons and daughters, her father’s relatives wanted her to come back to the clan again. But her uncle was not ready. She prayed him many times and at last he agreed. So she came back to her father’s clan. In fact, she was living a miserable life when she just got married. Her husband and she had to bear the expenditure for the treatment of her father and mother in-laws. Her father and mother in-laws were believed to be killed by others with their black arts. Husband hardly worried for the family. Rather he enjoyed drinking. He was a heavy user of Zou (wine). Sometimes he used to drink the whole night with friends.

She is a little bit alright now because all her children have been grown up. Brewing business was really successful. Besides family expenditure, it also supported children’s education and helped in rearing pigs. All her sons and daughters got married and some of them go to office now.

However, her past life used to come and haunt her. The lives of women in those days are horrible. “I think it is better now. In those days, women were not sent to school. If women went to school, they were considered to be prostitutes. So I was afraid to go school. I didn’t go to school at all. Instead I used to go with my

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grandmother and mother for collecting pig’s feed from the neighboring villages” she narrated. She used to work day and night for not depending on others’ mercy. Similarly her mother in law also used to advise her to be a self-dependent. Daughter in-law used to respect and weigh the words of mother in-law. However, the trend has been changed. Mother in-law seems afraid of daughter in-laws. “One day when I was rinsing dishes one of my friends was teasing me. Rinse the dishes well or your mother in-law might scold you” she recalled her past. But still she loves to do what a woman has to do in the family.

Since there were no rice mills, a woman had to pound the paddy both for man and animals. Rearing and feeding of domestic animals are part and parcel of women’s domestic chores because it supports the family to maintain and sustain. So she used to go to find pig’s feed in the neighboring Meitei villages. She also used to go to cut Colocasia plants for pigs which are too itchy when its juice touched the skin. Besides pounding of paddy and feeding of pigs, she used to help her husband in the field. Husband ploughed the field and she transplanted the paddy plant in the field.

She further continued that there are some works which are unavoidable for women in the society. A woman starts her day with domestic chores. In the early morning, she sweeps and cleans the room and all before cooking. She tries to do most of the small domestic works done while cooking the food for the family. When the food was ready, a woman or a wife serves the food. After the lunch men go to his work and all.

Even after the lunch, a woman cannot rest. She has to wash the dishes clean and keep them properly in the places. She has to fetch water from the ponds. It is her duty as a married girl to serve her father and mother in-laws well. She has to make
bed for her mother and father in-laws. She has to warm water to wash the hands and feet of her in-laws when they were about to go to bed. Besides in laws, she also has to serve her husband properly. All these sort of things were taught by mother before marriage and mother in law after the marriage. However, traditionally mothers usually advise their sons to learn to control their wives well and to work hard together for a good, prosperous and plentiful family.

Before the introduction of power tiller in the village, her husband used to plough using bulls. When husbands returned from the field, she used to ready fire to warm his feet and hands before taking their foods. She tried to give her best services to the husbands. “In our family, men never serve food. Even our sons usually wait for their sisters to serve the food”, she said. Women did not leave every stone unturned to maintain the family. They tried to maintain the family whatever the problems might be. Among the Kabuis, the lives of women were pathetic. In the early morning before going to field, they used to pound the paddy and cook the lunch. After the lunch they went to the field and when they come back from the field they have to pound the paddy for the dinner again.

Apart from that, in the past, people helped each other in most of agricultural activities like transplantation and harvesting of paddy in the field. And the family used to bring Puk (foods including wines for those who were working in the field). Women had to cook the food before dawn so that they could go with men in the field.10

Akena, (52yrs) is another dream diviner of Sawombung Kabui village. She is a mother of two daughters and three sons. She possessed the divine power since she was a little girl. God used to show her different things in the dreams but hard to be
interpreted. She was in trance when one of her daughter died. She even forgot to take bath for many days. She started giving information about the persons who going to die. She used to talk about a woman named Yaimapi, a cancer patient in her village and finally the family members of Yaimapi came to her to know more about the condition of the patient. They requested her to perform the dream divination again. But it was too late for her. She died in no time.

In fact, some villagers were hardly trust her and thinking of it a lie. ‘God shows me everything that people talked about me’, she said. 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 used to consult her senior in the profession, Thaballei Kameipui. She suggested her to perform the rite of Kareng Jaijimei. Among the Kabuis, one cannot become Mangtatmei (one who performs dream divination) at will. One must perform a rite known as Kareng Jaijimei (rite to become a true dream diviner) before he/she became a dream diviner. It is a rite meant to recognize him/her as a dream diviner in the society. After the rite, a dream diviner can start the task of dream divination. In case he/she can distinguish the rice packets which meant for girls and boys in his/her first day of divination and could say something about them. Then, she/he is believed to be a person who could talk with God and a man of God. He/she is normally known as Mangtatmei (dream diviner). A dream diviner usually performs three important functions such as Mangbanmei, Mangloumei and Pumshutmei in the society. Mangbanmei is a process in which a dream diviner asks about the person or family or village to Ragang, the Almighty God whereas in the process of Mangloumei, a dream diviner asks about the dead person. And Pumshutmei is the process of bring back the soul of sick person by praying to Ragang and giving of a long life. It is believed that
life and dead of a sick person is predictable through the process of *Mangbanmei* and *Pumshutmei* (Kabui, 2012).

She requested the Pei of the village to perform the rite of *Kareng Jaijimei*. However, her family was not in the position to perform the rite because her family was in the position of hand to mouth. The rite needs more than seven fowls which are hardly affordable by her family. By the grace of God and people, the rite was performed successfully. After the rite, she used to go her guru, Namkhondai Kamei who taught her everything about the dream divination. “Though some people talked and looked suspiciously, I can live a decent life. My family is economically better than before. God gives everything to me”, she said.11

Traditionally women are taught to be subordinate not only in the family but also in different male oriented institutions like school, college, office, etc. Among the Kabuis, the social institutions like *Khangelhu* (boy’s dormitory) and *Luchu* (girl’s dormitory) are important institutions for inculcating patriarchal ideologies. All ideologies as a habitus are being internalized in one’s thought and practices through generations and in course of time misrecognized and (re)produced as the only reality. Several cultural and religious practices are also work upon the individuals to ensure the reproduction of the habitus from generation to another.

*Khangelhu* (boy’s dormitory) and *Luchu* (girl’s dormitory) traditionally work to internalize the male ideology especially among the young girls and boys. Elders used to teach young boys and girls manners, etiquette, etc. which are worth striving for in a society. In *Luchu*, young girls learn to talk, walk, sit, work and serve elders. They were taught to be sincere, honest, faithful, obedience, patience, full dedication
to duties and responsibilities. They learn to work and love each other as their own sisters in the family.

Besides moral lessons, they learn the art of maintaining and managing a family. They acquire the knowledge of husking and pounding of paddy, fetching water, cutting and collecting of firewood from the jungle, cooking food, cleaning house, washing clothes, utensils, feeding domestic animals like pigs, dogs, cow, etc. They used to learn art of spinning yarns and loin loom weaving. They also taught to help others in the society. They widely involve in community welfare services like making and cleaning of village roads and ponds. In the emergency or occurrence of epidemic or natural calamities, members of the Luchu along with Khanchhu take part and render their services to the affected people (Kamei, 2004). During Gan Ngai festival, they prepare, cook and serve foods like tea, wine, etc. in the Khanchhu. They also take part in dancing and singing in the festival. In this way they gain the knowledge of folklore and traditional dances in the Luchu. In short, among the Kabuis, almost everything taught in the dormitories.

It is often said that the young one who is tough and hard to control in the family became a good member of the society when once he or she admitted in the dormitory. Similarly, young boys also learn manners, etiquette, respect, hunting, fighting, etc. in the Khanchhu which are worthy for becoming a complete man in the society. Khanchhu and Luchu thus help in moulding the personalities of men and women in the society. And accordingly they perform their roles in the society.

In the past, everyone was very faithful to their parents. No one could go against the wishes of their parents. Females help males in agriculture besides their domestic chores like cooking, washing, cleaning, weaving, etc. The families having
large number of males are more convenient in agriculture and its allied activities. People used wine in productive ways such as in the festivals or while working sunny day in the field. Every one enjoyed the festival very much. Young people now try to fight whenever they got drunk instead of enjoying the festival. They hardly show respect to elders, said Karaona. In the early days, boys and girls in the dormitories were usually controlled by beating. Boys were beaten up with a bough of peach plant sitting in a row while girls with a plaited cloth. Traditionally Khangchu administers Luchu and two members from Khangchu, locally known as Tuna Munsinmei (care taker of girls) take care of all the affairs of girls in the Luchu. Girls in the Luchu must inform them before doing anything in the festival. Luchu usually eat after the Khangchu, she further added.

In the past, all the boys used to sleep in the Khangchu once they had been admitted. It was a duty of the boys to warm water and wash hands and feet of the elders when the winter comes. After the dinner, they used to make bed for elders and massage their bodies till they slept. They did not go to school. And elders in return learned them manners, etiquette and different ways of behaving in the society. They taught them folk tales and folk songs. They taught them their legendary stories.

However, girls used to sleep during the festival only and they were protected by two elders from the Khangchu. A hen never crows in the morning but cock does. Similarly women hardly perform the worships deities like Bukaomei, Lankaomei, Napkaomei, etc. in the family. But it doesn’t mean that women cannot perform Thousumei (the performance of worship by priest). But she cannot perform it like a man does. She must hold the fowl over the wings letting the legs hanging down
whereas a man hold the legs of the fowl and waves the fowl in simple harmonic motion while performing the worship (*Thousumei*). 13

Luguilu, 58 yrs old unmarried woman, also narrated her experiences in the *Luchu*. In the past, they used to sleep in the *Luchu*. However, nowadays it seems girls are not interested in *Luchu*. Only a few of them, leaders among the girls come by compulsion. During the festival of *Gan Ngai*, so many tasks were assigned to them both in the *Luchu* and *Khangchu*. They usually get the work done in the fear of punishment during the festival. Though the young girls were not interested in coming to *Luchu*, they love to form group of their own choice, sleep, eat and enjoy in their own ways. They hardly respect elders. Most of them seems forgot the duties and responsibilities expected by elders in the festival. Young people are now more interested to go and enjoy among themselves than performing cultural obligations and duties in the society. In this case, the leaders of girls are usually blamed for. The head of the *Khangchu* used to impose financial restrictions towards the *Luchu* as a punishment for their negligence of duties assigned to them during the festival. 14

Among the Kabuis, women have their own social and cultural institutions to perform their own roles in the society and every institution of women is under the supervision of men. For instance, the *Lakpui Kaibang* (married women’s association) is usually controlled by the institution of *Gaanchang Kaibang or Pei* of the village. Similarly *Luchu* is controlled by *Khangchu*. They perform their roles accordingly and try to resolve problems before going to higher institution, the Pei. After the marriage, a girl became a wife of a husband and a mother of a child. She became a member of the *Lakpuikaibang*. *Lakpuikaibang* (a house of married women) is one of the most important institutions in the society. It is usually accommodated in the house
of one respectable elderly woman with the consent of her husband. They assemble in the *Lakpuikaibang* whenever any issues come up regarding women in the society. They generally assemble in this house during the festival of *Nanu Ngai*. They will be helped by *Ganchang* and traditionally known as *Tuna Munsinmei*.

Two senior leaders will be selected among the married women to perform and maintain the duties and responsibilities in the society. They continue to hold their traditional post until they were promoted to the rank of *Kengjapei* (*Karapei*) or in the circumstances like death. They talk and discuss whenever necessary in the *Lakpuikaibang*. They impart knowledge of traditional dances and songs to the young married women. They are taught to develop and preserve good morality, conduct and to love and respect their husbands, mother and father in-laws, *Kaibangpei* and *Kaibangpou* (host and hostess of the married women) and other elders of the village. Whenever one is going to promote to the rank of or *Kenjapei* or *Karapei*, it is a tradition to arrange a farewell feast in the honor of the outgoing women. It is traditionally known as *Kadigangmei*. It usually associated with the presentation of folk dances by women. In case a person is died, they attend the funeral and it is a tradition to help the deceased family in the name of *Lakpuikaibang*. *Kenjapei* is a group of women who are the eldest and highest in the hierarchy of married women.

It consists of women who attained the age of about seventy or more in the society. They also have a separate institution. It is accommodated in a house. They have certain functions and duties in the society especially during the festival of *Nanu-Ngai*.

During the festival, it is customary to fetch water from the village pond or river by using the bottle of gourd for sanctification of child. They engage in piercing
the ears of the child. In the morning, they maintain and enjoy the ceremony of *Nanu Tamcha Ponmei* along *Banja* and in the evening, they sing and dance in praise of God for giving new children and for giving more children. Not only in the festival, in the past had they taken responsibility in the delivery of a child. They even took part in the ceremonies like *Najumgaimei, Nasankanmei* and *Najan Phokmei* (naming ceremony). Traditionally it is the duty and responsibility of the old women to prepare the symbolic eyes, necklace, earrings and cook for the dead person. It is also their duty to help bathing the body if the dead person is female.\(^\text{15}\)

Langanglu Maringmeilu, another unmarried (57yrs old) also narrated that they used to perform certain duties in the *Luchu* during the festival. Failed to do so was punished by beating with a rope of cloth. They were happily performed the duties assigned to them but nowadays young girls never do like that. Rather they question against the elders. So we have to make the work done or the *Khangchu* punishes them all. Nowadays parents feel bad when their children are taught discipline in a strict manner by the elders in the *Luchu* and *Khangchu*.

Youngsters want to enjoy the festival but at the same time they are not happy with the obligations and duties of the festival. Some parents are more concerned for school education of their children rather than the collectivism and sense of responsibilities acquired from the festival. So especially during the festival, *Tunapi* (leaders among the girls) always maintain and manage the situations so that no more complaint or action from the *Khangchu* against *Luchu*. When they were young, they used to sleep in the *Luchu*. They used to go jungle to collect firewood to be used in the festival before the festival under the leadership of *Tunamunsinmei* (care takers of the girls in girl’s dormitory).
They enjoyed a lot in those days but nowadays Tumamunsinmei as well as all the girls are seemed to be not interested in such things. They even not ready to come to the Luchu. It is duty of the girl’s dormitory to serve food and drink to the warriors who guard the village during the festival. They walk singing from one end of the village to another by holding spear and wearing full war outfit. They do enjoy the Pajeimei but sometimes some men disturb the occasion in the state of drunk. We are also strictly advised to look after the girls during the festival. In spite of that some girls disappeared and enjoyed themselves. Sometimes we had the complaint that some girls are told to go Luchu but they actually did not reached the Luchu at all. So it is important to take a special care during the festival especially in the Tunu Gan Lammei (in the day of dancing boys and girls).\(^1\)

Women in Kabui society have limited power not only in the administration of the family but also in the field of rights to ownership and disposal of immovable property. Though husband and wife are being united in a family by marriage, wife is still subordinate to her husband. Being a member of husband family she has certain share of ownership but only for the welfare her children. She doesn’t possess independent right of ownership. A husband however, has the very right to dispose not only the properties which brought to the husband’s place during the marriage but also all the properties acquired by her during the life time of her husband are the property of the husband (Gonthangmei, 2007).

Even the identity of women is not fixed but remains changed. In a very rare case, she has to back her parental clan if she decided to get married again or returned to parental home after divorce. A widow is entitled to retain, maintain and enjoy the property of her husband only when she wished to die herself as a wife of her deceased
husband in the family. She does not have any rights to dispose immoveable property but under certain circumstances such as payment of outstanding debts of her husband, expenditure of her children’s education, etc. she has the right to dispose of but she has to take the consent of surviving brothers and near relatives of husband before the disposal. And she loses all her privilege, rights of possession, enjoyment and disposal, etc. of property acquired from deceased husband in case she got married again with another person.

However, a divorced woman remained unmarried and set up a family of her own, the property will be inherited to an adopted son in case of adoption, father in case there is no adopted son, her full blood brother in default of father so and so forth when she died. The person who got the property will perform her funeral and all (Gonthangmei, 1993).

It is seen that a woman is defined and located in the social structure with reference to a man. The relationship may be daughter, wife or even daughter-in-law. She is not recognized as an independent being; she is considered to be incidental, an inessential in a patriarchal society. She sacrifices her life for the family but hardly counted her in a male oriented society. A man is a decision maker in the family and so does in the society. In patriarchal societies, apart from decision making and property right, women’s subordination and their inferior social positions are also reflected in their food and food culture which discusses in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 18th October 2012, Keishampat, Imphal
2 Interviewed with Mr Phaomeidun Phaomei, on 15th July 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
3 Interviewed with Mrs Pantisinglu Gonmei, on 7th October 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
4 Interviewed with Mrs Lusinglu, on 7th October 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
5 Interviewed with Mrs Chaoba Gonmeipui, on 15th April 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
6 Interviewed with Mrs Thambal, on 19th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
7 Interviewed with Miss Langanglu Maringmei, on 27th March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
8 Interviewed with Mrs Karaona Gonthangmeipui, on 20th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
9 Interviewed with Mrs Thaballei, on 23rd February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
10 Interviewed with Mrs Achanpi Maringmeipui, on 23rd March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
11 Interviewed with Mrs Akena, on 20th February 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
12 Interviewed with Mrs Karaona Gonthangmeipui, on 20th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
13 Interviewed with Mr DL Kabui, on 18th October 2012, Keishampat, Imphal
14 Interviewed with Miss Luqiuilu Gonmei, on 1st April 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
15 Interviewed with Mrs Karaona Gonthangmeipui, on 20th January 2012 at Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal and interviewed with Mrs Thambal, on 19th January 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal
16 Interviewed with Miss Langanglu Maringmei, on 27th March 2012, Sawombung Kabui Village, Imphal