

# The Position of the Khasi Jaintia Women as Reflected in the festivals and Dances

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The Khasi Jaintia predominantly inhabit the East and West Khasi Hills Districts and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. They have many important festivals and dances and their way of life is clearly reflected in their various festivals, and the social relevance of the festivals is very great as each festival has certain meanings to them. The unique institution among the Khasi and Jaintia is the matrilineal system, and due to its matrilineal character, the children always bear the names of the mother's clan, except in the War areas where the children could also adopt that of their father's. In the Khasi Jaintia society, women enjoy social and economic freedom and are highly respected, and they enjoy an unusual dignified and important position. Women are accorded respect as ones through whom the clan and the race is propagated. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine what role do women have in the festivals and dances, besides their usual roles as women and mothers and how the position of women is reflected in the two selected festivals. Women hold an important position and play an important role in the festivals and dances whether in the Bhoi area, in the Jaintia Hills or in the upland Khasi Hills.

The two selected festivals are (1. *The Chad Chiphiah or Chad Jong Nikhla or the Chad Laho* or more popularly known as the Laho Dance. (2) *The Pomblang Syiem or Pomblang Nongkrem or Shad Nongkrem* or more popularly known as the Nongkrem Dance.

## (1) The Laho Dance

The Laho dance festival is the traditional dance of the Jaintia or Pnar. It is a dance which glorifies the name and glory of God and shows the intimate relationship between God and man.<sup>1</sup> It is a very old dance festival, and the people believe that it is connected with the earliest settlement and habitation of the Jaintia. *Chiphiah* means dividing into two in the local dialect, so *Chad Chiphiah* means a dance which divides two male dancers by one

female dancer or a female dancer in the middle is encompassed by two male dancers, one on the right and another on the left. The Chiphiah dance earlier was discontinued for many years it was the Nihla clan who revived the same and for this reason the *Chad Chiphiah* became known as the *Chad Iong Nihla* or the Nihla Dance or a dance of the Nihla clan, later on it became known as the Laho dance.

There is a tradition<sup>2</sup> which suggests that there lived from time immemorial an honest woman named ka Ring Nihla at Jowai who belonged to the Nihla clan. The people called her ka Rangkit, and it was believed that she was a God gifted woman, and she did many good works for her people in her life time. Later on, her time came when she had to leave the world and she disappeared all of a sudden at *Chah tngit* a place at Jowai. Since then the members of the Nihla clan respected her as their family deity. After many many years, then one night, a woman named ka Syndur Nihla who belonged to the Nihla clan had a dream and in her dream she saw ka Rangkit who advised her to revive the *Chiphiah* dance. Ka Syndur Nihla told her dream to the members of the Nihla clan, they agreed and decided to revive the Chiphiah Dance. Then the Chiphiah dance was again performed with great pomp and grandeur at Chilliang Raj, a place in Jowai. In this way the Chiphiah Dance once again came into existence, and as it was revived by the Nihla clan, it came to be known as the Nihla Dance. This does not mean that all the participants should belong to the Nihla clan, but other clans can also participate. The fact is that one virgin female dancer who belongs to the Nihla clan must participate, otherwise the dance cannot be performed.<sup>3</sup> Thus a female dancer is indispensable, this is seen in the last Nihla dance in 1917. At this time, there was no virgin female who belonged to the Nihla clan at Jowai except ka Sngi Nihla who stayed in Shillong. The elders of Jowai who organised the dance festival, had to come to Shillong to take ka Sngi Nihla to Jowai, so that the dance could be performed. Ka Sngi Nihla could not go because her mother was in the advanced stage of the family way and moreover, she was the only elderly female member in the family to attend to the mother. It was said that after delivery, if her mother had no objection to her daughter's going, then she would go. The elders then prayed to God, on behalf of the mother to deliver a child that night. The prayer lasted for many hours, when the mother gave birth to a female child that very night. Next morning, ka Sngi Nihla along with her uncle u Khro Nihla went immediately to Jowai.



Thus the dance was observed successfully in 1917.<sup>4</sup> Thus a woman plays a very important role in this festival.

The Laho dance depicts the family structure of the Jaintia, where the uncle, the niece and the husband or father are represented. This dance shows the various duties and responsibilities that the uncle, the husband or father have in the Jaintia family set up. In the Laho dance, there are three dancers in each group, the female dancer dances in the middle and she is flanked by two male dancers, one on the right and another on the left. This shows that the woman is held in high regards in the Jaintia family, she is regarded as the custodian of the family, the propagator of the clan and the race and the preserver of posterity. The male dancer on her right symbolises the uncle, who is the protector of the family, the clan and the race as a whole. The male dancer on her left stands for the husband or the father of the children who is the progenitor of the clan. The female dancers should be only virgins, married women do not participate in the dance. This shows the purity and sanctity of the Laho dance. The lone female dancer, who dances backward and forward right and left in the midst of the dancers stands for the *langdoh*, or the priestess who is the custodian of religion.<sup>5</sup> Thus the position of women in the Jaintia Society is clearly reflected in this Laho dance festival.

The Laho dance is very significant from the historical and social point of view. It is regarded as the traditional dance of the Jaintia, as it marks the beginning of their habitation here on earth the Laho dance also depicts their family structure and the role that men and women have in the society.

## (2) The Pomblang Syiem or Pomblang Nongkrem or Shad Nongkrem.

The festival is popularly known as the *Shad Nongkrem* or the Nongkrem Dance, it is a well known religious festival of the Khasi. It is a state religious festival of the Khyrim Syiemship, which is held annually at the *Ingsad*, the official residence of the Khyrim Syiemship at Smit. This festival is held to honour and respect ancestors, the founders of the state and religion and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, well being and general prosperity of the ruling family and the people as the whole.

### Origin of the Shillong or Khyrim Syiemship :

The origin of the Shillong or Khyrim Syiemship is traced back to ka Pah Syntiew, who is believed to be the mother ancestress of the ruling family. According to a popular Khasi tradition,<sup>6</sup> ka

Pah Syntiew had a mythical background, she lived in a cave at Marai, which is situated between Nongkrem and Pamlakrai. Ka Pah Syntiew was a very beautiful girl and was very simple. She used to come out during day time, as she was attracted by the warm air and the beauty of nature. She used to sit on the rocks and many boys who tended the cows and sheep saw her every now and then. The boys reported what they had seen to their parents and the people. Many tried to catch her, but as soon as they reached the entrance, she quickly went inside the cave through a very narrow entrance, and they could not proceed inside. Then one day, a man who belonged to the Myllemngap clan went to the cave, holding a bunch of flowers known as u 'tiew jalynteng to attract her to come out. She approached near the entrance to catch the flowers, but before she could snatch them from his hands, he withdrew slowly, and the maiden followed him, and then he caught and took her home. The Myllemngap family looked after her and loved her as their own daughter, and she grew up to be a very beautiful woman. She was known as ka Pah syntiew, meaning one who is allured or enticed by a flower. She won the love and admiration of all who came in contact with her. Ka Pah Syntiew was given in marriage to a young man from Nongjri, who was a warrior and statesman. They lived happily and she bore him two sons and one daughter who grew up to be strong, healthy and wise.

One day ka Pah Syntiew left the house, her husband and children and went back to the cave at Marai. Her husband and children tried very hard to persuade her to come back, but she refused. The fame of ka Pah Syntiew and her children spread to all the *Raid* and the nobles and rulers of these *Raid* planned to form a common state, the question arose as to who should be the *Syiem* or chief, and all cried out in the *Dorbar*, that the eldest son of ka Pah Syntiew should be the chief. The proposal was accepted and the eldest son became the first chief of *ki Syiem Shillong* or the Shillong chiefs. Thus the Shillong or Khyrim Syiemship originated and the Nongkrem festival must have started with the origin of the syiemship itself. It is a common belief that ka Pah Syntiew particularly loved the little children where she taught them how to sing and dance. <sup>7</sup>

The important feature during this festival is the role of the *Syiemsad* who is the custodian of the state religion, this is in conformity with the matrilineal system of the Khasi, where a woman holds a respectable position in the society, Her main functions are to keep ready the necessary things and articles on occasion of sacri-



fices during the festival, in concurrence with the priestly clan. In the past, she sent a proposal for the appointment of chief to the *Dorbar*, *Syiemsad* is a unique political institution of the Khasi political thought. She is entrusted with the custody of rites and ceremonies of the state in order that her moral force may serve as a restraining hand, a power behind the throne. In the Khyrim Syiemship, the line of descent for *ka Syiemsad* is to the eldest daughter, but in the other states as in Cherra and Nobosohphoh, the youngest daughter occupies her place.<sup>8</sup>

On all the days of the festival, the *Syiemsad* plays an important role. The festival starts on the weekday of Pomtiah, the *Dhulia* or musicians beat their drums till the sun rises to wake up the people and remind them that on that night, the religious ceremony of the *Pomblang Nongkrem* will start. At night of the same day, the *Syiemsad* or high priestess prepares three earthen vessels of *ka iadum* or rice beer and one gourd. On that night, the *Sohblei* or high priest who belongs to the Rumnong clan will perform the ceremony in front of the fire place or hearth inside the house. First of all, the *Syiemsad* gives a gourd of rice beer from one vessel to the *Sohblei* who dedicates this first gourd to *u Blei Shillong*, the *Dhulia* beat their drums and play their pipes, the *Sohblei* prays for the well being of the *Syiem*, and the ruling family, the state and people on the whole, he pours the rice beer in the hearth. Then the *Dhulia* change their tunes, the *Syiemsad* gives the *Sohblei* a gourd of rice beer from another vessel, he offers this second gourd to *ka Blei longsyiem* or ancient ancestral mother of the syiem clan which means to *ka Pah Syatiew*, praying for the blessings and protection to all, he also pours the rice beer in the hearth. The *Dhulia* continues to beat their drums and the *Syiemsad* gives a gourd of rice beer from another vessel, and the high priest offers the last gourd to *u saidnia longsyiem* or the first maternal uncle of the Syiem clan for his blessings for general prosperity.

On the second day, before the sun rises, the *Dhulia* bring all their drums to the *Ingsad*, and beat the religious drums. At night, the *Sohblei* offers libation to *u Blei Shyllong*, *ka Blei longsyiem* and *u saidnia longsyiem* in the same way as on the previous night.

Early in the morning of the third day, certain ceremonies are to be performed at the *Lum Iewduh pomblang*, a hillock. The *Syiemsad*, gets ready with all the preparations and things to be taken to the hillock, then the elder *Syiem* and all the people leave the *Ingsad* and walk in a procession to the hillock. There is a woman who carries all the necessary things in the *Khoh* or conical

basket to the place, once she leaves the Ingsad to the hillock, she is not supposed to turn back.

The fourth day of the festival is the day when the goats are killed for the sacrifice and it is also a day of dancing. On this day, the *Syiemsad* and the *Sohblei* fast the whole day long. Early in the morning, the musicians beat the drum known as *ka sing kynthei* or the female drum in the room of the *Ingsad*, known as *ka Ingbah*. The female members of the ruling family who are virgins in their beautiful traditional dancing dresses bedecked with gold, silver and other ornaments dance round the hearth three times along with the *Bakhrav* or elders of the state. After this dance inside the house, they come out and perform a traditional dance known as *ka shad noh kjat ki syiem*, which means the opening or inauguration of the dance by the female members of the ruling family. When they dance, there are someone to hold the umbrella to cover them.<sup>9</sup> This is to show respect to the *Syiem's* family and also to differentiate the female dancers of the ruling family from other dancers.<sup>10</sup> One of the chief dancer is the daughter of the *Syiemsad* or any female virgin members of the ruling family who will be the *Syiemsad* later on. After this dance, then follows the dance of other male and female dancers. On the same day after sunset, the *Syiemsad* makes preparation at the *Ingbah* for the sacrifice. She distributes all the necessary things for the sacrifice to *u Sohblei* and all those who will perform the sacrifice.

The Nongkrem dance is held in the dancing ground in front of the *Ingsad*. All female dancers must be virgins, no married woman dares to enter the dancing field, regarding the male dancers, both married and unmarried can dance. In the group dance whether at the Nongkrem dance or in the Shad Sukmynsiem, the women dance in the inner circle of the dancing arena moving their bare-feet gracefully forward and backward with their eyes casting downwards, they should not look this way or that way. This signifies the modesty, humility and purity of women, the qualities that they should possess. The whole body of a female dancer is balanced and the hands remain straight and do not move. They have to move their feet in conformity with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes. The male dancers dance in the outer circle of the women, this shows that the men are the protectors of the family, clan and the race. The men's dance is more lively and enthusiastic, they hold *u symphiah* or sort of flyflab in their hands and they move with footsteps forward and backward to the accompaniment of the beating of the drums and the playing of the pipes!



by the muscians. In another dance known as *ka shadwait* or sword dance, the male dancer hold the sword. The dance of the women in the inner circle means that women are held in high regard and respect in the Khasi society. The men dance in the outer circle of the women which shows that men are the protectors of the women, the family, clan and the race. It is during the dancing occasion also that the men could see the beautiful girls and make a proposal for marriage, but they should first of all know to which clan she belongs, whether she is within the permissible kinship to avoid *ka shong sang* or marriage within the same clan, which is considered as a mortal sin in the Khasi-Jaintia society.

Besides these two festivals, the dignified position and important role of women is clearly reflected in other festivals and dances which are performed in the different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia hills.

### Notes & References

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