

THE FESTIVALS IN THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE KHASI

ABSTRACT

By

Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED
IN
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

To



THE NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY

SHILLONG-793 001

MEGHALAYA (INDIA)

1989

A B S T R A C T

Statement of Problem

The Khasi who predominantly inhabit the East and West Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya have many important festivals and dances which are very ancient and have survived the stress and strain of time and circumstances. Some festivals are also of recent origin, example can be given of Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or Shad Weiking, which had its origin during the British period, when a need was felt for the preservation of the traditional culture of the Khasi due to the threat posed by the process of westernization. Another dance is Ka Shad Tirot or the Tirot Sing's dance or Tirot Sing's day celebration where male and female dancers dance in a similar way as in the Shad Weiking. This celebration started about two decades to commemorate the heroic deeds of u Tirot Sing in the Khasi war of resistance against British imperialism.

The way of life of the Khasi is reflected in their various festivals, and the social relevance of the festivals is very great, as each festival has certain meaning to them. In the precolonial period, the Khasi had been able to maintain social and political isolation, in spite of the influence of the neighbouring plains' people particularly Sylhet and Bengal

with whom the Khasi had commercial contacts. They had their own traditional religion, unique political and social system. Their social, economic and political activities were all governed by the situation and environment that they lived, and their very existence depended on good harvest. To free themselves from plague, pestilence and various diseases and to get a bountiful harvest, they propitiate God through sacrifices, and rites and rituals are parts of their festivals. Some of the festivals are celebrated after the sowing season and some others after the harvesting season and before sowing for the new year is done. It is during these festive occasions that the people thank God for all His kindness and blessings, that He has showered upon them in the year that had passed and also to invoke His blessings for a bountiful harvest, good health and general prosperity for the coming year.

The major festivals are:-

1. Ka Chad Chiphiah, or Chad Iong Nikhla or Chad Laho or the Laho Dance

The Laho Dance is one of the oldest traditional dance of the Pnar or Jaintia living in the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. It is a very old festival, and it is connected with the earliest settlement and habitation of the Pnar. The Laho Dance is a thanksgiving dance to honour God, the Creator, for all His blessings that He has bestowed upon the people. The

original name is Chad Chiphiah or Chiphiah Dance, and later on it became known as the Laho Dance.

2. Ka Rongkhli or Tiger Festival

Ka Rongkhli is the most important festival of the War Jaintia, and is performed at Nongtalang village, which lies in the southern part of the Jaintia Hills District, bordering Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Rong means festival and khli means tiger in the local dialect, so Rongkhli means the Tiger festival. This festival is held whenever a tiger is killed accidentally or by the villagers on their organised hunting. In whatever manner that the tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped. It is their belief that if God is not worshipped, certain calamities like epidemic diseases, starvation, blindness will befall on the people. The festival is usually held in the months of January, February or March after the harvesting work is over.

3. Ka Behdeinkhlam

Ka Behdeinkhlam is another religious festival which is celebrated by the pnar or Jaintia inhabiting the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. This festival is celebrated annually at Jowai and in some other places of the Jaintia Hills district such as Tuber, Shyrmang, Ialong, Mukhla and Muthlong. Behdeinkhlam means a festival to drive away plague with the help of sticks. The festival is held in the month of June or July after

the sowing season. The people observe this festival to free themselves from various diseases and other evils and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, and well being of the people on the whole, so that they could live happily throughout the year.

4. Ka Lukhmi

Ka Lukhmi is an important festival in the Raid Iapngar and some other places in the Bhoi area in the northern part of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. It is held in the month of March before the sowing begins and after the harvesting work is done. This festival is connected with agriculture and cultivation rites of the people. The people in the Bhoi area depend much on agriculture which is the mainstay of their economy. This festival is performed to Ka Lukhmi or ka 'Leikba the goddess of rice and agriculture which symbolises wealth and prosperity. It is celebrated for a good harvest of rice and other crops, so that they would have enough food for the whole year and also for the general welfare of the people on the whole.

5. Ka Sajer ka Raid Nonglyngdoh

Ka Sajer is a popular festival of the Bhoi area in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. It is observed in the months of December, January or February after the harvesting work is over and before sowing for the new year. It is connected

with agriculture and cultivation rites of the people for the prosperity of crops particularly rice which is their main food. At the same time during this religious ceremony, the people thank God the Creator for all the blessings that He has showered upon them throughout the year.

6. Ka Lakympong

Ka Lakympong is another festival of the Bhoi which is celebrated in the Raid Tyrso and Raid Nongtung and other places of the Bhoi area. There are two types of Lakympong dance festival, the first one is Ka Shad Lakympong Khyraw or the dance of the youth which include the celebration of only young unmarried boys and girls, it is a festive dance festival and has no religious connection. The second one is the Lakympong Lukhmi, it is celebrated once in every five years. The Lakympong is celebrated in the month of February or March after the harvesting work is over and before the sowing for the new year begins. It is a festival in which the people pray to God the Creator to invoke His blessings for a bountiful harvest, particularly rice which is the main food of the people and at the same time to pray for their general welfare and prosperity.

7. Ka Pomblang Syiem or ka Pomblang Nongkrem or the Nongkrem Dance

This festival is the 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 at Smit, a few kilometres from Shillong. The Nongkrem dance is also known as ka Shad Nguh Syiem or a festival to show respect to the Syiem or Chief and the ruling family. This festival is held to honour and respect the 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 on the whole.

8. Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or Shad Weiking or the Weiking Dance

Shad Suk Mynsiem means a dance when the heart is happy or peaceful. It is an annual thanksgiving dance, which is held under the auspices of the Seng Khasi a socio-religious and cultural organisation of the Khasi. This dance festival is held at the Weiking field in Shillong and it is quite different from others as it is of comparatively recent origin. During this festival, the people thank God for all His blessings in the year that had passed and to invoke His blessings for the coming year for a bountiful harvest and general prosperity. The dance is held annually for three days in the month of April after the harvest is done and when sowing for the new year is over.

Besides the above festivals, there are still many more festivals and dances, which are celebrated in the different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Some of them have religious association while others have no religious connection at all, but here we are going to study only the above eight festivals.

Survey of Literature

The festivals play a very important role in the life and culture of the Khasi, but festivals have not been taken up as a separate study by any one. Although some authors have attempted to write on the festivals, and some articles have been written in journals, newspapers and magazines both in English and Khasi, yet no one has made a specific study on the festivals of the Khasi, their historical contents, social relevances and the influence of the festivals on the social, religious, economic and political aspects of the people. A survey of the existing literature reveals that the festivals and dances of the Khasi have not been studied in a true perspective and treated thoroughly as they should have been done so. Therefore an attempt is made in this work to study some of the important festivals of the Khasi and their influence on the life of the people.

Objective

The object of this dissertation has been to study the festivals of the Khasi in historical perspective. An attempt is made to study some of the important major festivals of the Khasi, and the influence that they have on the life and culture of the people. The study includes the origin, evolution and contents of the festivals, the glimpses that they offer in the past and brings to light the social relevances which have been lying dormant for so long, and at the same time to focus on the rich cultural heritage of the people.

Data

The data for this work have been collected mainly from the field, through interviews with selected knowledgeable persons and those who participate in the festivals and from the oral traditions. Besides these, we have consulted whatever books or articles that are available on the subject both in English and Khasi. As it has been our intention to make some comparison with the select festivals of some other tribes of North East India, this exercise has to be limited to the available published monographs on such festivals.

Organisation

The theme has been organised into eight chapters for the purpose of treatment. The first chapter opens the thesis with a profile of the Khasi dealing with their origin and migration, their religious and social systems, and the physical environment of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

The second chapter discusses the life of the Khasi throughout the year, how they lived in political and social isolation with little contact with neighbouring plains, and how the basic traits of culture remained unaffected by outside changes till the coming of the British. As the people settled in these hills, the villages and other social and political institutions came into existence. This chapter also shows how the people made adjustments with their own environment for the

sake of existence. For this existence and adjustment, they organised their life throughout the year, and this organisation of life when refined over the ages led to the evolution of the Khasi system of reckoning time or the Calendar. The Khasi Calendar is based on agricultural activities and nature. They have their own names for the twelve months of the year and also the days of the week, which is an eight days' week based on market schedule. There is a time of sowing and harvesting other agricultural and some other activities and they have their time of relaxation. They organise their festivals and dances in a year, they observe fertility rites which are connected with agriculture and cultivation.

The third chapter attempts a general survey of the festivals. An attempt is made to introduce the eight major festivals, the objectives of each festival, the areas where they are held, and the months in which each festival is being observed.

The fourth chapter is an attempt at an analytical study of the festivals, which show their historical origin, evolution, and how each festival is being preserved till date.

Chapter five attempts to examine the form and contents of the festivals, whether the festivals are agricultural, religious or secular, rural or urban, and the different functions of the festivals which include the rituals, dresses, ceremonies, their musical instruments and so on.

Chapter six examines the importance of the festivals in tribal life, and attempt is made at a comparative study of the festivals of the Khasi with some of the festivals of the other tribals of the North East. The Khasi like other tribals of the region love dances, music and songs which are connected with their various colourful festivals. The tribals of the North East in general observe various festivals, which are the characteristic features of the tribal society. They bring a sense of joy, love and brotherhood amongst the people. Observance of fertility rites relating to agriculture is the main occasion of the festivals which are celebrated with different customary rites and religious rituals.

Chapter seven brings into focus the contemporary trends, particularly the modernizing and revivalist dichotomy. This chapter shall examine whether the people are moving away from tradition or want to revive the same. The people are now politically and culturally conscious, as is evident from many of the recent movements, and writings, they want to preserve their language, culture, identity and also their festivals and dances and their rich cultural heritage. Revivalist movement appeared as a result of the quest of identity, there is a crisis of identity which the people are very much concerned about. With the progress of modernization and with so much of transformation, the people fear that there may not be anything Khasi

left and in no time, their customs, traditions and their old way of life would disappear. There is also a danger in their political and economic life and the people apprehend that the tribal people will be outnumbered in no time. It is these contemporary political and economic problems that the society is facing, that the people have become conscious of their identity, and it is in their attempt to strengthen their identity that they appreciate their past when it was uncontaminated. They start to appreciate their past, their indigenous way of life like festivals and dances, songs and musical instruments, their basic customs and traditions to show that they are a unique and different people from others.

Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of the thesis which review the earlier chapters and highlights the major findings.

Major Findings

The study of the festivals reveals that some of the festivals are very old and as old as the society itself as they are connected with the origin of the people themselves. Whereas there are some festivals and dances which are of comparatively recent origin for example, Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem. The study also shows that the festivals play a very important role in the social, economic and political life of the people. The observance of these festivals, ceremonies, rites and rituals

shows that the Khasi are a deeply religious people. They pray to God, the Creator for His blessings for peace, well being, bountiful harvest and general prosperity and at the same time, they do not forget to thank Him for all the blessings that He has showered upon them. The study also shows that the festivals are not only religious ceremonies, but social festivities. They provide an occasion, when the people could meet their relatives, friends, the near and dear ones, and share the joy of a community as a whole. It is a time of merriment and enjoyment, to imbibe the spirit of love and brotherhood. The festivals provide a social gathering and a collective activity to the people and free them from their everyday monotonous work. The people who have worked very hard the whole year and those who are otherwise occupied with agriculture and other works and also those who have to work outside their homes, come together in free mood during these festive days. This helps the growth of solidarity among them, their concern for the welfare of the people and the state and also the maintenance of unity and integrity against external threats.

The study also shows that the Khasi have a deep love for their culture and it is this love which has sustained them. They are proud that in spite of Christianity, modern changes and other outside influences, they are still able to preserve the basic traits of their culture. Although the study reveals

that most of the festivals are localised, yet, whenever the Shad Nongkrem, Behdeinkhlam, Shad Weiking and other festivals are approaching, everybody is in a festive mood. Thousands of people in their best and colourful dresses irrespective of religious creeds witness these festivals and the above festivals are getting bigger and attract more people than ever.

The study also brings to light that in the Khasi society, the festivals have direct connection with economic activities, apart from political and religious aspects. Festivals are a source of income to many people in the villages for example, cloth dealers, tea sellers and others. If the people are well off in that year and have a good harvest, then the festivals also become big.

The festivals have preserved the distinctive traits of the culture and tradition of the people. The study also shows that the festivals have an educational value as well, as in primitive society having no written records, recitation of prayers during festival time, serves the function of transmitting traditional lore within the tribe.

The study of the festival also shows that the Khasi love freedom and independence, so they could not reconcile their fate under the British rule, because the rulers interfered with the traditional way of life of the people. The Jaintia rose against the British, when the latter banned the cremation

of dead bodies near the Jowai town and interfered with the processionists of the dancing festival at Jalong village. These discontentments took the shape of revolt under the leadership of U Kiang Nangbah, but the revolt was suppressed, and U Kiang Nangbah was captured and hanged to death on 30th December 1862. Again, it is this love of freedom and independence which made U Tirot Sing to revolt against the British. From the study of the festivals, we can see that a festival can be instituted at the wish and decision of the people, for example, ka Shad Suk Mynsiem, which came into being, when the Seng Khasi introduced it at the beginning of this century. Another dance festival is Ka Shad Tirot or the Tirot Sing's Day Celebration, which is held annually at Mairang to honour the hero of the Khasi land, U Tirot Sing.

LIBRARY
Acc. No. 102717
Acc by
Date 29/10/90
Class by
Sub Head
Enter by
Inscribed