
Practice of Taking Ndeu (Price of a Woman) in the Zeme Society

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ABSTRACT

The Zeme society considers woman as precious and worth that the family possesses. The wealth, reputation, social prestige of the family and the village community depend on her action and behaviour. She is supposed to be a good administrator, manager, housekeeper, and banker of the household. It is a great loss for the parents when she gets married and goes off to her husband's family taking away all resources. For the worth of a woman, her father demands a price at the time when someone asks his daughter's hand in marriage. In reciprocating the loss, groom's father gives bride price to woman's father, and follows suit different prices at different stages. The main argument presented in this paper is to why the Zeme society taking the price of woman at different stages? It is not contested in favour or against to the practices but its purposes and significance. The paper begins with the introduction of the Zeme tribe, the Zeme's concept of woman, origination of bride price and stages of payment and elaborates the objective of taking different prices and changes in recent time.

Keywords: Zeme, henoumi, kering ndeu, prami, goal of Ndeu

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in human society is associated with either giving (of bride price) or receiving (of dowry) by the parents of the groom or the bride. This monetary transaction is associated with either religious sanctity or the social contract between the two families. Levi-Strauss (1956, pp, 283-84) stresses that in marital connection contract and agreement is made in exchange for something and thus, woman and her price is the 'significant one'. For Maus (1925) reciprocation through gift is the utmost, and is never free that causes its recipient to pay it back. Junod (1927, p, 278) equate giving of a price as sale of a woman as she becomes property of a man that passes from one family to another. Leach (1957) argued that the ownership of physical person of the bride (woman) and all rights that adhere to her are transferred in exchange for the goods in marriage payment. In this context, woman is simply treated as an object since a man paid for her price and claimed over her body. This propagates woman has no right over her own body. Jack R Goody (1970, pp, 37-41) question what is meant by the transfer of ownership of persons or exchange of women. He pointed out that marriage creates rights and duties of the spouses in each other. After marriage woman continues to have rights and obligations towards her natal kin group. It cannot be negated the rights and duties of woman's natal membership by her marital relationship and treated her as commodity.

However, most of the studies did not address to the importance 'of relationship between wife and husband's family'. It is merely interpreted as sale/exchange/absorption of a woman (to her husband's clanship) without even an ounce of what value in aftermath of marital engagement. As Goody (1970) explained marriage creates responsibility and duties of the spouses, the children and to the extent even kin-group. It is a multi-lateral relationship in accomplishing the social, economic, and political ends

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within the institutional limits (Li Puma, 1988, p, 148). A portrayal of a woman in the light of commodity due to the practice of taking of her price has loopholes and one sided commentary. To understand the purposes of taking price, one needs to know the cultural setting of a concern society because each culture differs from one another. If one society values certain things the other does not reciprocate to the same. With the same logic, taking of price of a woman in the Zeme society implicates not simply the price that matters. It is also about the relationship between woman's children and her natal family members. Certain amounts are paid to the woman's family at different stages by husband's family for the worth of woman. This paper is an attempt to explain the purposes of taking woman's price at different stages and its symbolic meaning. It also discusses the origination of price taking or giving and current trends. The paper is neither defending nor rejecting the practice of price taking in the Zeme society, but it is an attempt to know its cultural significance.

ZEME TRIBE

The Zeme tribe is a patrilineal society found in the Indian states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland with population little less than hundred thousand. Under the Indian constitution, the Zeme tribe is recognised as one of the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Racially, the Zeme tribe belongs to the Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Burman group, linguistically to Naga-Bodo- Sub-Group of Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 1909) and ethnically to a larger Naga family. The Zeme tribe is gerontocratic in practice, patriarchal in authority, patri-local in marriage and patrilineal in descent. Monogamy is the accepted form of marriage among the Zeme, though there is no rigid rule prohibiting polygamy. The Zemes practice clan exogamy in marriage but they also practice lineage exogamy as per the customary provisions - sub-clan is separated from the clan tree for the marital purposes. The creation of sub-clan differs from village to village. There are two patri-clans the Newme and the Pame. From these two patri-clans, various sub-clans are created. The Zemes are religious people who observe rites and rituals strictly. Broadly speaking, the Zeme tribe follow three different sets of religious practices – i) forefather religion (*Paupai Tenase*), ii) neo-Hindu (*Heraka*, syncretised religious cult group) and iii) Christianity. With the contact of Christian missionaries and the British, majority of the Zemes converted to Christianity and acquired modern educational system. The Zeme populaces are on the verge of radical changes with the adaptation of new culture, but there is continuity of customs in matter related to marriage, justice and in day-to-day life.

Zeme's Understanding of Woman

Etymologically speaking, woman in the Zeme society has different terms that are often used in referential context. A term such as *mipuimi* is referred to women or womanhood in general and *mipuindung* is referred to a married woman whereas *heleume* is referred to a girl or an unmarried woman. The Zeme tribe considers woman as a giver of life by sustaining and nurturing life. A man needs woman at the beginning of his life. According to the Zeme society's philosophy, woman is the 'plot' (*phung*) and man is the 'seed' (*helei*). When the seed is sown in the plot it grows into big plant. A plot gives manual to the seed to grow as plant and bears branches and fruit. The branches and fruit of the plant are the product of plot and seed. The plant is the by-product of plot and seed. If the plants and fruits are to be healthy the plot's manual is also required to be good. In this sense, woman is the centre of relationship or say networking centre for the two families.

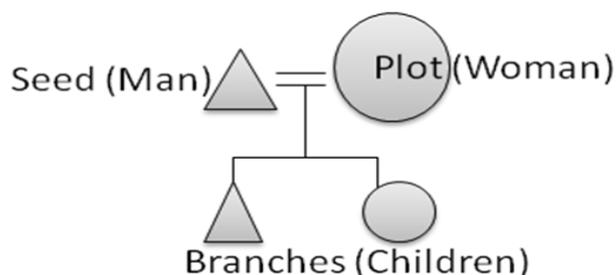


Fig1. Concept of Woman

Origination of Bride Price

Every social system has its own origins and precedent and reasons for certain practices. Likewise, the Zeme people believe that bride price or taking the price of a woman originated from the man name Dambe. And story goes:

Dambe married a beautiful woman and lived happily for a while. One day Dambe went to field for work, unfortunately his beautiful wife died. While in the field, villager informed him about the dead of his wife. Upon hearing the news he could not believe it and said to himself: "how could human being die?" It is said that those days people did not know about death and never witnessed it. When Dambe reached home, he went straight to his wife and asked people present in the room to leave. He locked the room and slept with his wife's corpse to check whether she was dead or alive – to satisfy his sexual gratification as his wife was believed to be beautiful and irresistible to him. However, his wife's parents saw him sleeping with the corpse of his dead wife which made his wife's relatives furious and angry. The father of the woman said, "Dambe has no respect and he must compensate with the price of my daughter." In compensating the damage, Dambe gave the price of his wife to her parents. From that day onward taking of bride price of a woman began to take place in the Zeme society.

This story is not about using of woman as commodity. The story indicates the dignity and respect to the people who raised her and taking away from natal family to live in marital family. In the word of Usher Fleising's (2003), the price is not merely a payment but way of valuing the labour of women, the efforts involved by her family in raising her, and the labour value of her offspring. It is a way of securing the rights of the husband's over the woman's children (pp, 175-176). A woman becoming somebody's wife does not mean that her husband has full right to treat her as per his liking. As indicated in the story, the woman's father imposed penalty on the man for disrespecting the woman and to her family.

Stages of Giving Woman's Price (Ndeu)

The price of a woman in Zeme society is not paid only once but several times by the children and grand-children. In this section, the different stages of payment of price of woman are discussed in the following sub-headings.

Henoumi

Literally it means wife's price. This is a first stage where the price of a woman is demanded by the girl's parents at the time of marital negotiation or on the day of *henoumpoubemai*. The price is paid in kind or in cash as per the quality of the woman. The process involved at this stage begins after the consent of the boy and the girl are given to their parents for marital negotiation. Traditionally, for marital negotiation, boy's parents would come with *hejoubung* (local beverage) and offer to the girl's parents. When the agreement on the marriage proposal is reached, price of the woman is decided upon after agreement is reached between the parents. It is called *hesalangshakaibemai* or *mpouchakaibemai*.

Kering-Ndeu

Literally it means 'life price'. This price is demanded by the woman's relative after the dead of her husband. This price determines the membership of a woman in her husband's household. To sustain membership of the mother, woman's children pay the price to maternal uncle's children. Once her price is given it is permitted to stay until her death in her marital house. In other word, it is called *bamchai ramebe mi* meaning 'paying the price to live till her death'.

According to the oral tradition, the legend Amang was the first person to practice *Kering-Ndeu* for which he took the price of his paternal aunt. It is said that Amang was a poor man without relative and no knowledge of who was his aunt. However, some of his villagers suggested that he should demand the *ndeou* of his paternal aunt who was married to a rich man. He had no idea where she lived, but

some of the villagers found her whereabouts. So, he decided to go and demand the *nde* of his aunt from her husband. As per custom, he had to prepare meat curry and approach the concerned person. To his dismay, he had nothing to cook, therefore, he cut the rope of his traditional bag (*hebe*) into pieces and cooked and packed and went. When he reached his aunt’s place he introduced that he was Amang but she refused to accept the claim. She told him that many people came from different places claiming as Amang but none to be true. So, he narrated his story about his living conditions. On hearing this, she broke down in tears and accepted that he was the real Amang. Then, he gave her the food package. When she unwrapped, it was his bag’s rope. She threw away the food package and prepared chicken and packed for him. She confided to him what type of animal to choose (the weakest and dirtiest among the cattle and in worst health condition). And if he refused to give that one, ask him to give cattle rope (*Kebuiria*). When his aunt’s husband arrived he gave the food package and ate the food. He asked Amang to pick one of the best cattle. As instructed by his aunt, Amang affirmatively wanted the unhealthy cattle. On hearing this, his aunt’s husband was taken by surprise as to how he could give such unhealthy cattle. Amang responded that if he was not willing to give that unhealthy cattle, he wanted half of the share of the cattle’s rope. So, he cut the rope and gave it to Amang. He instructed Amang to cut the rope into pieces and according to the size of the pieces they will grow, "If the garden is big, the size of the cattle will also be big." He did exactly what his aunt’s husband told him to do and animal grew into large number. With these cattle, he became rich, and organised a feast of merit for which he invited all living creatures from four corners of the world to come and witness the great feast.

Kechai-Ndeu

Literally it means ‘death price’. This is demanded after the death of a woman. Traditionally, the Zeme tribe believes that man pays the price of a woman for so long as she lives, but not of her death. It is said that relationship between husband and wife ends after the death of a woman and her soul goes back to her biological home.

Pra-nde

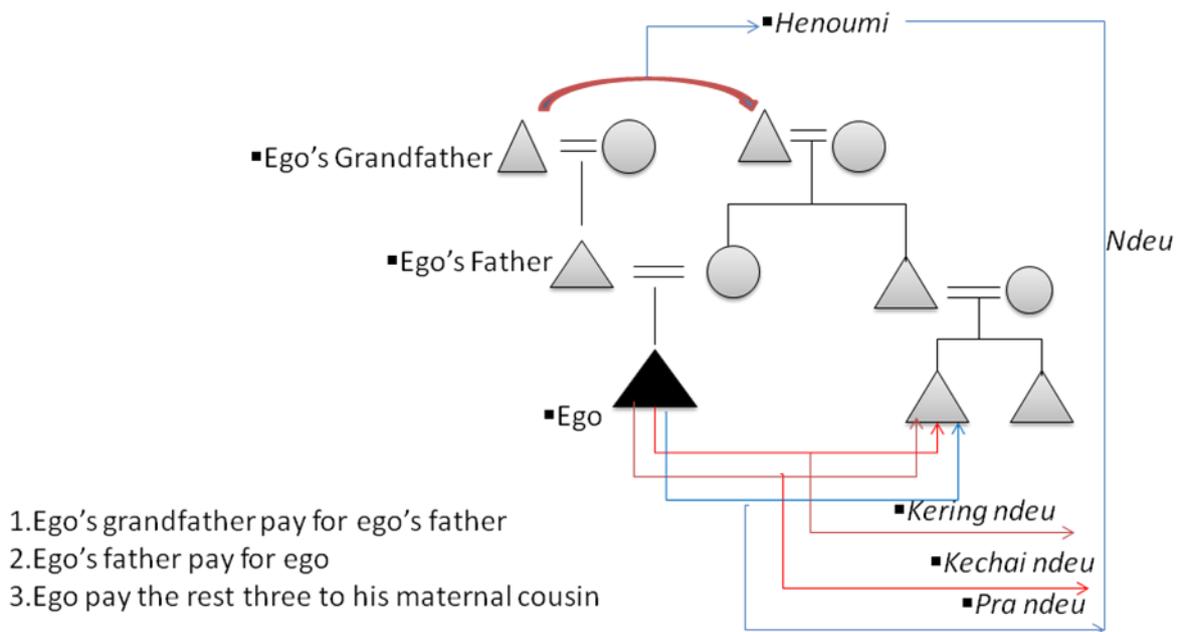


Fig.1.1. Stages of Ndeu Payment

Literally it means ‘bone price.’ This price is demanded after the death and burial of a woman – after several years. In practice, this is not demanded, as the Zeme believe that once this price is taken, relationship between man and woman ceases to exist. As per customs, a woman marries a man from another clan, but her blood and soul belongs to her natal/biological family. Woman is considered as

non-permanent member in her marital house. The *pra-nde* is paid to her biological parents to become full-fledged membership. Once it is paid, woman becomes a member of the husband's household in blood and soul. Initially the 'bride price' (*henoumi*) and 'life price' (*bamchai rabe mi*) are frequently taken, and in rare occasion *Kechai-Ndeu* is also demanded but *Pra-nde* is not often. People believe taking *pra-nde* will cut off the relationship between woman's natal and marital families.

Process of Taking *Kering*, *Kecchai* and *Pra-nde*

Demanding these prices proceed with the intimation of desire to do so. The maternal relatives pass the intimation to woman's children that they wish to proceed with the ceremony of demanding the price. Once the children of a woman receive the intimation they will agree upon and the date is fixed as per convenience of both sides. To demand this price, woman's male relative cannot go empty handed, but they have to cook good food especially meat. They can also go with live animal and cook at the house of the woman's husband. As per custom, meat has to be accompanied by one pot of local brewery (rice beer). The followings are the procedure that followed at the ceremony of *nde* demanding:

- i) Woman's relative would announce they would like to take back their woman since her husband is no more. In reply to the announcement made by the woman's relative, children would plead that their mother should live with them till her death.
- ii) If the woman is dead and buried, her relative would announce that her bone would be taken back to natal home. Woman's children would again plead not to take her bone and agreed to pay the price to become full member of marital family's blood and soul.

Purpose and Goal of *Nde*

The Zeme tribe believes that woman marries a man who belongs to different clan but does not mean she disconnects ties with her natal or biological family. The relationship continues till her death and even after as well. A woman is a bridge between her husband and children and her natal parent at large. In the lives of her children, her male siblings are important. It is believed that mother's male siblings (maternal uncle of woman's children) are considered as the ones who give 'hair and teeth' to a child. A milk tooth is first among them and the milk comes from the mother not from the father. Through the woman it connects her child and rest of her husband's family members. It is said, in the child, blood of the maternal uncle is transpired. Through the blood of maternal uncle, a child that is milking shrouded its teeth. The child's first hair is called '*nratam*' comes from the mother. Child's mother acquired from her male siblings. It is an old saying that 'from my mother milk, my hair and teeth grow'. For this matter, children respect maternal uncle (mother's brother), and they are called *herapou*. This does not mean that mother's blood line has no significance. It is claimed that woman (mother) married to a man of different clan and adopted her husband's clan. Her blood is not purely of her husband but only by convention she has adopted her husband's clan but by blood she belongs to her natal clan. This attaches the importance of relationship between mother's brother and sister's children.

The Zeme society believes that when a woman dies her soul or sprit goes back to the one who delivered/created her. It is said that only for the life - but not for dead - she was given the price to her parent (by a man who married her) to live in her marital house. The connections end with her death as her soul returns to original natal home. After the death and burial of a woman in her marital house, woman's relatives would claim to take her bone back. In response to the claim made by woman's relatives, children would plead their uterine uncle not to. Children would humbly say their mother belongs to them and the bone price will be given unto them as per the demand made by the uterine uncle. By paying the bone price, a woman becomes a full-fledged member of her husband's family in blood and soul. If the price is not paid then there will always be a debt for the husband and her children.

The objective of *nde* is to maintain affinal relationship, and to know who are their uncles, grandchildren, and relatives from the distant past. It also reveals the importance of woman’s uterine uncle in the lives of her children. The so-called *herapou* (uterine uncle) plays vital role in marital negotiation of his sister’s children. Radcliff-Brown (1952, p, 15, 30) pointed out that the strongest of all social bonds is between a child and its mother therefore there is a strong bond between the child and its mother’s family (uterine kin). Similarly, in the Zeme society, there is a strong bond between *herapou* and woman’s children. He will be the first one to be consulted by his sister in any matter. Uterine uncle also not only helps in marriages but tremendously lends physical help in whatsoever way possible. In times of emergency, his sister calls upon her brother instead of her husband’s relative for help. A man does not refuse to help his sister. In practice, the Zeme society does not want to recognise the role of uterine uncle in sister’s household. This is because of patriarchal mindset endorsed among the Zeme populace.

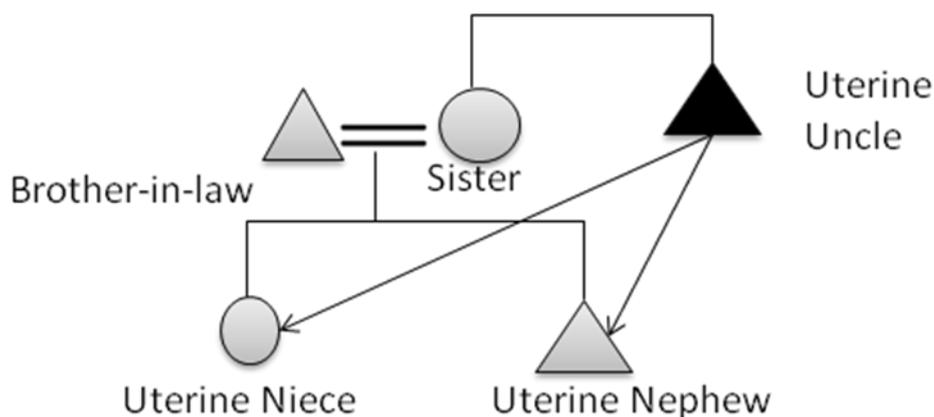


Fig.1.2. Uterine Uncle relation with Sister Children

CONCLUSION

Woman in the Zeme society is considered precious and her worth is highly valued by the family. The wealth, health, bondage, reputation, social prestige of the family, village and community depend on her action and behaviour. Society looks upon, not of the material possession or richness but of the social prestige of a woman. If a woman has social prestige she is held in high esteem in the society. Tradition says that an ideal woman is not loquacious but a talkative woman brings bad reputation to the family. The word of an ideal woman is authentic and unquestionable at any circumstances. For the worthy of a woman, the price is demanded by the father and relatives at different stages. It is believed that giving the price of a woman is a pride and honour for a man. For instance, if a person who does not clear different prices is considered a person who is living with huge debt. This debt remains even to the children and they are looked down by the society to some extent. A person can earn respect in the society with the payment of his debt to the maternal kin family.

However, in the course of changes in the society and with the contact of outsiders, the *nde* are not demanded anymore but only in few instances. In the contemporary context, taking of price of a woman is synonym to treating woman as commodity. Many have expressed that society should shun this practice after all woman has her own decision to make. However, taking *nde* at different stage in the Zeme society does not mean treating woman as commodities or exchange item which can be utilised by patriarchal man only. The important factor in taking *nde* has both metaphorical and material aspects. In reality, woman’s family does not take back the bone - though as it is claimed to be - which is buried. In material aspects, it also helps one another by paying certain amount of money and material to the woman’s relatives. It is also an occasion to know the distant relatives. In

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reciprocation, woman’s relatives give material to the children of their sister if they are rich. It will be wrong to assume *nde* practice as sale of a woman. It is a way of renewing the relationship between families of wife and husband. As society live by means of emotional attachment and feelings rather than a material bargain. It is perceived that the taking of price of a woman in the Zeme society implicates not simply the price that matters but that of relationship between woman’s children and her natal family members.

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