CHAPTER 3: Traditional Religious Belief System of the Poumais

3.1. Introduction

From the time when man opened his eyes on this planet he has been so curious and in quest of Supreme knowledge and Supernatural powers which may give him inspiration and solace. "As and when he was compelled to face natural hardships and dangers, storms, floods, lightening, epidemics, famines, deluge, scarcity, dangerous animals, etc., man has looked up to some invisible power for assistance, motivation, strength and help. Thus, this religious tendency awoke in man when he was gripped sometimes by fear and at other times by curiosity".¹ This belief in Supernatural or unseen power profoundly influences man’s thought and effectively guides and directs human’s behaviour.

‘Religion’, from the etymological point of view Bouquet has shown, “is derived from the Latin word ‘re(l)igio’, which itself is derived from either the root leg-, which means ‘to gather, count or observe’, or from the root lig which means ‘to bind’. In the former sense the implication is belief in, and observation of, signs of divine communication. In the latter sense the implication is the performance of necessary actions which may bind together man and the Supernatural powers that be”.² The above implications clearly indicate that belief in Supernatural powers and performing religious actions or rituals are the two important components or the bases of every religion. Haralambos and Heald also wrote, “Supernatural beliefs are present in every known society. Their variety seems endless. Any definition of religion must

¹ Ram Nath Sharma, Principles of Sociology, Bombay, P.45.
encompass this variety. At its simplest, religion is the belief in the Supernatural".³

Many thinkers and writers termed the religions of tribal India as animism, Bongaism, naturalism, Totemism, worship of ancestors, etc. The early missionaries called all the non-Christians as pagans, heathens or animists. Before the coming of Christianity, the Pounais had their own traditional religious belief system. They were monotheists and they believed in the existence of a Supreme God, the creator of the universe and the provider of every good thing to mankind. They neither believed in bongaism, totemism and naturalism nor did they worship ancestors.

The traditional religion of the Pounais is known as ‘Yaosomai’. The word ‘Yaosomai’ denotes wine-drinker or wine-user. Until they uphold Christianity, rice-wine was the main source of their drink. It was also used as offering in performing their rites and ritual ceremonies and while asking for good wishes, good health, peace, joy, prosperity, protection, etc. Rice-wine was also used while appeasing God and spirits for fear of or in order to ward off unwanted forces such as sickness, diseases, natural calamities, etc. In view of the above considerations, their religion was rightly named as ‘Yaosomai’. This religion is indigenous to them. Neither it was adopted from others nor had they converted to it. Until the advent of Christianity into their world, every Pounai was born into the world of ‘Yaosomai’ and it occupies the central place in each and every aspect of life of the Pounais. They do not have written texts or scriptures. However, their simple religious philosophy is deeply engrained in their individual and social life and it influenced and controlled their attitude and activities of their life. Their religious norms and practices were embodied in their rich heritage of rites, ceremonies, customs, signs, symbols and other traditions.

3.2. Concept of God the Supreme Being

The Poumais have been monotheists, believing in the existence of one Supreme Being, the Omnipotent and the creator of the universe, known as Ramai or Mapao. He is perceived as the sustainer, the provider of everything and the giver of all blessings. The Poumais believed that Ramai lives in the heavenly realm. He is invisible. However, He is believed to be omnipresent and omniscient. He is praised and worshipped by the Poumais as the guide, protector and upholder of humans' life. "He is the judge of all humans both now and after death. So every human deed is accountable to him for he is the upholder of the future of all mankind".4

3.2.1. Concept of Spirits

Like the Christians' belief in the existence of holy angels and evil spirits, the Poumais believed in the existence of benevolent as well as malevolent spirits. The benevolent spirits are good to mankind and considered as the agent of the Supreme Being. According to K. S. Benjamin Banee, though the Poumais "worshipped only one God ... they believed that God has many agents or spirits".5 The good spirits were worshipped with loyalty, love and dedication. They are known by the names like Kirako (the spirit of dwelling house), Lurako (the spirit of paddy field), etc. Malevolent spirits known as Rashi, on the other hand, were considered to be harmful to mankind and responsible for causing sufferings, sickness, death and other calamities to human beings. Therefore, they were appeased out of fear but not worshipped by the Poumais. Dr. M. Horam, in his article 'Naga Religion: A case Study' wrote "...Spiritual repose is disturbed by the evil spirits so they believe, who also cause sufferings, sickness, misfortune and death, and in order to ward off these sufferings people propitiate the evil spirits by offering eggs, fowls, pigs,

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4 David Sha, Influence of the traditional Rites and Rituals of the Poumai Nagas on Christianity in Manipur, Thesis for the Degree of B.D., Eastern Theological College, Serampore College (University), Jorhat, Assam, 1999, P. 8.

dogs and other domesticated animals." He further said, "Evil spirits have to be propitiated so that the God of kindness and magnanimity might be comforted ... and the malevolent motives of the evil spirits may be kept in check." Rivers, cliffs, dark gorges, pits, wells, big stones, big trees, etc. were believed to be the abode of the spirits Rashi.

a) **Kaora**

Among all the evil spirits they believed to be in existing, a demon known as Kaora is the most dangerous evil spirit. It is said that the demon lives in the high rocky mountains and usually visits villages on cloudy day, mostly during dry and winter season. They believed that the visit of the demon could be seen flying across the sky like a comet and it usually perches on high trees that grew inside or beneath the village. It is believed that, Kaora takes the life of seven persons whenever it visits a village and another seven lives when it goes back. They also believed that like the human beings sacrifice cattle while performing feast of merit, Kaora also celebrate feasts and festivals during which they sacrifice human souls.

It is also believed that Kaora uses human beings as its agent for finding out the persons whose life it should take. Such persons are known as 'Rashisamai' the possessors of evil spirit. They are believed to be empowered with healing power and gifted with the knowledge of using certain herbs as medicines. Rashisamai heals the people who are infected with deferent diseases. However, at times, on the pretext of providing treatment, Rashisamai mischievously invites his superior demon and takes the life of the patient.

It is also believed that Kaora usually visits Rashisamai in late night while everyone is in deep slumber. They communicate in different and

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7 Ibid., P. 59.
8 David Sha, op. cit., P. 8.
unknown tongue like a magician spells out his magical tongue. At times, in late night demon takes its agent around the village or visit other villages and return back home before dawn. In the presence of demon, even in the very dark night Rashisamai could clearly see his way and walk comfortably without any problem.\textsuperscript{10}

In fact, such Rashisamai is totally subjugated by the demon Kaora to its wishes. It is believed that, if Rashisamai fail to perform his assigned duties or refuse to act as per the demon wishes his life would be forfeited. In such circumstances he is compelled to follow the order and act as its agent in spite of knowing that he is serving the evil spirit.

b) Fetish

The Poumai believed in the existence of fetish things, which may be a stone, an animal, a tree, a creeper, a stick, etc., which is believed to be inhabited by spirits. However, in no way such fetish things possess holy or good spirit but only evil spirits. Some of them could be tamed and made helpful to mankind. A tamed fetish is known as Vah. It is believed that they help in multiplying wealth, population of man and cattle, in carrying out war, hunting, fishing attracting woman, etc.

As mentioned in the ‘Shepoumaramth in the Naga National Movement’, there are four types of Vah, they are: 1) Mai-vah (vah of man), 2) To-vah (vah of wealth), 3) Tu-vah (vah of cattle) and 4) Reih-vah (vah of war). It is further believed that fortune comes through worship and supplication to them. If they want man, wealth, cattle, and want to win war, they worshipped Mai-vah, To-vah, Tu-vah and Reih-vah respectively. If any incident is about to happen, it is believed that vah usually gives out sign of impending incident or misfortune.

\textsuperscript{10} Interview with L. Ngao, 16/05/2006.
For instance, just on the eve of the II world war, it is said that, Reih-vah (a stone in this case) cried with strange sound and soon the war came.\textsuperscript{11}

In spite of their belief in the existence of Vah, there were only few persons who practiced fetishism. Because, Vah is very rare and appears only to the luckiest persons to whom the spirit chooses to appear. Stone fetish or Chu-vah is another common fetish reared by the people. Chu-vah is round or oval in shape with smooth surface, blackish and shining in colour. It is said that Chuvaah crawls from place to place and even breeds offsprings.\textsuperscript{12}

As per the custom of the Onaeme (Oinam) tradition, Chu-vah was usually kept under a flat stone beneath the main post ‘khatai’ of the last room. On good days Chu-vah appears and crawls out of the covered stone. Whenever Chu-vah appeared, the owner offered ginger and rice wine and would fast for the whole day. It is also believed that Chu-vah not only helps in multiplying population and promoting prosperity but also protects house from thefts by making the thief stiff and immovable when he touches the thing he wanted to steal. A story says that one day a guest was served food by the landlady. She generously offered more rice to the guest. But as the guest felt shy, he refused to accept the offer. However, after she left for fetching water the guest wanted to have more rice and as he puts his hand inside the rice pot it was stuck and could not pull his hand back. When the lady returned, she offered ginger and rice-wine to the Chun-vah. Then only the guest was released.\textsuperscript{13} About the source of the stone Chu-vah, Milanda Ganguli wrote, “They were brought to their villages by warriors probably hundred years ago who found them while marching through forests or mountain streams or by the side of a river bank”.\textsuperscript{14}

It is also believed that a fetish or magical stone known as ‘Tavang’ which means ‘stone pig’ named after it’s shape once existed in the village of

\textsuperscript{11} The Shepoumaramth in the Naga National Movements, Published by Shepoumaramth Region, GPRN, 1995, P. 19.
\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Seiba Dazii, 07/08/2006.
\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Shanglong Ngaoni, Th. Raoping Tao, and Ng. Longkhyia, 15/09/2005.
\textsuperscript{14} Milanda Ganguli, A Pilgrimage to the Nagas, Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1984, P. 74.
Onaeme (Oinam). It inhabits at the southern end of ‘Zhi’, a water stagnant place. The stone was well known as the provider of rain. During cultivating season when there was drought or shortage of water the villagers proclaimed a day of genna known as Dukhai. On that day, the stone was dug up above the ground and rituals known as ‘dukhai’ to propitiate the Tavang were performed. It is interesting to note that the propitiation did involve neither sacrificing nor offering of any living being but decorating the site of the stone with monkey and wild animal skulls, wooden poles, tattered clothes, branches of trees, chicken cages, etc. Taking all these materials the village male folks marched towards the site of the ‘Tavang’, chanting their traditional vo ‘Oh....hao’ they decorated around the Tavang. It is believed that heavy rain and storm will immediately follow even before the completion of placing their magical decorating materials at proper places.\textsuperscript{15} However, with the rapid advancement of Christianity in the area the spirited stone had disappeared from the site.

Another magical or lucky stone was believed to be at ‘Dhore’, a path to paddy field at Onaeme (Oinam), which is about 250 ft. long steps well constructed with thousands of big and small boulders. As per their beliefs, one of the thousands of boulders possesses the fortune of male population. Whoever stepped over the stone was believed to procreate a male child. As such, in absence of male child, the women of the village as well as the neighbouring villages often tried their luck by walking up and down the steps in order to put their feet over that particular magical boulder.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, a fetish stone was believed to be brought by the forefathers of Khongdai at the time of their departure from Makhel and that it is still lying below the piled up stones inside the Khongdai Khuman village. It is strictly forbidden to touch the stone. It is believed that breach of the restriction causes storm and rain in the region and the person who touches the stone without

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Saothe Soni, 16/08/05.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
proper rites will go mad. Even to this day, when the villagers need rain they performed certain rites and lift up that magical stone above others.\(^{17}\)

3.3. Place of worship

The Poumai did not have their fixed place of worship. Their worship took place wherever they feel suited or required to do or as per the direction given by the priest or diviner or visioner.

Sacrifices of animals and offerings were made to placate and propitiate the Supreme Being as well as other deities. Such ritual sacrifices and offerings were performed at home and paddy fields to propitiate the *Kirako* (house deity) and *Lurako* (deity of the paddy fields) respectively. For the malevolent spirits sacrifices and offerings were made where the spirits were believed to dwell or to frequent. The propitiation of *Ramai* (the Supreme Being) was done at any suitable place except the places which were considered to be the abode of evil spirits. Z. A. S. Akhui rightly pointed out: "They (tribal) do not have any fixed place to worship and never worship idols. Offerings and sacrifices are made at any place in the house, on the roads, under the tree, upon a rock, by the river side, at the paddy field and other places where spirits are expected to have their abode or expected to visit."\(^{18}\)

3.4. Mode of worship

There was no written rule of law or doctrine of the Poumai traditional religion. However, their religious activities were well regulated within the boundaries of unwritten rules and codes of religious conduct. Prayers, offerings, sacrifices, gennas, taboos, etc. formed the main modes of worshiping God and deities. These activities were performed either to propitiate and win the favour of God and deities for good health, prosperity, protection from

\(^{17}\) Interview with Tunthah, 10/04/2006.

sicknesses and all other impending dangers including natural calamities, etc. or to placate and appease the evil spirits that harmed or may harm them. Among all the religious activities, prayer, offerings and sacrifices form the heart and core of their worshiping God and there was not even a single day that went without a prayer and an offering. Offering of pieces of food and drops of wine along with a few seconds of silent prayer before every meal and drink were the common norm. According to Asoso Yunuo, these offerings of food and wine signify their way of expressing gratitude to God. Offerings and prayers were also part and parcel of every rite, ritual and genna without which any rite, ritual or genna was considered neither completed nor acceptable to God. As such, various offerings were performed on different occasions with different materials including meat fish, egg, ginger, iron piece, charcoal, pieces of cloth, etc.

Further, animal sacrifice, though it was not performed often as prayer and other offerings, occupies one of the most important parts in their religious practices. According to Britannica Reddy Ref. Encyclopaedia, “the motivation for sacrifice is to perpetuate, intensify or reestablish a connection between human and the divine”. The Poumais also regarded animal sacrifice as the most effective way of propitiating God or deities and placating or appeasing spirits. For sacrifices, the Poumais mostly used buffalo, cow, ox, dog, pig, chicken, etc.

3.5. Traditional Religious Functionaries

Traditionally the life of the Poumais was closely associated with a number of religious gennas, sacrifices, offerings, rites and rituals. These activities were taken care of and performed by a number of religious functionaries who were designated with different names and positions. They

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were Vhe (village Chief), Napao (priest), Ngumai (shaman) and Pousoumai (diviner), whose activities are being discussed as follows.

3.5.1. The Village Vhe (Chief)

The Vhe is the overall religious head and the chief priest of the village, under whom all the religious activities of the village are performed.\(^{21}\) As the chief priest, he is expected to be well versed about the religious calendar and announce all the days of village gennas, religious ceremonies, feasts and festivals. All these occasions are opened and conducted by the Vhe by performing certain rites and rituals and worshipping God and deities on behalf of the villagers.\(^ {22}\) During these days the Vhe remains chaste and on fast by taking rice-wine and abstaining from solid food. In case of a sudden genna when there is no rice-wine he takes only water mixed with yeast which is known as ‘khabaopao’ or Kheibaopo.\(^ {23}\) He also fasts on the first day of every month. He is the person who inaugurates ploughing of land (deidaosou), sowing of seeds, transplanting paddy and harvest before any villager has done so.\(^ {24}\) Besides, he also observes a number of restrictions and taboos. All those activities are strictly performed by him in order to gain the favour of God and other deities for the well being and prosperity of the villagers on the one hand and on the other to ward off sickness, poverty, natural calamities and other dangers that may be fallen upon the villagers or the village as a whole.

3.5.2. Napao (Priest)

For the Poumais, Napao (a priest) is the master of religious rites and rituals of the village community. As such, in every Poumai village there is a Napao who is responsible for performing a number of important rites and rituals for the community as well as individuals. It may be noted that there is no

\(^{21}\) Interview with S. P. Henry, 14/04/2006.
\(^{22}\) Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.
\(^{23}\) Interview with Shanglong Ngaoni, 11/09/2005.
\(^{24}\) Interview with Woba Khazi, 08/08/2006.
priestly class or clan among the Poumais as is the case with ancient Jews and the Hindus. A priest is usually chosen among the old retired persons who have good knowledge and are well versed about the religious ceremonies, rites and rituals of the community. He is to be selected and appointed by the public. The office of priest is not hereditary. He holds the office as long as the community has confidence on him and he has the zeal to serve the community.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Napao} is the chief intermediary between God and the Poumai people. He is consulted in every important occasion, personal or communal.\textsuperscript{26} Though there is the chief priest i.e. the village chief, \textit{Napao} performs all the ceremonial sacrifices of the village community. In killing of ritual animals such as cows and buffaloes it is the \textit{Napao} who spear the animal first and then only others joined the process of killing the animal. Besides, he performs a number of prestigious rites and rituals such as marriage, feast, festivals, etc. which are out of the jurisdiction of the chief priest. In return, he is provided a basketful of paddy, lump of meat, etc. as the charge of his service.\textsuperscript{27} Whenever, a villager kills a wild animal a portion of the meat is reserved for him.\textsuperscript{28} However, for religious sanctity he is forbidden to take certain meat such as dog, cat, tiger, monkey, eagle, sparrow, shallow, etc.\textsuperscript{29}

Besides \textit{Napao}, there is a lower priest called \textit{Khuhiro} in some Poumai villages. "\textit{Khuhiro} acts as the assistant of the higher priest (\textit{Napao}). He is the one who performs the rites or rituals which are regarded as indecent or unwanted. Certain rites such as burial of persons who died of unnatural causes, digging of grave, etc. are performed by the \textit{Khuhiro}".\textsuperscript{30} In the villages where there is no \textit{khuhiro}, the old men of the village perform all the indecent and unwanted rites.

\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
\textsuperscript{26} David Sha, op. cit., P. 21.
\textsuperscript{27} Interview with Saohe Sone, 16/08/2005.
\textsuperscript{28} David Sha, op. cit., P. 21.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
\textsuperscript{30} David Sha, ibid., op. cit. P. 21.
About the domestic rites and rituals, it is the head of the household or family mainly the father, who acts as the household priest and performs them. "Household sacrifices like clearing the fields, sowing seeds, harvest, birth of any domestic animal, etc. are performed by the father." In case of the father's absence, it is the mother who takes the place of the father. There are also certain exceptional rituals like Baoloutou, Laonii Soukii, etc. which are reserved for the mother to perform. In the absence of the mother the eldest daughter usually takes over the mother's place in performing the rituals.

3.5.3. Ngumai (Shaman)

Ngumai (Shaman) is a medicine man or a witch doctor who is believed to be having healing power and the knowledge of treating illness. "Both Colonel McCulloch and Dr. Brown identify the village priest with the maiba who is a doctor and magician in one". In fact, a priest for the Poumais is an aged man who simply performs sacrifices for the people. The Ngumai, on the other hand, may either be a man or a woman who is believed to possess certain power or spirit of 'ngu' that helps him or her to tell the past, the present and predict the future of a person. The Ngumai can tell which spirit causes sickness. To cure it, he prescribes the necessary living as well as non-living materials to be offered or animals to be sacrificed to the spirit that caused sickness. He also makes use of certain herbs of jungle as medicines to heal sickness. It is said that, at times, with his naked mouth the Ngumai sucks at the painful area and produces certain materials like stones, rubber, tuff of hairs, etc. which are believed to cause the pain in the patient.

The ngumai thus plays a very important role in the traditional religious life of the Poumais and he is respected by all. However, the great disadvantage of ngumai is that, the people believe whosoever possesses this power would

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31 Ibid., P. 22.
32 Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 13/02/2005.
34 Shanglong Ngaoni and Thang Raoping, Tao, 16/08/05.
either have no children or if he has any already, the child will die.\textsuperscript{35} It is also said, "...usually their life was not prosperous; they were usually poor; miserable and besides, they could not know themselves about their own fate or future as they knew for others."\textsuperscript{36}

3.5.4. Pousoumai (Diviner)

\textit{Pousoumai} is another religious functionary who plays an important role in the traditional religious life of the Poumai. Like \textit{Ngumai} he is also known as the lifesaver and a mediator between man and God or spirits. He is a man well versed in performing divination with the help of a bamboo known as 'Pousou'. Pousou is an act of breaking bamboo splits by invoking God's or spirit's name and asking the information he wants to know. By observing the signs of fibers produced at the end of the broken bamboo splits he tells the reasons why a person felt sick, which spirit causes the sickness and what materials or animals need to be offered or sacrificed to the offended spirit. He also prescribes the process of rites to be followed and the place where the offerings or sacrifices of animals shall be done. Like \textit{Ngumai} he can foretell the future by performing pousou. Whenever a new village site, plot site, paddy field or jhum field is selected he performs pousou and predicts what luck and fate will be met if the new site is utilized. Pousou is also done before going for war, traveling to a far destination, going for hunting, etc. to predict all the good or bad things one has to face in the mission he has to take up.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, the \textit{Pousoumai} plays a very important role in the society and he is respected by the villagers.

\textsuperscript{35} Interview with Thang Phuping, 10/02/2005.


\textsuperscript{37} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 16/08/05.
3.6. Traditional Rites and Rituals

The word 'Rite' is derived from the French word 'Rit' and Latin word 'Ritus' which means 'a solemn act of religion' or 'an act performed in divine or solemn service'\textsuperscript{38} According to Oxford Advance Learner’s dictionary, 'rite' is a religious or other solemn ceremony and 'ritual' is the action that is always done at a fixed time and in the same way, specially as part of a religious or other ceremony.

Human beings practice rites and rituals since time immemorial to express their sense of gratitude and to win the favour of their God and deities or spirits in times of need. According to Raghuvir Sinha, the rituals are to appease God, to secure their blessings for thanksgiving, to mark supremacy in kinship as well as in atonement of some wrongful act. It forms a sort of communication between man (human) and God.\textsuperscript{39}

Rites and rituals are the important components of the Poumai traditional religious life. Their purpose and intention of performing rites and rituals are to appease and pray for well being, multiplication of population of both human and domestic animals, fertility of soil, healthy growth and abundant yield of crops, success in hunting, fishing and warfare, for protection from sickness, danger, misfortune, for atonement of wrongful act etc.\textsuperscript{40} According to the New Encyclopaedia Britannica, in any sacrificial rite a number of goals or intentions may be expressed, yet the ultimate goals of all sacrifice is to establish a beneficial relationship with the sacred order, to make the sacred power present and efficacious.\textsuperscript{41}

3.6.1. Rite – De – Passage

Right from birth to grave a series of rites are performed for every Poumai son and daughter. There is a belief that non-performance of proper rite

\textsuperscript{38} David Sha, op. cit., P. 16.
\textsuperscript{39} Raghuvir Sinha, Religion and Culture of North East India, 1977, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{40} M. C. Arun, R. Ngupani & others, op. cit., P. 49.
\textsuperscript{41} 'Sacrifice', The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropædia, Vol. 16, 1974, p. 132.
of a person can make him mentally abnormal, physically infected with diseases and even shorten the life of the person. Such persons are considered incomplete and looked down upon by the society. As such, it is obligatory to ceremonize everyone with proper rites at the different stages of life.

3.6.2. Rite on Child Birth

The birth of a child is followed by a number of rites and restrictions. As soon as a new baby appears the father touches its head and claims "it is mine" or else evil spirit may claim and reserve the baby’s life and the baby may not survive for long. After the child is delivered the umbilical cord is tied with a fiber and with a bamboo knife the cord is cut off. Then the placenta is put in an earthen pot and it is either buried at the birth place or hung on a tree or tied at the backside wall of the house with another pot kept lying over it. The flow of blood at the delivery site is properly checked from touching or crossing by any one lest it develops sour relationship between the mother and the person. Once a baby is delivered, all the stored water is abandoned and only fresh water will be used in a gesture that signifies removing of evil spirits and impending sicknesses. While fetching water, spill of it is carefully avoided lest the child suffer from frequent vomiting.

As a birth rite, a hen if the baby is a girl or a rooster in case of boy is strangled. While strangling, the crossing of the chicken’s legs is observed. It is considered good if the right leg of the chicken crosses over the left and that if the appendix faces towards the anus the child will live a long and prosperous life. For the birth of a baby the family observes a five days genna. During those days, the family members abstains from eating certain vegetables and the meat of any animal that is slaughtered for funeral, killed by wild beast, etc. Sharpening of knife or any iron implement is avoided as they believe that it

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42 David Sha, op. cit., P. 24.
43 Interview with Saothe Railang, 06/01/2007.
44 Interview with R. Baanai, 09/08/2006.
prevents growing of the baby. Talking to or entertaining outside villagers is forbidden for fear of inviting evil spirits.

3.6.3. Zihsayu-Nae (Naming rite)

Zihsayu-Nae of a baby is performed on the next day of delivery. It is also the day of taking the baby to light for the first time. For the rite, a blameless cock or hen as per the baby’s sex is strangled. While strangling, the crossing of the right leg of the strangled chicken over the left indicates a peaceful, prosperous and long life for the baby.

A grown up boy or girl as per the sex of the baby administers the performing of the rite. Holding a bunch of lighted bamboo and pine wood with one hand and the baby’s hand with another, he calls out the name to be given to the baby, as ‘Pou-o (baby’s name), teizhihei bungere, teivahei palaikhe’, (Pou-o, it is tired of staying in dark, let us go to light) and takes the baby to the threshold of the main door. There they sit until the lighted fire went down.\(^{45}\)

Naming is followed by taking the baby to neighbour’s house and make the baby hold a thing for the first time. It is believed that holding of a seittou (a typical small bird) will turn the baby to a good orator and critic, if it is a plantain shoot he will live a cool, clean and peaceful life and a prosperous life in case of a spoon.\(^{46}\)

3.6.4. Laoyu-Nae (Child sanctification rite)

Laoyu-Nae is one of the most important ritual ceremonies in the life of a child. It is a ceremony of sanctifying the newly born child and seeking God’s blessings for well being of the child and on the other hand admitting the child to the society. It is obligatory on the part of the parents to perform this ceremony for every child. Traditionally, this rite was performed five times for every male child and four times for female child. According to Khosai, if this

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\(^{45}\) Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.

\(^{46}\) Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 19/07/06.
ceremony is not performed or not properly performed the child will become mentally defected.\textsuperscript{47}

In performing the ceremony, a rooster or a hen as per the sex of the baby is strangled in the early morning and the signs of its crossing legs and direction of appendix are observed. If both the cases show negative signs another chicken will be strangled. It is also important to note that, on this day only fresh water is used and spill of any food including soup and wine into fire is strictly prevented lest the child faces misery and poverty in future. During the ceremony it is obligatory to provide special hospitality to the child. Offerings and prayer to the Supreme Being and deities are the usual features of the ceremony.\textsuperscript{48}

During the day, relatives, neighbours and friends are invited and offered rice-wine. When evening comes the children of the khel join the feast and enjoy the food and drinks of the ceremony to their hearts’ content. It is obligatory for everyone who joins the feast to bless the child. This day onwards the child becomes a bonafide member of the society.

\textbf{3.6.5. Loutouyu (Sanctification of Boys)}

\textit{Loutouyu} is a male sacramental ceremony performed during \textit{Laonii} festival by the male children of about 3-5 years of age. It is also known as a ceremony of presentation of the boys as befitting members to society.

According to Thozii Nakhu-o, \textit{Loutou} is performed in the strictest possible manner and with utmost care. It is mandatory for the performer to sacrifice a blameless cock, use fresh water fetched by males from a newly excavated pond, light new fire in the traditional way, cook food on new hearth with new pots. Spilling of soup and food into fire is carefully prevented. In the

\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Lani Khosai, 1/09/2005.
\textsuperscript{48} Interview with Thang Phuping, 10/02/2005.
evening, the left over food are to be thrown away and all the utensils are left hanging under the roof of the porch.\textsuperscript{49}

However, the most important part of this ritual is the sanctification rite administered by Meshimai (a man who had performed the feast of merit). He soaks a pair of ‘lou’ plant (a scented herb) and dabs the children on all their joints such as toe, knee, elbow, including head and will bless the child saying: “May you be strong, brave, victorious over enemies, shine as bright as the Moon and the Sun”. Then, the boys who participated in the sanctification rite offer a chicken each to God at the village gate to obviate sickness, misfortune and death.\textsuperscript{50}

Once a boy had performed ‘Loutou’, he is treated as a bonafied male and is entitled to enjoy the privilege and status of an adult man in the village.\textsuperscript{51} Since then, he is restricted to move under the weaving looms, touch weaving implements, avoid crossing of his legs by women, etc. It is believed that breach of the taboos will infect him with ‘reihravu’ which means he will suffer from inability to run when he goes for war, will fall easily and be killed by his enemy.\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{3.6.6. Siitaopo}

\textit{Siitaopo} is a ritual ceremony usually performed during Laonii festival by a group of bachelors exclusively of a dormitory. However, it is not obligatory for every bachelor to perform the ritual ceremony. According to P. D. Shelly, the ritual is generally performed on the sixth day of Laonii known as ‘Veih’ and it is a sign of staying ahead of their enemies. For the ritual ceremony, a pig is killed and a very big wooden post about 20-25 feet height is erected. The head of the post is dressed with evenly cut straws. Well-sharpened bamboo pins pined with pieces of pig’s fat are struck around the

\textsuperscript{49} Interview with Thozii Nakhnu, 06/11/2006.
\textsuperscript{50} S. P. Henry, Laonii: The Customary Festival of the Poumai Nagas, (unpublished article).
\textsuperscript{51} Commemoration of 50\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of India’s Independence – 1997, Senapati District, P. 2.
\textsuperscript{52} Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.
straw head of the erected post. In the middle of the straw head a very pointed bamboo stick pined with a chunk of fat is properly fixed. Thereafter, if any eagle is found struck to death with the pins while diving down to pick the meat, it is interpreted as a good omen and considered as if an enemy’s soul had been killed.

A piece of the sacrificial meat is distributed to every male who have performed ‘Loutou’. The meat is kept hanging at the eve of the front house. If ants are found feeding over the meat it is believed that enemies’ souls are feeding on it and their enemies shall be easily won by them.\(^{53}\) The people of Onaeme (Oinam), Ngamju, Tingsong, etc. performed this ritual ceremony during Sinya or Sounii that falls in the month of Sitho/Khoniikhou (April).\(^{54}\)

3.6.7. Shiheiy-Nae (Marriage rite)

To the Poumais, marriage is not merely a social contract but it has religious implications. As such, a series of rites are performed to solemnize marriage. The first and the foremost marriage rite is performed before a proposal is made. When a girl is chosen, the boy’s parents offer wine and ginger to their deity invoking him to tell whether the girl will be suitable to be their daughter-in-law or not. They also pray for divine wishes through dreams. If they had a good dream, proposal is put forward and final engagement follows only if the girl’s parents also have good dream and wishes. At the time of final engagement, as per their tradition a gourd of rice-wine and a spade are to be presented to the girl’s parents as a mark of final betrothal act.\(^{55}\)

On the marriage day, the priestess offers wine to the deity and initiates the sending off of the bride by pulling her. As the bride reaches to her destination and enters the groom’s house, she is led to step over an iron piece that is kept lying along the threshold. It is believed that stepping over an iron

\(^{53}\) Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.

\(^{54}\) Interview with Railang Thio, 12/09/2005.

\(^{55}\) M.C. Arun, & others, op. cit., P. 54.
piece provides peaceful and lasting family life. Then, the couple is given a cup each of plantain leave filled with rice-wine. They offer drops of wine to their deity and after having a sip or two they exchange their cups as a mark of their mutual love, respect and commitment to each other in good faith. Thereafter, the bride allows her groom to cross over her legs as a sign of her submission to him.\textsuperscript{56}

On the next day the groom will go to field to catch some \textit{dumukhao} or \textit{Khani} (a type of small fish). The caught fishes are then cook in a piece of earthen pot with thatch fire and on a newly set up hearth. With the help of toes the bride lifts down the pot and offers the fishes to their house deity. The whole day the couple remains abstaining from solid food except wine.\textsuperscript{57}

For the first five days of marriage the couple observes strict genna. They do not share bed and remain chaste. No chicken is allowed to fly over them and no stone should be thrown over them lest the couple confront frequent quarrelling, which may lead to divorce. In the early morning of the fifth day the couple takes ritual bath form the village public pond and during daytime they go to paddy field and mark their first tilling of the field that is gifted to them. With this they became bonafied husband and wife and start enjoying the bliss of family life.\textsuperscript{58}

3.6.8. Rites on Death and Disposal of dead body

The Poumais believed in the existence of soul and life after death. Physical death is not considered as the real death but a journey to the land of souls. Therefore, when someone dies proper rites and offerings are made for the living soul.

\textsuperscript{56} David Sha, op. cit., P. 26.
\textsuperscript{57} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 19/07/06.
\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Saothe Soni and Railing Thio, 14/02/2005.
As a rule, when a person dies, the dead body is washed by the Khuhrosou (lower priest) or by an elderly man or woman. Sometimes washing of death body used to be delayed till the next day, believing that once the dead body is washed the person will never rise again. On the death of a man or woman of honour a day of village genna is observed. However, for an ordinary person a day of genna is observed only by the concerned khel. In case of children, no village or khel genna is required. It is obligatory on the part of the bereaved family to observe five days genna for the death of every family member irrespective of age.

Cattle, mostly cows are slaughtered on funeral. As per their belief the souls of the slaughtered cattle will accompany the departed soul. For a hunter, usually a dog is killed in order that its soul will guard him from the attacks of the beasts he killed while he was alive.

For disposal of dead body, the Poumais follow burial system in which Napao plays a very important role. It is the Napao who inaugurates digging of grave then only other join the process. He also starts a thatch fire inside the grave before the coffin is lifted down. Spear, shield, dao, male basket, clothes, etc. are usually buried along with male corpse and in case of woman, cotton, spinning and weaving implements, carrying basket, clothes, iron staff, rain protection sheet, etc. are buried. For a king or a man of honour a live rooster is usually buried with in a cave like space dug along the side of the corpse with an air passage pipe projected above the ground. They believe that at times crowing of the buried rooster is heard through the pipe. The Poumais believed that dead men continue to live another life with the materials that are buried with them.

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59 Interview with Woba Khazi, 08/08/2006.
60 Interview with Kadu Daihrii, 01/10/2006.
62 Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 19/07/06.
63 Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.
After burying the corpse, Napao comes back to the house of the deceased and cleans the hearth by removing the old stone oven of the hearth along with the ashes. Then he erects a new stone oven and sets a new fire in it. The family’s clothes are flipped over the fire. These acts of cleaning and sanctification signify the sanctification of the house so that dead may not occur again in the family.\textsuperscript{64}

A child who dies within five days of birth is wrapped in cloths and put in an earthen pot and buried under the floor of the living room without any ceremony except a day of genna observed by the family. Such disposal of dead body is termed as ‘ngaire’ (forgotten).\textsuperscript{65} Deaths caused by drowning, hanging, burning, suicide, attack by wild beast, falling from tree, etc. are termed as ‘Thaisi’ (unnatural death). They are treated with utmost contempt and humiliation and their souls are supposed to be death forever. No auspicious funeral ceremony is performed in such cases. Their bodies are forbidden to carry inside the village but buried outside. A woman who is about to die in labour is pulled out of the house through a back door or an outlet cut through the wall before she breathes last. Such dead bodies are buried outside without coffin as well as ceremony. It is also taboo to cry on such death.\textsuperscript{66} Burying the corpse of unnatural death is done either by the napao or by one of the eldest men in the village. Younger persons are restricted to touch the corpse lest such death may befall upon them.\textsuperscript{67}

3.6.9. \textit{Koh} (Farewell to departed Souls)

The Pounais believed in the existence of life after death. The life after death is the life of departed souls who will be living in the land of death. Therefore, ‘Koh’ (farewell to departed souls) is performed as a ritual ceremony to bid farewell to all the departed souls of the particular year. This ritual ‘koh’

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{64} David Sha, op. cit., P. 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Interview with Kadu Dailrri, 01/10/2006.
\end{itemize}}
is performed once in a year particularly in the month of Doniikhou (November/December), the last month of the year.\textsuperscript{68}

For this ritual ceremony the bereaved family brews special rice-wine and slaughters cattle. Rich family usually slaughters a cow or a buffalo whereas a poor family may opt for a dog or a pig. A chicken is offered for small children. On the day of Koh relatives and friends of the deceased offer rice wine to the departed soul and the villagers pay their last respect to the departed souls. Relatives and friends offer a handful of rice to the bereaved family and in return they were given a chunk of meat each.\textsuperscript{69}

As evening approaches, the departed souls are sent off with a gourd of special rice-wine arranged for each of them. The gourds of rice-wine are kept in line at the village gate with big gourds in the first and last of the line and small ones in the middle. This arrangement symbolizes the elders go first and last and the small children in the middle in order to protect the children from the attack by their enemies on their way to the land of death.\textsuperscript{70}

While performing this farewell ceremony, every villager comes out of the house in order to get away and free from all evil spirits. Then all the left over food, rice-wine and water are thrown away. This symbolizes freeing the family from all impending sicknesses and death. It is believed that unless this ritual is performed the souls of the death persons continue to live with the family members. As such, food and wine are usually served for them on all the special occasions.\textsuperscript{71} Once the ritual is performed the souls are believed to have gone permanently to the land of death and thereafter no food and drink are necessary to serve nor is any other ritual required to be performed.

\textsuperscript{68} M.C. Arun, R. Ngupani & others, op. cit., P. 53.
\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Saothe Sone, 16/08/2005.
\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Railang Thio, 12/09/2005.
3.7. Rites on selection and establishment of a new village

Traditionally, selection of a new village site was done by a team of leaders who move out carrying a blameless cock and a Reih-vah (sacred stone). The place where Seitou and Moh (typical small birds) chirp in high pitch and the cock they are carrying along with crows is considered the place sanctioned by God for their habitation. When such a place is found the leader of the team and the ‘Pousoumai’ (diviner) perform the first rite called ‘vousei’ (offering of ginger pieces to the land deity) and a fire is set on at the site. If the smoke of the fire rises up straight and later bent eastward, is taken as a good sign. Then, the Pousoumai seeks divine wishes through ‘Pousou’ (divination). When both the smoke and Pousou give positive signs the site is selected for establishment of a new village.

After selecting a site, the sacred stone ‘Reih-vah’ is placed on the ground. It is taboo to remove the stone once it is placed at a particular site. Then, two tiny temples known as ‘Rapao’ are built nearby the Reih-vah. Thereafter, the Chief’s house is also built beside the Reih-vah followed by the house of the Pousoumai and then that of the common villagers.

According to K. Daihrii, while establishing a new village, a blameless pig is sacrificed at the new village site. Even without removing hairs the sacrificial meat is cut into pieces and distributed to all the big trees that grew over the site and big stones that lay around there. While distributing the meat, he will say: “Take this meat, we will stay and live together”. Then, the remaining meat is cooked in a new pot without any salt and chilly and performed a ritual ‘Sousei’ (offering of pieces of meat) saying, ‘let the life here be prosperous and populated as much as the pig’s hairs.’ This ritual is mainly to appease the spirits that dwell among the big trees and stones at the site and

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72 Interview with S. P. Henry, 05/04/2006.
73 Interview with Shanglong Ngaoni, 09/02/06.
74 Interview with Kadu Daihrii, 01/10/2006.
75 Interview with S. P. Henry, 05/04/2006.
76 Interview with Kadu Daihrii, 01/10/2006.
the pork cooked without chilly and salt signifies a cool and peaceful life over the new land.

3.7.1. Rites on Construction of the Chief’s House

Construction of the Chief’s house requires a number of rites and processes to be followed. All the materials to be used in the construction of the house are to be arranged on the day of construction itself. Once the construction works are started the Chief and his wife remain chaste for five days. The persons who are engaged in collection of materials for the house construction also abstain from sex. The posts or beams to be used in the construction of the house are arranged from the tree that does not have any defect at any of its parts.\(^77\) It is also to be noted that while constructing the Chief’s house, females and outsiders are totally restricted to come nearby the surroundings of the house until the construction is completed.\(^78\) When the frame of the house is erected, a person who lives a virtuous life walks over the main frame above the middle pillars starting from the posterior end. In case the person fails to reach the anterior end, the house construction is considered taboo.\(^79\)

The most significant part in the construction of the Chief’s house is that offering sacrificial human’s head to the house deity as a part of propitiation and prayer for protection. In case of failure in obtaining human’s head, a lock of human’s hairs or a piece of cloth clandestinely brought from outside the village was used to propitiate the house spirit in place of head.\(^80\) It is also important to note that all the adult male members of the village participated in the construction work of the Chief’s house and the construction work is to be

\(^{77}\) Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 13/02/2005.
\(^{79}\) David Sha, op. cit., P. 33.
\(^{80}\) Interview with Shanglong Ngaoni, 16/08/2005.
completed on the day it is started. The day of construction the Chief’s house is observed as no work day by all the villagers.\textsuperscript{81}

3.7.2. Houvahzii (Raokhakha)

Traditionally, Houvahzii or Raokhakha was one of the most common rituals practiced by the Poumais. This ritual was usually performed to express gratitude to God on completion of a big task, on birth of a son, etc. It is also performed as a way and means of sanctification from sin, sickness, diseases and also as worship of God before taking up a big task.\textsuperscript{82}

For this ritual, special rice-wine is prepared and generally a young boy administers the ritual as a priest. In the early morning of the ritual day the boy strangle a blameless rooster and the crossing of its legs is properly observed. The right leg crossing over the left is considered a good sign. Then, the beat, tail, tips of the wings and toes of the rooster are cut out and pined on bamboo pins which are then struck around a bounded bunch of leaves known as ‘Poudii’ or ‘Pohlao’ specially arranged for the purpose. Some bamboo pins smeared with the rooster’s blood are also struck around the bunch. Thereafter, with a prayer, the ‘Poudii’ or ‘Pohlao’ is put up somewhere near by the village gate. This signifies that the Poudii carries away all the impending misfortunes and sicknesses to be happened to the family. On this day, cooking of the chicken as well as rice is carefully done so as to prevent spilling of soup into fire. Then, neighbouring elderly males are invited, who join the ritual process of offering drops of wine and pieces of chicken to the household deity and perform the ritual cry known as Raokhakha.

On this day, the family members are restricted to take any vegetable, fish or meat other than the chicken that is killed for the ritual purpose. This ritual day is observed as a genna day and the family members abstained from

\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 16/08/05.
\textsuperscript{82} Interview with Railang Thio and Th. Raoping Tao, 14/02/2005.
doing any field work including gardening, washing cloths, collecting fire wood, etc. 83

3.7.3. Kidzii

The Pounais believed in the existence of both male and female deities. Kidzii is a ritual performed by the mother or the eldest person of the family to worship and appease both the male and female deities of the household. It is usually performed in the evening beneath the main or middle pillar of the last room. Offerings of ginger, rice-wine and 30 pieces of meat as ‘Paokhao’ (offering made for the male deity) and 20 pieces of meat as ‘Paikhao’ (offering made for the female deity) are made. 84 After performing the ritual, it is taboo to eat or drink anything and talking to any outsider till dawn. It is believed that breach of the taboo will invite misfortune or poverty in the family. 85

3.8. Agricultural rites

The Pounais are agriculturalists and their livelihood solely depends on agriculture. B. C. Allen had commented as, “Since the old traditional agriculture was the main occupation of the hill men, their entire way of living was agriculture oriented. Their social and religious activities were ultimately connected with agricultural pursuits. Each agricultural operation e.g. tilling, sowing or harvesting was accompanied with or followed by village festivals … Festivals were accompanied with religious ceremonies and sacrifices. The villagers then prayed for rich harvest, for warding of natural calamities like draught, storm, hailstorms and epidemics.” 86 As such, from tilling and sowing of seeds to harvest and consuming of crops they perform various rites and rituals. Some of their important agricultural rituals are briefed as below.

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83 Interview with Satothe Sone, 16/08/2005.
84 Interview with P. D. Shelly, 20/09/2006.
85 Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, 10/02/2005.
86 B. C. Allen, Naga Hills and Manipur (Socio Economic History), Gyan Publications, Delhi, 1981, P. 79.
3.8.1. *Deidaosou*

*Deidaosou* means ‘digging or tilling of land’. It is the first agricultural ritual of the year performed in the month of *Doroupokhou* (November), after completion of harvest and before tilling of any field is started. This ritual is associated with the last annual festival *Baoloutou*, a festival of tasting newly harvested paddy.\(^\text{87}\) The ritual *deidaosou* is performed on the second day of the *baoloutou* festival, on which inauguration of tilling paddy field is done by the village Chief or in some villages by the village priest. In the early morning the Chief goes down to paddy field and offers drops of wine and pieces of ginger to God. He then prays, "*O Ramai, deidaoho pa delavei daolou-o*” meaning “O God, as we start ploughing may we be ploughed the magic land”. Then, he digs out some soil in the field. This is followed by the villagers who perform similar *deidaosou* ritual for every of their paddy field.\(^\text{88}\)

3.8.2. *Taimouthou*

According to the tradition of the Poumains, the first sowing of annual seeds is started with the performance of *Taimouthou* ritual. Before this ritual is performed none of the villager is expected to sow any seed. *Taimouthou* is the seed-sowing rite performed at the end of the *Taithounii* or *Rounii* (seed sowing festival) that falls in the month of *Roupakhou* (February/March). On the last day of the festival the village Chief inaugurates the sowing of new seeds with a prayer and then permits the villagers to sow seeds on the following day.\(^\text{89}\) In the early third day morning of the festival, the mother of the house collects a handful of paddy seeds and smears them with the blood of the chicken that is killed for the ritual. Then, she sows the blood stained seeds in the field and until she returns from field it is taboo to take any food or drink.\(^\text{90}\) It may also be

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\(^{87}\) M.C. Arun, op. cit., P. 51.

\(^{88}\) Interview with Lani Khosai 11/09/2005.

\(^{89}\) Interview with Khai Raoping, (Head man), 07/02/2006.

\(^{90}\) H. Gideon, The Poumai Naga Feast and Festivals and their Relevance of Christianity Life today, Thesis for the Degree of B.D., Eastern Theological College, Serampore College
mentioned that, while sowing ritual seeds, pieces of 'mousii' (a kind of wood), 'paisii' (a herb), 'Laipa' (a herbal flower) and feathers of the sacrificial chicken are struck around the area where the seeds are sown. It is believed that the using of these materials will help the seeds grow and yield as much abundantly as the flowers and fruits born by the above plants.\textsuperscript{91}

3.8.3. Paidouso-soh

Generally, the first paddy transplantation of the year is done with a ritual called 'Paidouso-soh'. Unless the ritual is performed it is taboo to transplant any paddy plant. Breach of it will spoil the transplanted paddy. According to Kadu Daihrii, the ritual Paidouso-soh is performed by sacrificing a dog and offering the meat to the paddy field's deity.\textsuperscript{92} However, the people of Onaeme (Oinam) and some other villages use fish, rice-wine and dried meat as offerings for the ritual. The dried meat used in this ritual is a sacrificial meat especially reserved for ritual purposes. With the offerings, the village Chief first performs the ritual 'Paidouso-soh' by planting a few paddy plants and invoking God’s blessings for healthy growth of paddy, well protection and bountiful yield of crops. On the next day the general public performs similar ritual in their respective fields.\textsuperscript{93}

3.8.4. Chachi-nae

When the harvest season comes and the crops are ripening, the Poumais take good care of their crops by imposing a number of restrictions against the usual life of the people. Exposing of colourful cloths, playing of certain games like Toukhaoyu and Kakayu, and musical instruments such as Hakai, Bhe, Sha; felling of trees; clearing jungle; etc. are restricted lest they attract rain, wind and storm that may destroy crops before they are harvested. When crops are

\textsuperscript{91} Interview with Shanglong Ngoni, 09/02/06.
\textsuperscript{92} Interview with Kadu Daihrii, 01/10/2006.
\textsuperscript{93} Interview with Railang Thio, 12/09/2005.
fully ripened and ready for harvest the village Chief fasts for a day on behalf of the villagers and pray to God for protection of crops from natural calamities and for good harvest. Then, he offers rice-wine and pieces of ritual meat to the field deity and inaugurates harvest by plucking a few grains of paddy. In some villages, the priest of the village performs the ritual in place of the Chief.

This ritual is also performed by the villagers as well. Generally, the household mother is responsible for performing the ritual. On the first day of harvest, she plucks a few grains of paddy and packs them with a few pieces of dried ritual meat and drops of rice-wine. The package is then put beneath the threshing mat used in the harvest. After completion of the day’s work, the mother once again prayerfully continues the ritual process by touching the four corners of the threshing mat. When the paddy is brought home, the mother with a prayer for a bountiful granary throws a pair of handful grains into the paddy barn where the newly harvested paddy would be stored.

3.8.5. Baoloutou

Baoloutou is the last annual agricultural ritual ceremony commonly observed as festival. The main day of the ceremony is observed by abstaining from eating meat and other vegetables except fish, crab and hathou (a local dal commonly known as Naga dal). On the day newly harvested granaries are dedicated to the Supreme Being and the new paddy are tasted.

In the early morning the house mother fetches fresh water and collects a pair of ‘Paikrupa’ or ‘Paisii’ (a type of shrub). With a prayer to make the harvested paddy more lasting, the mother with the help of paikrupa sprinkles water at every corner of the paddy barns. However, according to K. Daihrii, crabs and khanii (a type of small fish) are cooked and dabbed at every corner of

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94 M.C. Arun, R. Ngupani & others, op. cit., P. 52.
95 David Sha, op. cit., P. 30.
96 Interview with Mrs. Longdala Ka, 04/03/2004.
97 Interview with Th. Raoping Tao, (Vepa) 10/02/2005.
the paddy barns with the words “may the paddy be risen up like the spring
where khani lives and the clay that has been mounting around the crab’s hole”.
Then, a few grains of new paddy are collected from every barn and cooked.\textsuperscript{98}
Until this ceremony is performed the use of new paddy from granary is restricted.

3.8.6. Tungkhungkhong

Tungkhungkhong is an agricultural related ritual performed during Siinga or Sounii festival. This ritual is performed by the Chiime (elders’
council) and the village Vhe (Chief). As a process of the ritual, during the
morning of the main feast day the Chiime and the village Chief abstain from
solid food. On this day an unblemished ox or cow is sacrificed to the Supreme
God to seek divine revelation about the rainfall to be received by the region in
the particular year. In killing the sacrificial cattle, it is the priest who is to spear
the cattle first and then only others join in the process of killing the cattle.
Thereafter, rainfall that will occur during the year is predicted by examining
the amount of fluid outflow from the cut off belly of the sacrificial animal. A
good outflow of fluid is believed to be a sign of abundant rainfall in the year.
This sacrificial meat has high ritualistic and sacrificial value. The meat is
distributed to every household of the village. Some parts of the meat are kept
dry and preserved for using in performing paddy transplanting and harvesting
rituals.\textsuperscript{99}

3.8.7. Chobe

It is a very important ritual of the Poumaids performed during Ngah
festival that falls in the month of Ngakhou (September/October). This ritual is
performed to predict the climatic condition of the year in the region. According
to K. Daihirii, on the main day an unblemished calf is kept fenced in front of the

\textsuperscript{98} Interview with Kadu Daihirii, 1/10/2006.
\textsuperscript{99} Interview with Khaie Raoping, Headman, 07/02/2006.
Chief's house. If the calf bellows facing towards the Chief's house, it is believed that hailstorm will occur in the village; otherwise the region to which direction the calf faces and bellows will face calamity. In case the calf never bellows for the whole day it is believed that there will be no calamity in the region. K. Daihrii, further narrated that on the next day the calf is again tied along with a stone in front of the Chief's house and the bellowing of the calf is again observed to predict the impending misfortunes in accordance with the direction the calf faces and bellows. This prediction helps the people to take precautionary steps against the impending calamities and protect their crops.  

3.8.8. Raothai

_Raothai_ is a typical ritual of the Pounais mainly practiced by the people of Onaeme (Oinam). It is performed in the month of _Raothaiho_ or _Ngekhhou_ (September/October) and its observation continues for days. In the early morning of the first ritual day, the village Chief cages a well-fed and unblemished small chicken. With a prayer for well being and prosperity of the villagers the caged chicken is hang on a branch of tree at around the village gate and it is left unfed for days and wait for its dead of hunger. Until the chicken dies the villagers observe strict genna by abstaining from all their field works including collecting firewood, gardening, spinning, weaving, etc. During the genna days, outsiders are restricted to enter the village so also traveling to outside village is forbidden.

After the dead of the chicken, the village fortune is predicted by examining the position of the death chicken. It is believed that, if the belly of the chicken faces the village side there will be a good harvest, enough and sufficient food and prosperity in the village otherwise the village will be stricken by poverty and there shall be prosperity in the region where the

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100 Interview with Kadu Daihrii, 01/10/2006.
chicken belly faces. Similarly, a peaceful life was predicted in the village if the beak and head of the chicken faces the village side.101

3.9. Gennas and Taboos

3.9.1. Gennas

The term ‘genna’, ‘Naereih’ in Poula is mostly explained as ‘ban’ or ‘prohibition’ by many. However, it is not only ban or prohibition of doing something but it is also a form of worshiping God or deities and an important feature of the Naga religious life. “Genna is occasionally observed with religious sanctity through which people express their gratitude, grief, etc.”102 Like the Christians worship God on Sunday, the Poumaiis worship God on genna days with offerings and prayers for well being, healthy growth and abundant yield of crops, prosperity, protection from sickness, diseases, calamities etc. During such genna days, all their important works including agricultural works, weaving, stitching, trading, traveling, etc. are totally prohibited. The village gates are closed and outsiders are forbidden from entering the village. There are certain gennas that restricted even sex and certain foods. These are the important features of their gennas and breach of any is feared for curse and severe punishment from the Supreme Being.103

Genna may be calenderic or non-calenderic. The calenderic gennas are observed on fixed days of every year, which are mostly related to agricultural gennas. The non-calenderic gennas are observed occasionally as per the need of the time and situation. Whenever, there is storm, flood, fire accident, earthquake, epidemic, death, etc. in a village, a day of village genna is unfailingly proclaimed in order to prevent such incident from occurring again. Besides, they also observe household gennas that are mostly non-calenderic.

101 Interview with Khaie Raoping, Headman, 07/02/2006.
102 David Sha, op. cit., P. 34.
103 Interview with Longmi Dowang, 22/12/2005.
The annual gennas of the Poumais as stated by the Poumai Literature Committee in the *Poula Lariibvii Araina* (*first book in Poula*) are as follows:

1. Phaohainai  
2. Dziivunai  
3. Dziikhonai  
4. Meivosouhnai  
5. Moukeinai  
6. Deithainai  
7. Ngaiapaisounai  
8. Rahunai  
9. Teivosounai  
10. Veinai  
11. Ngenai  
12. Murasounai  
13. Velaonai  
14. Soulaonai  
15. Kuphaolaonai  
16. Kidziinai  
17. Dziidunai  
18. Vethonai  
19. Southonai  
20. Hriipuranai  
21. Kodunai  
22. Sheemaikhanai  
23. Thoberanai  
24. Deishosounai  
25. Soubanai  
26. Vahhunai  
27. Haonai  
28. Rilainai  
29. Baopeirepanai  
30. Hriimainiishanai  
31. Khaoraoshinai  
32. Shepaonai  
33. Tsiimaivotonai\(^{104}\)

3.9.2. Taboos

The word ‘taboo’, ‘souneu’ in Poula has been derived from the Polynesian ‘Tabu’ meaning to ‘forbid’ and forbidden’. Taboo is used to designate all the restrictions communicated through verbal ‘don’t do’s and generally associated with ritualistic behaviour”\(^{105}\). According to Encyclopaedia

\(^{104}\) Poumai Literature Committee, *Poula Lariibvii Arnipu*, Published by Poumai Literature Committee, 2004, P. 32.  
\(^{105}\) D. N. Majumdar and T. N. Madan, op. cit., P. 140.
of Religion and Ethics, in general, taboo or tabu signifies “that a thing is forbidden, being applied to all cases where things are not to be touched”.106

Like other tribes, taboo is an important custom of the Poumais that forbids certain activities or using of certain words that stand against the social approval. The practice of taboo is generally enforced to regulate the norms of social as well as individual behaviour and breach of it is strictly avoided for fear of evil consequences. Various taboos are imposed on different occasions with different degrees of restrictions which include abstinence from having sexual relation during certain occasions, eating certain kinds of food, saying or touching certain things, etc. Incest or marriage within the same clan is one of the strictest taboos and breach of it is usually punished by banishment from the village for fear of Supernatural punishment to the whole village. Having sex during the process of performing feast of merit is taboo for the performers, lest they become poor.107

For the Poumai women it is taboo to eat the flesh of kites, hawks, tiger, animal killed by wild beast, etc. They are also forbidden to take chicken that lays eggs here and there lest they become unfaithful to their husbands and the animal that dies in giving birth for fear of happening similar misfortune to them. It is also taboo for the women to touch war or hunting weapons during their menstrual period. Touching them would lead to the lost of the weapons’ sanctity and their instinctive qualities of devouring their preys.108

Similarly, a number of taboos are imposed upon men. For a warrior and his descendants eating or drinking anything from the village where the warrior killed any villager is taboo for fear of attack by a strange disease known as 'Laokhao' which leads to falling of all teeth. Games killed by woman are regarded as unnatural as well as unclean and are forbidden for men to eat.109

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107 Interview with Longni Dowang, 22/12/2005.
108 Interview with Soni Khaone, 18/08/2005.
109 Interview with Saothe Railang, 06/01/2007.
Besides, among the many taboos practiced by the Poumai, some of them as listed by the Poumai Literature Committee are quoted as under:

1. *Paohmai Thaimai ziiphei souneu-e.* (It is taboo to hurt grand fathers and maternal uncles).
2. *Pfi-chi, tulou sapa neu-e.* (It is taboo to have sexual relation with mothers, sister-in-laws and sisters).
3. *Pfiimai-Poumai taida neu-e.* (It is taboo to beat parents).
4. *Tsiimai pah khea neu-e.* (It is taboo to hurt elders).
5. *Reihmai tya ziika neu-e.* (Killing all the enemies in war is taboo).
6. *Putoumai naotoumai sadoukhe lounue-e.* (It is taboo for man to go under women’s weaving loom).
7. *Chachou souyusho reikhaive yuneu-e.* (It is taboo to look back after swearing of oath).
8. *Vearou namai ngaoba neu-e.* (It is taboo to ill-treat orphans).
9. *Zhosou mouziimai tsiisou tou neu-e.* (It is taboo for the feast of merit performers to eat the flesh of animal killed by wild beast).
10. *Reih ziiyu teile hei neye peire tia bah layu sho southa neu-e.* (It is taboo to kill an enemy who had surrendered and raised his hand in war).
11. *Tokho-tosiimai pano sa-a dakhai taneu-e.* (It is taboo to turn beggar away empty handed).
12. *Nae-nou souyu sho reikhaive yuneu-e.* (It is taboo to look back after performing a rite, ritual and offering).
14. *Nae-nou zai neu-e.* (It is taboo to breach genna).
15. *Dzii ye meiy vah neu-e.* (Competing with water and fire is taboo).
16. *Teibekou rei-a ziineu-e.* (It is taboo to sleep with head facing southward).
17. *Raichu lada neu-e.* (It is taboo to move boundary stones).
18. Mai sho-lya puh neu-e. (It is taboo to dig other’s secrets).
19. Theo taila neu-e. (It is taboo to kick off oven).
20. Sho-vai maiye konii neu-e. (To laugh at handicapped is taboo).\textsuperscript{110}

3.10. Sin and Punishment

‘Sin’, ‘mah’ in Poula is a term related to religion, which is interpreted differently as per the different belief systems of different religions. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, sin is defined as an action that is against religious rules and is considered to be an offence against God.\textsuperscript{111} In the Britannica Encyclopaedia, the wrongdoing, particularly the breaking of moral or religious rules is considered as sin. In the Hebrew Scriptures, sin is viewed as a hatred of God or defiance of His commandments. Sin is also interpreted differently as “In the tribal religions the concept of sin is vague... Sin is an offence against tribal custom or taboo and what is morally evil may be regarded as good if it does not transgress the tribal customs and laws”.\textsuperscript{112}

Similarly, sin, as per the beliefs of the Poumais, is considered as an act that is against the customs, taboos and gennas of the people. To them, the rules of customs, taboos and gennas are believed as the commands of God and proper observance of those rules is His wish. Violation of any of them is viewed as sin and feared for punishment from Heaven. However, their traditional customs are a mixture of both morally good and evil activities. The evil activities they practiced as their customs are regarded as practices sanctioned by God and not considered as sin so long as they did not encroach beyond the limit of their custom. To mention a few of their evil customary practices, winning of physical relation over woman other than incest, taking of enemy’s head, etc. are considered as heroic deeds through which they earned prestige and honour in the community. Sacrifice of human being particularly

\textsuperscript{110} Poumai Literature Committee, op. cit., P. 31.
\textsuperscript{112} R. R. Lolly, op. cit., P. 12.
while constructing a village Chief’s house is another evil custom they practiced for their material well being as well as fertility of population.\textsuperscript{113}

Whatever the case may be, sin is feared, because they believed that no sin can be hidden from the eyes of God and the community as well. It is assumed that no sinner can escape from the punishment given for the sin one has committed. The punishment would fall either directly or indirectly upon the sinner or upon the family members or the descendants. The gravity of the punishment varies as per the degree of the sins one has committed.

According to S. P. Henry, the birth of a child with deformed physical features, with more or less number of fingers, crippled limbs, etc. are considered as signs of punishment from God against the sins committed by the parents or grand parents or forefathers of the child. It is believed that a sinner dies unnatural death or suffers from terrible sickness. He can neither take proper breath nor talk to people nor die peacefully and he would struggle for days and die a horrendous death. It is also said that the dead bodies of sinners give out stinky smell soon after dead and it is usually accompanied with storm, heavy rain and strong wind. Such signs indicate that the deceased has committed sins while he was alive. Besides, the diseases like big boils, cancer, etc. are also believed to be due to sins one has committed.\textsuperscript{114}

3.11. Conclusion:

All these traditional religious beliefs and practices of the people were strictly observed and followed by the people since time immemorial. However, in the year 1937 the first seed of Christianity was sown among the people of Maiba village of the Poumai community. Since then, the flame of Christianity has been spreading to all the Poumai villages and today the faith of Christianity has taken its firm roots among the people of the Poumais. With the advent of Christianity, they have slowly but steadily have abandoned most of their old

\textsuperscript{113} Interview with Shanglong Ngaoni, 11/09/05.
\textsuperscript{114} Interview with S. P. Henry, 04/04/2006.
traditional religious beliefs and practices. Today only a handful of elderly people are left practicing their aged old religious beliefs and practices. The effects of Christianity on the traditional religious beliefs and practices are being discussed in Chapter V of the present work.