

Tuk: A traditional measuring scale among the Kom Rem tribes of Manipur (India)

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Abstract:

The Kom Rem are tribes composed of a group of six smaller tribes having unique customs and practices. Scales for measurement of length exist as a system in their own right since time immemorial. There are three kinds of scales used for measuring length amongst them. They are the Kaap, the Tuk and the Hlam. The most popular among them is Tuk. The scale is not confined to only these tribes but to their neighbouring people such as the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes and the Meiteis. All though there exist no accurate value for the said scale i.e Tuk (also for the Kaap and the Hlam), its uses and adaptation to the time and circumstances have become rather significant.

This article is an attempt to document the traditional scales of measurement among the Kom Rem tribes descriptively and analytically. The various customary practices imploring the use of such scales are also explored to give a vivid picture of their symbolic uses through customary institutions such as the Village Council.

Keywords: Traditional measuring scales, Tuk, Kaap, Hlam, Kom Rem tribes.

Introduction:

Tuk, pronounced as /tʊk/ in 'took', is a traditional measuring scale popular among the Kom Rem tribes of Manipur, commonly used to measure the size of a quadruped animal. Another equivalent terminology of tuk is 'wai' pronounced as /wai/ in 'wiper'. It is an equivalent of tuk common among the tribes of Manipur and the Valley people, especially the Meiteis in Manipur. It is different from Nou-sun, pronounced as /nʊw/ in 'now', and /su:n/ as in 'soon' which is the commonly accepted standard for determining the price value of a cow or a buffalo according to ages and size as well as based on the number of times the cow or the buffalo has given birth to a calf. According to the belief among the the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes, a cow or a buffalo which have given birth to a more number of times was more valuable and costlier.

Defining Tuk:

Tuk according to the dialects of the Kom Rem people means 'a piece'. It is defined as a piece or a unit of any measurable objects which can be extended to provide a measuring scale for length and breath. Another scale used shorter to 'tuk' is 'kaap' pronounced as /ka:p/ in 'calve'. It is simply the length covered by a stretched index finger and the thump from each tips.

It is an interesting fact among these tribes that when a person is asked to measure any quadruped animal, he will resort to the following practices. Firstly, he will curl all his fingers inward, both hands. Then he will stretch his thump and folds it with the tip of the thump placed on the curled index finger, almost making a fist. With both hands extended, the left fist will be placed on the left side and the right fist on the right side, each folded thumps barely touching each other. The length covered by the two fists is normally assumed to be one Tuk. This makes the length of a Tuk almost equivalent to one feet. A 'Tuk' or 'Tuk inkhat' is the length of the two fists as mentioned above (Grierson, 1972:336). In order to measure an animal, they will resort to such counting of Tuk from the head or forehead to its tail, commonly known as 'adung' or length. The size of an animal measured at the fattest or largest part near the bowel/stomach, is commonly known as 'awai' or breath. So the numbering based on Tuk goes as 'Tuk inkhat' or one Tuk, 'Tuk inhni' or two Tuk(s)...and, so on. Sometimes, due to difficulties or inconveniences in measuring the animals by such a practice, a small thinly maleated bamboo sheets known as 'manang' (commonly used for binding purposes) are used at first to measure the length and breadth of the animals, and the number of 'Tuk' counted or measured on that bamboo sheet, later.

Standardizing 'Tuk' & its limitation:

There cannot be an accurate length of a Tuk. Tuk is not a standardized form or scale. But it is an accepted scale of measurement among the Aimols, the Chirus, the Kharams, the Koirengs, the Koms and the Purums which comprises the six sub-tribes of the Kom Rem. Although the standards are similar all throughout the tribes, its accuracy varies from village to village, and from person to person upon whom the task of measuring are entrusted. As such, in circumstances involving two or more groups, each party brought their sakamaks (a person who marries one's daughter or sister) or entrusted persons to agree on the measured animals (Serto, T, 2007:19). When one group has finished measuring, the other party has to re-measure again, negotiating, bargaining and coming to an agreement at last. This becomes a common practice, and therefore, a part and parcel of their customs as such.

Approx. 1 ½ Kaap= Approx. 1 Tuk

Approx. 7 Tuk (s)= Approx. 1 Hlam

The measure of each Kaap, Tuk or Hlam can be manipulated in many ways; for example, the length of a Kaap differs from a person to person. A person with bigger and larger index finger and palm will surely have a longer Kaap leading to correspondingly larger Tuk and Hlam. Again a person with a smaller index finger and palm will have shorter length. As such, it is wise to figure out the smallest Kaap, Tuk and Hlam and the longest Kaap, Tuk and Hlam. The mean of the longest and the shortest measurement resulted in an approximate measurement of the same. But such calculation of mean is too sophisticated for the people of these tribes who measures remotely. Besides, there occurs specific uses of Kaap, Tuk and Hlam; each one used under different circumstances and for different purposes.

Tuk & its uses:

Tuk is generally used to measure animals. It is the most common and popular scale among the Kom Rem people. Customs dictate that all fines, penalties and prices of animals to be paid are measured in terms of Tuk. So, the animals to be paid have to fit to the prescribed length and size. Those who do not follow the norms are penalized again leading to imposition of subsequent penalties. It, in other words, set the standards for an animal to be produced or paid, involving:

- i. Payment of penalties, such as pig or cow or buffalo, etc. imposed by the customary courts;
- ii. Payment of bride price, in case if a bride price has to be paid in terms of a pig, cow or buffalo;
- iii. Any other wild boar or animals killed during hunting and measured in tuk.

Majority of penalties imposed by the customary court of the village mainly relates to divorce (Serto, 2007:26). A divorce case can be initiated both by the husband and the wife on the grounds like cruelty, adultery, barrenness and polygamous marriage. The council of elders acting as the jury normally, in a divorce case initiated by the husband, if finds the wife as not guilty, then the husband has to pay the following fines as penalties decided by the elders:

- i. A cow/buffalo/mithun;
- ii. A pig measuring five Tuks for the jury of elders; and
- iii. A pot of wine for the jury of elders (Serto, T, 2007:28).

Likewise, if it is the wife who initiates the divorce, and her husband is not guilty, then she has to pay the following fines:

1. A cow/buffalo/mithun in return of the bride the husband had paid in time of her marriage.
2. A pig measuring five Tuks for the jury of elders; and
3. A pot of wine for the jury of elders.

Besides these, the entire dowry brought by her could not be taken back and must be left with the husband. Although the suckling baby may accompany the mother but she has to return the child to the father after some years if the father decides to take the child back with him. The council of elders serves as the final jury of any divorce case. Its decisions are final and binding to both sides, and could not be reviewed. It may be noted here that normally, if the person against whom a divorce case is initiated be found guilty, then the one who initiated the divorce didn't have to pay the fines measured in terms of Tuk. A penalty imposed with a pig of five Tuk also occurred in similar cases such as adultery, divorce due to barrenness, polygamy, etc. Sometimes, a divorce may also take place without either of the husband or wife paying any fines to the other if they mutually agree so. But this happens only during *Tong-lai-tong tan*, also known as *Keinou Wayen* meaning *mutual agreement*.

Again, in cases involving dispute resolutions whose settlement are made by the Chief and his councilor, the Village Katar (Village Council) or Upa imposed fines on the culprit(s) a pig or cow or mithun measuring certain Tuk based on customary laws within the village. Except on cases involving inter-village disputes where both the parties enlisted their village chiefs or Katar (the elders), no cases are solved outside the village. However, due to absence of a body acting as an over-seer on inter-village disputes, many

such disputes have taken the form of inter-village feuds. The feuds even extended to the question of accuracy of Tuk; each village adopting different lengths of Tuk.

The laws for dispute resolution are orally transmitted and administered unlike codified laws. But payment of fines or penalties in Tuk is sanctioned by the customs and practices of the Kom Rem people. Under these laws, disputes in the nature of offences (both civil and criminal) such as assault or bodily injury, homicide, theft, adultery, fornication, incest, divorce, disturbance of peace, etc. are included. Besides there also exist the proper way of payment for offences committed including prescribed punishment and penalties associated with each offence.

Prescribed punishment according to custom in Tuk:

Punishment according to the custom meant simple payment of fines or penalties prescribed by the Village Council or Upa/Kataar. Normally, in cases involving assault or bodily injury, the penalties imposed is a pig of medium size measuring five Tuk, and one pot of wine to be offered to the Upa or Kataar. If the injury is of serious nature, one cow is also penalized upon the offender as an immediate relief to the injured person. Cases involving theft, adultery, fornication, incest, divorce, disturbance of peace, etc. required the offender to kill a pig of medium size measuring five Tuk, and one pot of wine to be offered to the Upa or Kataar.

Kaap & its uses:

Kaap is generally used in measuring the width and breadth of traditional clothes woven on handlooms. Some of these clothes worn by men in their traditional attires include ponthle, pon rabo, ponchai, hepon, rengnu-am, pon-lum and pase-pon, etc.¹ Similarly, some of the commonly worn clothes associated with the women such as ponte, ponkokhoi, khamtlang, hmukhamjar, amtepon, chibusa, sazumpon, kahnik, tingsoi, sherkok and pherpum, etc. are also measured on Kaap.² The Kom Rem tribes have many dresses and dress code (Singh, KS 1998:95). Men are forbidden to wear dresses meant for women. As such weaving or loin making are taken up on an extensive scale. This industry is devoid of all sort of modern or mechanized scales and measurement. In fact all the traditional shawls, clothes and other loin costumes with varied and delicate colours and designs are made on the traditional loom using Kaap.

Secondly, traditional Gongs are also measured in Kaap. For example, at the time of payment for the first bride price called *Alukhong-Akangki* or *Man Lukaching*, it consists of a *Sum* i.e. a brass gong whose diameter is three Kaap along with a full grown *mithun*. This was followed by a second type of payment of a fine brass gong of one Kaap (in diameter) or *mithun*. In earlier times, the main bride price known as *Manpu* comprises of five *mithuns* or buffaloes, one gong of eight Kaap in diameter, and several jars of *ju/wine*.

Hlam & its uses:

Hlam is the largest scale used among the people. It is the length covered from the tip of the left hand to the tip of the right hand when an average person stretched his hands straight in opposite direction at 180 degrees. It is generally used for measuring the width and breadth while constructing a house and also while measuring one's land. However, it is a very unscientific scale among them. It is used for measuring one's own house or land thereby invoking less dispute and counter claims. The use of Hlam has declined now a day. Instead, it became mandatory that lands, possessed by a person or a household be recorded under the land reform rules or other statutory laws such as the MLR (Manipur Land Reforms) Act 1960.

¹ Ponthle is generally a white color clothes with delicate design carved on it; Pon raboo is also a kind of thick warm-clothes made with manga konpi thread, a kind of local thread commonly used by the poorer section; Ponchai is a white colour cloth used for wrapping around the waist in order to cover the lower parts of the body, or at times for wrapping around the whole body; Hepon is also a kind of cloth with delicate designs and colours on it; Pasepon is a black colour cloth with red colour designs engraved on it which is also used for wrapping around the waist in order to cover the lower parts of the body, or at times for wrapping around the whole body; and, Lukom is a cloth of either black or white in colour engraved with rengnu-am (literally meaning the queen's design). It is generally smaller in size and used for wrapping around the head.

² Ponte is a striped cloth of black, red and white in colour; Ponkokhoi is also a striped cloth of pink, black and white in colour; Khamtlang is red and yellow in colour, with striped designs at the two ends facing each other; Hmukhamjar is a white colour cloth commonly used as one of the Lukim, also known as head covering; Amtepon is a less designed but most commonly worn cloth used for wrapping like the ponvei; Chibusa is a cloth with complex designs; Kahnik is an inner garment worn by women; and, Tingsoi is worn (by women) to cover their heads.

Conclusion:

During olden days, hunting as well as killing wild animals was considered a novel task among the Kom Rem people. As such, a person who has killed a wild animal was highly regarded and respected. It was an act of gaining prestige and honour. Forbidding hunting makes the used of 'Tuk' less frequent, confining to measuring only to a handful of animals such as a pig. As is well known, the used of metric system for measuring length, weight, and height has introduced a common and standard system all throughout the world. Almost all the essential commodities, tools, goods, etc. come in a uniform standard. As such, animals are weighted in Kilograms now. Besides, killing wild animals today is a forbidden act. It is rightly said that tribal people have a life of their own. One peculiar feature about the Kom Rem tribes is the acceptance of a measuring scale having no accurate length. Tuk is used in their day to day life to solve the problems arising out of measurement. The absence of trade and restricted commercial practices during olden days made the scale quite useful and fulfilling the communal needs of the people. There have been so far no evidences of market or trading centers existing among these people. Money was not involved until recently, nor were animal's meat sell for commercial purposes. Instead, such meats were given or exchanged with favor; for example, the fattest portion belonged to the maternal uncle or the chiefs. However, the introduction of trade and commercialization through the use of money, practices such as selling and purchasing in open market required an easy to use and standardized measuring scale. The impact of liberal democratization and scientific commercialization has indeed changed their way of life in various aspects. However, one peculiarity that has not changed is the customary life, practices and customs of these tribes. Even then and now, the limited and rare uses of 'Tuk' during customary proceedings in a customary court have made this scale a unique cultural symbol among the people.

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