

Feasting as a Social Institution among the Maos and Marams of Manipur

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Abstract:

Feasting traditions among the Mao and Maram Nagas of Senapati district constitute central cultural institutions that structure social hierarchy, ritual life, and inter-village relations. This article examines the Feast of Merit, diplomatic feasts and agricultural feasts, among the Mao and Maram communities, analysing their social, economic, and symbolic dimensions. Drawing upon anthropological theories of ritual, reciprocity, and social integration, the study situates feasting as a mechanism for transforming material wealth into social prestige and moral authority. Using qualitative and historical methods, the article argues that feasts functioned not merely as ceremonial events but as institutions regulating redistribution, conflict resolution, and collective identity. Despite significant transformations under colonial rule and Christian influence, the symbolic values embedded in feasting like generosity, reciprocity, honour, and community cohesion continue to shape Mao and Maram social life.

Keywords: Mao, Maram, Feast, Genna, Ritual, social structure.

INTRODUCTION

Senapati district, located in the northern hill ranges of Manipur, is home to several Naga tribes, among whom the Mao and Maram Nagas occupy a distinctive cultural and historical position. These communities are traditionally organized into autonomous village-republics, each functioning as a self-sufficient socio-political unit. Within these systems, complex institutions evolved to regulate economic production, kinship relations, political authority, and religious observance. In the past feasting occupied a central and enduring role, serving as both a material and symbolic institution through which social hierarchies, collective identity, and moral values were constructed and sustained.

In anthropological discourse, a feast is broadly defined as a public event involving the collective consumption of food and drink in a context imbued with ritual, social, or political significance (Dietler & Hayden, 2001). Feasting differs from ordinary eating not merely in scale but in its ability to mediate relationships—between individuals, groups, and the divine. As Hayden (1996) observes, feasts act as “arenas for the negotiation of power, generosity, and reciprocity,” while Dietler (1996) emphasizes their role as “strategic instruments of commensal politics,” where food becomes a tool for creating and reproducing inequality, prestige, and alliance.

The Mao and Maram Nagas provide a particularly vivid example of these dynamics. Feasts among these communities such as the Feast of Merit, diplomatic feasts agricultural feasts, functioned as structured forms of social exchange, transforming private wealth into public recognition and communal solidarity. The Feast of Merit, in particular, illustrates how wealth was ritualized into moral prestige: individuals who

hosted such feasts ascended in social standing, earned spiritual merit, and strengthened kinship bonds. Diplomatic feasts, meanwhile, were employed to reaffirm inter-village alliances, turning the act of eating together into a performance of trust and peace. Agricultural and harvest feasts marked cyclical transitions in the agrarian calendar, renewing the covenant between humans, land, and spiritual forces. Feasting among the Maos and Marams was thus not merely a cultural display but a social mechanism, articulating moral values such as generosity, obligation, and reciprocity. These events reinforced communal ethics and redistributed wealth, ensuring equilibrium within the moral economy. In the sense outlined by Mauss (1990) in *The Gift*, the feast embodies a system of total exchange, an act that is simultaneously economic, social, and spiritual. It becomes a vehicle through which material accumulation is converted into symbolic capital—status, honor, and communal esteem.

Despite their significance, existing ethnographic accounts of the Mao and Maram Nagas often remain descriptive rather than analytical, emphasizing ritual details without adequately exploring the deeper sociological meanings of feasting. This paper addresses that gap by examining feasting as a cultural institution, a nexus where economy, religion, and social structure intersect. Through this analysis, the study seeks to illuminate how feasting traditions among the Mao and Maram shaped social organization, mediated power relations, and reinforced moral order.

By situating these traditions within the broader theoretical frameworks of commensality, exchange, and ritual economy (Dietler, 2001; Hayden, 2014; Bloch, 1989), the paper highlights the enduring relevance of feasting as a lens through which to understand the relationship between material life and moral community in Naga society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of feasting among the Mao and Maram Nagas is grounded in anthropological theories of ritual, reciprocity, and social integration. Marcel Mauss's (1990) theory of the gift provides a foundational framework, emphasizing that acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating create binding social relationships. Feasts among the Nagas exemplify this principle by converting material resources into enduring social obligations and prestige.

Functionalist perspectives, particularly those advanced by Malinowski (1944), help explain how feasting institutions fulfilled economic and social needs by redistributing resources and reinforcing leadership. Durkheim's (1995) concept of ritual as a source of collective effervescence is equally relevant, as communal feasting generated social solidarity and reaffirmed shared values.

Additionally, S.F. Nadel's (1951) view of culture as adaptive behaviour provides insight into how feasting practices evolved in response to ecological constraints, colonial intervention, and religious change. Together, these theoretical perspectives allow feasting to be understood as a dynamic institution rather than a static tradition.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and historical-ethnographic methodology grounded in symbolic anthropology to explore how feasting among the Mao and Maram Nagas functions as a social institution. Drawing on oral traditions and secondary data including ethnographic literature, colonial records, the research triangulates multiple sources to ensure cultural and historical validity. Through

document and textual analysis, synthesis of oral narratives, and theoretical mapping, the study interprets feasting as a mechanism of reciprocity, redistribution, and moral cohesion. The analysis follows three steps i.e. economic, socio-political, and ritual-symbolic examining how feasts generate prestige, resolve conflict, and reinforce communal solidarity. Anchored in the theories of Mauss, Malinowski, Durkheim, Nadel, and Barth, the research decodes feasting as an adaptive moral economy. Despite relying on secondary sources, methodological rigor is maintained through thematic coding, cross-comparison, and reflexive interpretation, treating indigenous epistemologies as central to understanding the enduring significance of feasting in Mao and Maram societies.

FEASTING TRADITIONS OF THE MAOS AND MARAMS

The Feast of Merit

The Feast of Merit constituted one of the most significant institutions of social distinction and moral achievement in Naga society. Among the Maos and Marams, the feast functioned as a culturally sanctioned mechanism through which material wealth was converted into social prestige, ritual authority, and enduring recognition within the village community. Far from being an occasion of mere consumption, the Feast of Merit was a highly ritualized social process embedded in kinship obligations, agricultural surplus, and cosmological beliefs.

In Naga society, the accumulation of wealth alone whether in the form of landholdings, a bumper harvest, or ownership of cattle did not automatically translate into social standing. Wealth acquired meaning and legitimacy only when it was publicly redistributed. The Feast of Merit served precisely this function by transforming private resources such as rice, livestock, and rice-beer into collective benefit. Prestige, therefore, was not measured by possession but by the demonstrated capacity to give. The increased ability to feed others became the clearest marker of social success, reinforcing a moral economy in which generosity, rather than accumulation, defined status.

The scale, duration, and style of the Feast of Merit varied across villages and clans. In some instances, the celebrations extended over several days or even a fortnight, during which the entire village and occasionally neighbouring villages and clans were invited to partake in rice, meat, and rice-beer. Such prolonged feasting underscored both the economic capacity of the host and the depth of his social networks. Failure to provide adequate food or drink, particularly rice-beer, was considered a serious disgrace, as it signalled both poor preparation and an inability to fulfil communal expectations. Consequently, the preparation of large quantities of rice-beer was essential and often involved the collective labour of the host's clan, highlighting the communal nature of individual prestige.

Eligibility to host a Feast of Merit was restricted to married men, reflecting the strong connection between household stability, ritual responsibility, and social maturity. The wife of the host played a crucial role in observing *gena* (ritual prohibitions) and in managing key aspects of the feast, indicating that the achievement was fundamentally a household accomplishment rather than an individual one. This gendered division of ritual labour reinforced the moral ideal of cooperation between husband and wife as a prerequisite for social advancement.

Successful performance of the Feast of Merit entitled the host to visible symbols of distinction. Among the Mao Nagas, individuals who hosted feasts gained the right to wear specific ceremonial garments and ornaments, and to decorate their houses in distinctive ways that set them apart from others in the village.

Families that hosted multiple Feasts of Merit were known as *Zhosomei*, a title that signified enduring prestige and elevated social standing. Upon the erection of customary commemorative stones, such individuals were entitled to wear *Zhososa* and *Khephi Kadesa*, the latter being a shawl intricately woven with animal motifs that symbolized strength, abundance, and ritual accomplishment. Among the Maram Nagas, comparable honorific recognition included the right to wear *Tutsii Pai*, a distinctive shawl characterized by broader stitches and the absence of stripes, marking the wearer as a person of proven generosity and status.

A distinctive variation of the Feast of Merit is found among the Willong Marams in the form of the Feast of Wealth. This ritual involved the ceremonial release of a Mithun into the forest, followed by its recapture by the most capable and agile man. The successful capture symbolized bravery, skill, and the ability to control abundance. The ritual culminated in a blessing bestowed by the oldest man in the village, who offered prayers for long life and prosperity. In a reciprocal gesture, the young man presented a shawl to the elder, symbolizing respect, continuity, and intergenerational transmission of honour. This dramatic enactment reinforced the moral legitimacy of wealth by linking it to courage, ritual sanction, and communal approval.

Collectively, the Feast of Merit represented the highest expression of social achievement among the Mao and Maram Nagas. It institutionalized a system in which material surplus was morally transformed into social capital, leadership, and symbolic distinction. By compelling the wealthy to redistribute resources, the feast helped maintain social balance while simultaneously allowing for graded differentiation based on achievement. In this sense, the Feast of Merit functioned not only as a marker of individual success but also as a foundational mechanism for sustaining social cohesion, moral order, and collective identity in Naga village society.

Diplomatic Feasts

These feasts served as critical diplomatic mechanisms for resolving conflicts and forging alliances. These rituals, known as *Kabi katii* among the Marams and *Aso Koto* translating to “Covenant or solidarity meal” among the Maos emerged in contexts of feuding or warfare between villages. Such practices underscore the Naga emphasis on reciprocal hospitality as a social construct for maintaining ethnic boundaries and peace, aligning with Fredrik Barth's ethnic boundary theory where rituals reinforce group solidarity amid inter-group tensions (Barth, 1969). These feasts were rare, reserved for pivotal moments when enmity threatened communal stability, reflecting a pragmatic ethnogenesis through negotiated solidarity rather than perpetual conflict.

The process began with negotiation led by the village's prominent elder or leader, who brokered an initial agreement and disseminated it across both communities. This preparatory phase ensured communal buy-in, transforming potential adversaries into participants bound by mutual consent. Once finalized, able-bodied men from both villages converged in the host village, symbolizing vulnerability and trust—guests entered enemy territory unarmed and dependent on host hospitality. This mirrors oral history traditions in Naga ethnography, where pre-feast pacts often invoked ancestral spirits or customary laws to sacralise the truce (Iralu, 2000).

Upon arrival, each adult host in the receiving village paired with a guest, escorting him home for an elaborate reception marked by utmost respect, honour, and the finest local cuisine typically rice beer (*zu*)

or (*ohai*), meats, and fermented delicacies. This one-on-one hosting ritual personalized reconciliation, embedding peace within domestic spaces and familial networks.

During the feast, participants deliberated mutual grievances, resolving them through dialogue infused with “warm friendliness and common interest.” Discussions extended to long-term commitments: sustaining tranquillity, pledging mutual aid during crises (e.g., raids or natural calamities), and outlining reciprocity. The event’s reciprocal nature mandated a return feast by the former guests, fostering enduring alliances without fixed timelines, which sustained relationships across generations.

The farewell amplified the feast’s diplomatic weight. Hosts prepared portable meals wrapped in wild banana leaves for guests’ journeys and families, evoking enduring memories of generosity. Shawls—prestigious Naga symbols of honour and alliance were gifted as tangible emblems of friendship. A strict taboo prohibited humans or animals from crossing the departing procession's path, invoking supernatural enforcement of the covenant and deterring betrayal.

These elements highlight the feast's role in materializing abstract peace, akin to gift economies in anthropological theory (Mauss, 1990), where exchanges create binding obligations.

Historical records note *Kabi katii/Aso Koto* between Khonoma (Angamis) and Willong villages in the early nineteenth century, amid British colonial incursions that exacerbated inter-village rivalries. Similarly, Maram Khullen village hosted the feast with neighbouring Mao villages, notably Pudunamei, forging ties that persist today. These events exemplify how customary diplomacy preserved Naga autonomy pre- and post-colonization, contributing to stable ethnic boundaries in Manipur's hill tracts.

Such practices remain relevant for understanding contemporary Naga conflict resolution, informing ethnographies of peacebuilding in Northeast India.

The *Kabi katii* or *Aso Koto* exemplifies Naga diplomatic ingenuity, transforming feuding villages into allied communities through ritualized hospitality. Among the Marams and Maos, this “covenant meal” unfolded in rare instances of warfare or enmity, initiated by village leaders who negotiated preliminary agreements disseminated to all residents. Able-bodied men from both sides then gathered in the host village, where each guest received personalized hospitality: an adult host escorted him home, offering the finest foods amid profound respect.

The feast proper facilitated resolution of disputes in a spirit of camaraderie, alongside pledges for enduring peace, mutual aid, and reciprocity—the hosts obligated to reciprocate later. Departures featured lavish packed meals in wild banana leaves for the journey and family, shawl exchanges as friendship tokens, and a procession taboo barring crossings by man or beast. Historical precedents include the early nineteenth-century event between Khonoma and Willong, and Maram Khullen with Pudunamei (Mao), yielding relationships intact to this day (cf. Shimray, 1985; Iralu, 2000).

This institution reveals the Nagas' strategic use of feasts to sheathe swords, embodying Barthian boundary maintenance via shared rituals.

FEASTS DURING AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS

Agriculture formed the economic backbone of Mao and Maram society, and feasting marked critical phases of the agricultural calendar. Among the Marams, major festivals such as *Ponghi*, *Kangi*, and *Rakakkii* corresponded to sowing, growth, and harvest cycles. The Maos also celebrate festivals like the *Chiithuni*, *Saleni*, *Onuni* and *Chijjini*. During the celebrations of these festivals, there were gennas, rituals followed by eating, drinking and celebrations. These feasts marked the celebrations for fertility and abundance, intended to secure prosperity and communal well-being.

Ritual observances known as genna accompanied these feasts, imposing temporary prohibitions on work, diet, and social interaction. Such restrictions reinforced ritual purity and collective discipline, reflecting Durkheimian notions of sacred time separating ritual from everyday life (Durkheim, 1995). Music, dance, and communal consumption of rice-beer and meat were integral, serving as mediums for transmitting historical memory and social values.

DISCUSSION

Feasting among the Mao and Maram Nagas functioned as a multidimensional institution integrating economy, ritual, and politics. The Feast of Merit regulated social hierarchy through controlled redistribution of wealth. These practices reveal a sophisticated indigenous understanding of social order, where prestige was earned through generosity rather than accumulation. Diplomatic feasts provided non-violent mechanisms for conflict resolution, emphasizing reconciliation over retribution. Agricultural feasts reinforced ecological adaptation, collective discipline and a time to rejuvenation and recreation. Such feasting during festivals restored the health of the people as they engaged themselves in eating and drinking so as to reinstate the energy and health lost during the heavy agricultural work. Also, in some cases to prepare their body for the agricultural work that lies ahead with the new season. Feasting thus served as a moral economy, balancing individual ambition with communal responsibility while fostering health, fertility and renewal.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

From a theoretical perspective, Mao and Maram feasts exemplify Maussian gift exchange, where generosity creates enduring social bonds. The Feast of Merit aligns with Malinowski's (1944) functionalist view by fulfilling economic redistribution and leadership legitimization. Durkheim's theory of ritual explains how communal feasting generated collective solidarity and reaffirmed shared values.

The decline of traditional feasts under Christianity and colonial administration illustrates processes of acculturation (Redfield et al., 1936). However, the persistence of symbolic values like generosity, hospitality, and social responsibility supports Nadel's (1951) argument that cultural institutions adapt rather than disappear.

CONCLUSION

Feasting traditions among the Mao and Maram Nagas were central to the organization of social life, serving as institutions of redistribution, moral authority, and peace-making. While many ritual forms have diminished due to religious conversion and modernization, the ethical foundations of feasting continue to influence contemporary social relations.

The study of Mao and Maram feasts demonstrates that indigenous institutions possess enduring relevance, offering valuable insights into community cohesion, conflict resolution, and sustainable social organization. In this sense, feasting remains a cultural legacy that bridges tradition and modernity in Senapati district.

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