**Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology**
Vol. 2, No. 2, 2025, pp. 241-248 • ISSN: 2584-2765

*URL: http://www.pbjournals.com/siias*
*Publisher of Open Access Journals*

# The Sangtam Naga *Koh thsütitüp* Feasts of Merit and Social Stratification

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***To Cite this Article***

Thsingvi T. Sangtam (2025). The Sangtam Naga Koh *thsütitüp* Feasts of Merit and Social Stratification. *Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology,* 2: 2, pp. 241-248.

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to bring together the different practices of the feasts of merit among the Sangtam Naga tribe in the Northern Sangtam. The Koh thsütitüp (feasts of merit) in the past brought respect and prestige to the individual during their lifetime and were remembered even after their death; the couple who gave the Anyidsi and Yongdiba wore a unique shümüpi shawl and a shürongthsi wraparound or makhela. An individual who completes giving *Koh thsütitüp* a series of feasts of merit wears *Nengthsanengkhongrü* renown and *thsapihipirü* elite shü shawl, signifying the recognition and honour earned through philanthropic acts. The donors of the Koh thsütitüp families live in a unique, constructed house that features a new roof made of hay called "*shaara*," with its edge cut straight. This work will illuminate the social traditional institutions of feasts of merit and highlight inequalities and stratification based on factors such as authority, prestige, and wealth in society, as some individuals elevate their status by wearing different shawls and wraparounds and by constructing houses in a different form from those of others in the village or community. Gerhard Lenski, in the book Power and Privilege (1966), terms social stratification as limited and important resources, such as status and wealth, being distributed within the community, and his analysis of the question of "who gets what and why" indicates power as the significant factor determining this distribution (Lenski, 1984).The study area covered Sangtam villages in Kiphire and Tuensang districts. This study uses the ethnographic method, a qualitative approach. The data were collected using both primary and secondary sources.

***Keyword:*** *Sangtam, feasts of merits, Yongdiba and Anyidsi, stratification, Koh thsütitüp*

## Introduction

This paper is an attempt to bring together different practices of the feasts of merit by the Sangtam Naga tribe[1] in the Northern Sangtam in Tuensang District, Nagaland. The Koh thsütitüp (feasts of merit) in past brought respect and prestige to the individual during their lifetime and were remembered even after their death; the couple who gave

**Received :** 29 July 2025 • **Revised :** 27 August 2025 • **Accepted :** 09 September 2025 • **Published :** 22 September 2025

the Anyidsi and Yongdiba wore a unique shümüpi shawl and a shürongthsi wraparound or makhela. An individual who successfully completes giving *Koh thsütitüp* a series of feasts of merit wears Nengthsanengkhongrü [2]renown and thsapihipirü[3] elite *shü* shawl, signifying the recognition and honour earned through philanthropic acts. A wife of the feaster, the first- stage of feasts of merit donor was entitled to wear a fringe on one end, and a wife of feaster, the second stage of feasts of merit donor was allowed to wear shürongthsi on both sides, symbolizing her husband's prestige and status. The donors of the Koh thsütitüp families live in a unique, constructed house that features a new roof made of hay called "shaara," with its edge cut in a straight line. This work will illuminate the social traditional institutions of feasts of merit and highlight inequalities and stratification based on factors such as authority, prestige, and wealth in society, as some individuals elevate their status by wearing different shawls and wraparounds and by constructing houses in a different form from those of others in the village or community. Gerhard Lenski, in the book Power and Privilege (1966), terms social stratification as limited and important resources, such as status and wealth, being distributed within the community, and his analysis of the question of "who gets what and why" indicates power as the significant factor determining this distribution(Lenski, 1984). This study uses the ethnographic method, a qualitative approach, Secondary sources, such as books, articles, and journals, were consulted and used to generate data.

The *Koh thsütitüp* is a feasts hosted by an individual for the whole community to declare that the individual will offer a feasts in the village. This is the highest social status and is the deepest expression of religious sacrifice. This is a feasts of honour, partly a reflection of the generous philosophy of feeding people experiencing poverty and sharing wealth with the entire population. However, mostly it is the competitive spirit to climb the ladder of social organisations. The donor was honoured and respected both while alive and after death (Shimray, 1986). The host or donor of the feasts showed that wealth distribution was more important than possession. Each feasts is entitled to give social distinction to himself, his family, and his village. The Sangtam community organises a series of feasts. Feaster uses gayal, swine, cattle and fowls in the feasts of merit.

The Feasts of Merit involves the sacrifice of gayal *dhsüza* and the killing of cattle, pigs, and cows and is performed by married men, believed to prevent bad spirits, ensure the family's good health, and maintain harmony within society. The institution is closely connected with social prestige rather than political power (Brauns & Löffler, 1990). The early anthropological studies of Fürer-Haimendorf (1939) and J.P. Mills (1926) discussed and traced that the concept of a feasts of merit is a significant social institution

among the tribal Naga society. Thus, the social institution includes both the religious and social achievements where the rich people hosted a large feasts and distributed the food, meat, wealth, property, and sacrificed animals in the village; the host earned social recognition and honour, and the traditional tribal Naga societies believe that the host of the feasts is remembered even after death (Mills, 1926; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1939). Many researchers and scholars understand the practices of hosting feasts of merits as mechanisms that reinforce social hierarchy and support equality. Suzanne Villeneuve and Briand Hayden argue that the feasts reveals inequalities within the community that appear egalitarian and describe such societies as transegalitarian, in which the rich gain influence and build relations(Hayden & Villeneuve, 2011). Hosting feasts of merit and building megaliths demonstrate not only symbolic prestige but also concrete material benefits and political influence within the society's cultural and traditional practices (Singh, 2024).Therefore, providing a feasts of merit in the village or community play, as a community display of prestige and status, also served as a significant platform for stratification and differentiation in societies that appear democratic. People build connections and alliances through negotiation (Hayden & Villeneuve, 2011). Gerhard Lenski termed social stratification as limited and important resources such as status and wealth being distributed within the community, and his analysis on the question of "who gets what and why" indicating power as the significant factor determining this distribution( Ovung, 2012).To understand social stratification in Naga society, it is necessary to study inequality as an important analytical tool for understanding change. The study includes the main scope of stratification, such as wealth, power, and status, which are interdependent as a wider system (Ovung, 2012).

A newly married couple performed this ritual of hosting the feasts, offering pigs and cows to the Supreme Being for blessings and prosperity. A priest, 'bebürü perform the ritual.' He poured rice beer and sprinkled it throughout the inside and outside areas of the house. He kept the spear '*thsu*' near the door and took the *'xutse yungkha*-job's tears beer,' pasted ginger, and threw it in the direction of the wall, saying it was to kill the strongest man by performing these rites. After throwing, if some rice or meat sticks to the wall, it is believed that the family will be victorious over enemies and have a prosperous life; if it sticks to the wall, it is a bad omen (Sangtam, 2006). The rules governing the performance of Koh thsütitüp among the Sangtam follow two general rules. They must strictly observe the traditional sequence of rites and rituals; an individual may not be allowed or given the feasts of merit, Yongdiba, and Anyidsi within a given year in which they must harvest before the paddy and rice in the field. Otherwise, an individual can offer and perform a series of feasts whenever the donor

has sufficient resources. When the couple decided to offer the Yongdiba feasts to the villagers or community, they raised more domestic animals, such as cattle, gayal, and pigs, and worked harder in the fields that same year. In order to have a plentiful harvest and sufficient domestic animals and resources for the Yongdiba feasts. The Yongdiba feasts is usually held at the end of the year, in *Chenyung choo* (month of December), during the winter season. After prior preparation, the host announced that they would offer the feasts to the community or villagers.

In some cases, in 2006, Mr Thrilongse, a retired teacher from the Chimonger village, approached church elders to offer a Christmas feasts and declared it within a few months. In modern times, people hardly use the traditional terms "feasts of merit," "Yongdiba," and "Anyidsi." However, to offer a feasts to the village during the Christmas celebration, it is only at the end of the year, when they have received an extraordinarily plentiful harvest of rice in the field and sufficient reared animals in that year. They must invite friends and well-wishers from the town and the neighbouring village to the feasts. The privileged for offering the Anyidsi feasts is entitled to wear the wraparound in black, with several narrow red stripes, embroidered in red with a symbolic representation of gayal or dhsüza horns. Donors are entitled to construct a house with bamboo splitters along the top of the roof, placing them closer together and crisscrossing. They also built their field hut and granary uniquely, like the houses in the villages. Rough wooden models of wagtails built on the roof of the house, which symbolised the bobbing and pirouetting of wagtails, are reminiscent of the movement of a dancer. Feaster wears ceremonial headgear made of two feathers of the great Indian hornbill. The wife of the feaster is entitled to wear fringe on her clothes, and she may wear a wraparound elaborately striped with red and blue and with a narrow white central strip. Feaster's wife is entitled to adorn herself with necklaces designed of cornelian beads, large white discs of conch shell, and a *nang* crystal earring; it further extended privilege to his female descendants in perpetuity. Thereby strengthening lineage continuity. An affixed hanging fringe of thatch grass is attached to the projecting roof of the house, and constructed a projecting porch roof over the entrance. This hanging fringe is locally interpreted as a symbolic representation of the dewlap of a gayal or dhsüza, indicating prestige, wealth, and ritual accomplishment (Stonor, 1950)

The Yongdiba is the first stage of the *Koh thsütitüp*, which continues to be celebrated over three ritual days, each day marked by specific traditional practices and symbolic distributions. The first day is called *amüjang nyümong*; slaughter of the domestic animals like cattle and pigs occurs, and preparation of meat and designated portions, which are arranged properly for subsequent ceremonial distribution, occurs.

The second day is called *Rohtüp;* following customary practice, it features the formal distribution of meat. Allocated different portions of the meat and social relations based on relations, obligations, and status. The day also emphasized the ritualisation of friendship, as the host invited an *arangzu*-chosen bosom friend and others to feasts, drink and sing. Lifelong friendships are formalised and consecrated by symbolic actions, including sharing food, meat, and drink, and exchanging weapons in *ching-bi mülitacho*. The third day in the olden days was Püpzang Nyümong, which involved the consumption of remaining food and strengthened mutual responsibilities, especially between the feaster and his arangzu or shujeng shangrü. The third day in the olden days was Püpzang Nyümong, which involved the consumption of remaining food and strengthened mutual responsibilities, especially between the feaster and his arangzu or shujeng shangrü. This third stage concludes with the host observing himütsu[4] or Mamoh[5] ritual taboos for fifteen days, and the priest who performs the ritual observes them for thirty days of sanctification, abstinence, and purification, Folk dance is not perform in the first stage of feasts called Yongdiba.

It is called the first step, *"iyoh shuhkha*": the preparation and predistribution of meat, the killing of large swine, and the distribution of its portion. After finishing the Yongdiba feasts, after a few years have passed, the Anyidsi is a more complex stage of the feasts of merit. Increase agricultural labour and require animals during this stage; this shows the donors' couple's revitalised economic potential and ambition of achieving something (Sangtam, 2017). They do not announce the observance of any of the feasts until they have prepared and recovered enough resources.

It is called the first step, "*iyohrü* [6] *shukhah*," the preparation and predistribution of meat, the killing of large swine, and the distribution of its portion. Such as folk singers, folk dancers, and intimate acquaintances, to promote social engagement. The organised collective work for preparing animals and gathering firewood demonstrates the collective characteristic of *Koh thsütitüp*. The second day is the most significant stage of the feasts. It started with the priest performing a ritual near a symbolic Y-shaped post at sunrise, known as *khyümdong*. Throughout the day, the dancer sings a folk song praising the feaster, supporting his social recognition and prestige. Volunteers distribute meat and rice beer to the performers during the dance . *Yangtungshu*, a portion of meat, is distributed to every household as well as to the *kezükorü* guests and those assembled surrounding the *khyümdong*. Emphasizing inclusivity and ritual redistribution in the community. The third day of the Anyidsi feasts is *Dezangba*, concluding the Anyidsi feasts with communal feasting, dancing, and singing. An important rite and ritual act involves the study and analysis of the gayal or *dhsüza s*kull affixed to the *khyümdong*,

through which the priest divines the donor's future fortune. The remaining meat is collectively gathered and consumed. At the same time, some is given to the stewards of the rice beer brewer (*fuhzanyahrü*)[7] . Older, more experienced people who are unable to labour physically are responsible for protecting the meat from dogs, robbers, and other animals during feasts. Their function goes beyond defense. They use their expertise to direct the cutting of the meat portion, determine serving sizes and amounts, and suggest who should get what, and to the one who performs the rites and rituals, indicating recognition of ritual and economic contributions.

Apart from the Koh thsütitüp feasts of merit, there are other feasts as well, such as *Langthsa or Yangpi Anyidsi*. According to the Tsathrongo from Kiphire town shared that, a ritual is performed to make friends with enemies, neighbouring villages, or friends by inviting them to a feasts. They offered the bigger portion of meat to the invitees and reconciled with them. In this religious sacrifice, they even share their shawls, spears, and daos and become goods (Sangtam, 2006). The *Pühüm* ritual would be the final feasts, following Yongdiba and Anyidsi. While a man might repeat offering the Yongdi and Anyidsi numerous times, after executing *Pühüm*, the end of the feasting cycle was indicated.

The *Koh thsütitüp*, like *Yongdi, Anyidsi, Langthsa, Yangpi Anyidsi, Akongtsu,* and *Thsatsu*, gradually declined after the coming of Christianity and modernity in the Naga society. Viewing it as a traditional religious practice, involved various cultural rites and rituals, and was also opposed to Christian practices because it was associated with rice beer consumption. However, some cultural and traditional elements continue symbolically, such as wealthy individuals and politicians sponsoring communal feasts during the Christmas celebration.

Despite the decline of value and importance of hosting the old traditional practice of feasts of merit, a politician and candidate established political camps during election, provide lavish meal continue for weeks and month before polling day, candidate distribute such as rice and meat to the supporter and villagers, for many society in Nagaland, this practices is not simply bribery however it observe as a moral responsible of leaders. People believe that "If someone wants to be our leader, he must feed us."This concept is associated with the capacity to offer and care for the community, similar to the old practices of the Feasts of Merit (Wouters, 2015). Margaret Ch. Zama examines the traditional institution of the feasts of merits, which has transformed over time, and argues that, despite its decline and disappearance in many communities, its value and importance have morphed into a new form, shaped by changing religious and ideological contexts. Zama uses the Mizo society as the source of study, demonstrating

a Christianized practice of religious feasting known as *Pathian chawimawina, the* glorification of God. More often, it now refers to Thanksgiving, lawmthu sawina(Zama, n.d.).

## Conclusion

The study concludes that offering Koh thsütitüp to the community or villagers among the Sangtam earned honour and respect, as evidenced by unique house construction in the village, special shawls and wraparound items, e.g., *Nengthsashü and shümüpi*, and different clothing and ornaments for both men and women. Not everyone can offer or donate *Yongdiba, Koh thsütitüp* leads to stratification. Status differences are marked by the wearing of different shawls and by the prohibition on wearing certain shawls. Killing gayal dhsüza on the first day of the ritual will be performed only by those who offer the feasts of merit, also unique rituals during the funeral, and the construction of unique housing. During the Koh thsütitüp feasts, women had opportunities to wear special clothing, a symbolic marker of prestige through their husband's achievement. The Koh thsütitüp are not only traditional or cultural practices. However, they are important institutions that continue to promote social solidarity and reinforce stratification and social inequality.

## *Notes*

1. The Sangtam Naga is one of the major tribes of Nagaland, inhabiting the Kiphire and Tuensang districts. The Sangtams have established recognised Sangtam villages in several districts including Dimapur and Peren.
2. Nengthsanengkhongrü means Virtuous actions and the successful completion of the feasts of merit acquire honour and recognition.
3. Thsapihipirü refer to a man who has offered the Yongdiba and Anyidsi (feasts of merit) to the villagers or community.
4. In order to receive blessings, the host abstains from having sex with his spouse during the fifteen or thirty-day Yongdiba and Anyidsi. It is also forbidden to accept fine money, take part in a naming ceremony for a newborn, or consume funeral meat.
5. When an individual neglects taboos, equating all activities without differentiating between good and evil, and indulges indiscriminately, they invite disaster or injury. Individuals regard these ailments as inescapable curses and deem them unavoidable.
6. Iyohrüh and Iiyoh mean upon the announcement of an individual's forthcoming performance of the Yongdiba and Anyidsi, they portion and prepare the meat into little pieces for distribution to the dance troupe, referred to as iyohrü.

7. During feasts, the society designates aged and experienced individuals, unable to engage in hard labour, to safeguard the meat from dogs, other animals, and thieves. They also direct the meat cutting, ascertain suitable portion sizes, and set distribution by advising on who receives certain parts and in what quantities.

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