

The Rong Khli (Tiger Festival) of the War Jaintias ¹

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The Khasis predominantly inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya. They comprise the four main branches, the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, and the War. The Khasis, are a happy and lively people, they love dances, music and songs, which are connected with their various colourful festivals and religious ceremonies. Many of these festivals have religious association, though a few of the celebrations are plainly secular.² The festivals and dances play a very important role in the life of the people. It is during these occasions that the people can be joyous and happy and can forget their everyday monotonous life. It is through the festivals and dances that the life of the Khasis is reflected. To them festivals and dances are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivities. During these occasions, ceremonies, rites and rituals are performed which shows that the Khasis are a deeply religious people, they pray to God for His blessings, peace, well being 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. It is also during these festivals and dances that they could meet their relatives, the near and dear ones from far and near. The young boys and girls could be joyous and happy, the girls in particular, could display their beauty, gracefulness and their rich costumes, gold and silver ornaments.

The Khasis have a rich cultural heritage, they have many festivals and dances and their own distinctive dancing costumes gold and silver ornaments and jewelleries which are artistically made. Their musical instruments consist of various kinds of drums, pipes, harps, flutes and cymbals. Their most important festivals are the *Pomblang Syiem* or the *Pomblang Nongkrem* or more popularly known as the *Shad Nongkrem* or the Nongkrem dance which is the religious festival of the Khyrim Syiemship held annually at Smit, the official residence of the Khyrim Syiemship, about 20 K. M. from Shillong. This festival continues for five days. It is held to honour and respect the ancestors and to ask God's blessing for the beautiful harvest, well being and general prosperity of the people on the whole. Another important festival is the *Beh-deinkhlam*, which means a festival to drive away plague with sticks. It is a religious festival which is celebrated annually in the month of July at Jowai, the headquarter of the Jaintia Hills District, and

also in some other places of the District. This festival is held to drive away evil spirits that caused various diseases to the people, and to invoke God's blessings for a good harvest, well being and to free them from all evils, so that they could live happily throughout the year. Another important festival is the *Shad Suk Mynsiam* or *Shad Weiking*, which is an annual Thanksgiving Dance held under the auspices of the Seng Khasi, a socio-religious and cultural organisation of the Khasis who still hold on to their traditional religion. *Shad Suk Mynsiam* means the dance of a happy or peaceful heart. The dance is of comparatively recent origin, when a need was felt to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the people. Besides these major festivals there are still many more festivals and dances in the different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but here only one important festival known as the *Rong Khli* is to be discussed. This is the most important festival of the War Jaintias, living in the southern part of the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. It is performed at Nongtalang village, the biggest village in the War Jaintia. Most of the people in this village still practice their traditional religion. The people of Nongtalang have many festivals, one of them is the *Rong Beh Lyngkan*, a festival to drive away evils, which is similar to the *Behdein khlam* festival. Another festival is the *Rong Pyrtu* which is also an important one and the *Phur*, which is connected with the bone collection ceremony of the dead. *Rong* means festival and *Khli* means tiger, in the local dialect, so *Rong Khli* means the Tiger Festival.

Origin of the Festival

The origins of the *Rong Khli* festival is not known as the Khasis have no written records. However, whatever tradition is available, it seems that this festival is very old, and is handed down through the ages, from generation to generation. It might have been started long time back before the people settled at the present village of Nongtalang. They might have brought it from the place of migration or have learnt it on their way. The dance known as *Shad Khla* or Tiger dance which is performed during the festival is believed to be a war dance in which certain religious rites and ceremonies are performed after the victory in the war. There is a tradition that in the ancient times, after the victory in war the head of an enemy was chopped off and put in a long pole, and the people came along with the enemy's head, shouting and dancing all the way to the accompaniment of music played by drummers and pipers to celebrate that victory. Whether or not this practice,

could be taken as the origin of the festival, we cannot say. However, some cases of head-hunting, were reported where the head of an enemy might have been carried away as trophy³. To the people, the tiger is symbolised as an enemy and is hated by them. This hatred might have started with the origin of the people itself. According to a Khasi tradition, God in the beginning created sixteen families, who used to go up to heaven and come down to earth as they pleased by a golden ladder. It was so, till the seven families known as *u Hynniew Trop u Hynniew skum*, or the seven huts decided to remain here on earth, and thereby the golden ladder was severed. The nine families stayed with God in heaven, and the seven families stayed on earth and became the fore-fathers of the Khasis. There then grew upon *u Diengiei* peak, a tree known as *Diengiei*, which grew to be so gigantic, that its leaves and branches became so thick, that the earth was over-shadowed and became very dark. The people were determined to cut this tree, so that light would come to the world. They started cutting the tree in the morning and went back to their homes in the evening. As the tree was very high and big, they could not finish the cutting in one day. When they came the next morning, they found that the tree grew again and the cut marks had disappeared. The people were surprised, for every time they cut it, the next day, the marks disappeared and the tree grew again. They wondered how this happened. Then *Ka phreid*, a very small bird, told the secret to the people, that it was the tiger who came every night and licked the part of the tree which had been cut, and the cutting marks disappeared, and the tree grew again. Knowing the secret, after cutting the whole day, they did not take their axes and knives home, but kept them upwards on the portion of the tree which had been cut. The tiger came as usual and licked the tree, but the sharp edges of the axes and the knives cut his tongue. From that time, the tiger did not dare to go and lick the tree any more, and the mission of man was successful. The tree fell and light appeared once more to the world. Since then the tiger is looked upon as enemy of man. The tiger asked the goddess that he would fight a war with man, whether he won or lost, but the goddess should accept him, if he died in the war and a festival would be observed to the goddess, and the tigers's head would be carried and put in the village gate in his memory. The goddess agreed, hence the tiger festival originated⁴². If this event is to be taken as the beginning of this festival that means, it is very old and as old as the society itself.

According to another tradition, when one of the powerful Jaintiapur chiefs was ruling, he wanted to get one tree which grew in Nongtalang village and this tree resembled the feet of a dove. Some people belonging to the neighbouring villages of Pomchedong and Padu went to cut this tree to be given to the chief. On hearing this news, the people of Nongtalang village went to take this tree. So a war started between the people of Nongtalang and Pomchedong and Padu. In this war, the people of Nongtalang prepared their best warriors. The best two were u Khew and u Ktah. These two warriors were able to chop the heads of some of their enemies. They came back to their village with the enemies' heads along with the swords and the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes. On their way home, they passed by one village known as Nongbareh to show their victory over the two villages. As a sign of good gesture and brotherhood, the people of Nongbareh came and joined the war dance, together with the people of Nongtalang. The people of Pamchedong and Padu planned to come and follow them again, but they could not find them. They only heard the beating of drums on their way to Nongbareh. So, the people of the two villages, having no other alternative accepted defeat. They were afraid, lest the people of both Nongtalang and Nongbareh would jointly come to their villages and that would be very dangerous for them.

Another story tells us that in the ancient times some people used to keep watch. They guarded their village, in case any enemy might come and harm them. If any enemy happened to come, the watchmen cut his head and ran as fast as they could to their village, beating their drums very hard to produce a loud sound, and beating continuously till morning. Once they heard the sound of the drums, the enemies are frightened and could no longer enter the village. When the sun rose in the morning, they dressed up and started dancing. The Tiger festival of Nongtalang could have originated from this performance of their ancestors.

Thus it is not certain, how this festival originated. Traditions explains that the festival is very old. We cannot say that the head of the tiger substitutes that of the human head, the tiger too is symbolised and looked upon as an enemy of the people. The forests are infested with wild animals and a tiger is a danger and a menace to the people, who come to the village, killing the people, sheep, cattle and other domestic animals. So, the tiger is their great enemy and its killing is like killing of an enemy which brings relief to them.

Contents of the Festival

The *Rong Khli* is held whenever a tiger is killed accidentally or on an organised hunting by the villagers. The festival is not a regular one, it depends on the killing of the tiger. Sometimes, a tiger comes to the village in search of prey. If it so happens, that someone shoots or kills the tiger, even then the festival is performed and the God is worshipped. Sometimes, the people of the village organise hunt where the male members take part. Sometimes, a particular clan organises a hunt. People from other clans are also invited. In case a man who does not belong to that particular clan who has arranged for the hunting, happens to shoot or kill the tiger, he and his clan will not have to perform the ceremony, as the organising clan has taken the responsibility of performing the festival, and as a sign of good gestures one who kills the tiger will get one turban on the day of the festival. In whatever manner the tiger is killed the God is to be worshipped, or else certain calamities like epidemic, diseases, starvation, blindness, ill luck will befall on the people. Killing the tiger by someone in the clan is said to be a good omen for the prosperity of the clan. The carcass of the tiger, when consecrated, becomes holy and to have a small piece of it, may bring luck to such a person⁵. If anybody kills the tiger, the clan to whom he belongs must perform the ceremony, if, for, example the man who kills the tiger belongs to the *Bareh* clan, this clan has to perform the ceremony, and the festival is known as *Ka Rong u Bareh* or the festival of the *Bareh* clan, and if he belongs to the *Pohsnem* clan it is known as *ka Rong u Pohsnem* or the festival of the *Pohsnem* clan and so on.

The festival is usually held in the dry months from January to March. After killing the tiger, the clan, to whom the person who kills the tiger belongs, informs the *Lyngdoh* or religious priest, and when the *Lyngdoh* and the *Dorbar Monniew* or the *Durbar* of the uncles have agreed, the clan can perform the festival. If due to some unavoidable circumstances, the clan cannot perform the festival after killing the tiger, they can perform it later on but by any means, they have to perform the sacrifice, or their clan would suffer from certain diseases, death and other calamities. After the clan gets the permission from the *Lyngdoh* and the *Durbar* for holding the festival, they should inform the day for holding the same. The expenditure for the festival is borne by the organising clan, but a certain amount is contributed by the *Durbar*. After the permission is given for holding the festival, the *lyngdoh* gives the drums which are used only during the festival.

Stages of the Festival

Before the festival, the organising clan performs certain ceremonies to inform God about the holding of the festival. The actual festival lasts only for one day. The tiger's flesh and intestines are taken out and dried up, and the body of the tiger is kept outside the village in the *phlong* or village gate. There are two village gates, one in the east and another in the west. The body of the tiger cannot be brought inside the village, until one day before the festival. When the day of the festival is nearing, the people in their various *dong* or localities beat drums and play their pipes till the day of the festival comes.

On the day before the festival, usually in the evening, all the people gather together in the dancing ground along with the beating of drums and playing of the pipes. Then they all go to the village gate to fetch the dead body of the tiger. The elder uncle of the organising clan will lead the group in his dancing attire, carrying the shield and the sword, he dances in front of the other dancers and they continue to dance all the way. The dead body of the tiger is taken from the village gate and they all come back to the dancing ground. The tiger's body is kept in a special place which is purposely made for the occasion. The male members have to wait for the whole night, along with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes. They keep on dancing for the whole night till the next morning, but this is not a religious dance. A big fire is lit and the food and drink is provided by the organising clan.

The Festival Day

On the day of the festival, early in the morning, the people leave the dancing ground and they all go to the elder uncle's house of the organising clan. At his house, they perform certain religious rites, the elder uncle pours libations and the *Lyngdoh* along with the elders of the *Dorbar Manniew* pray for the well being of the people for good health, general prosperity, good harvest and to free the people from other evils, they also pray to their ancestors. When the religious ceremonies are completed, then the male dance follows. They dance in front of the elder uncle's house, they first dance a particular dance known as *ka niam chai wat*, then they dance another dance known as *ka mastieh*. In this dance, persons from the organising clan will dance first. The person who kills the tiger will first dance with his elder uncle, then follows the dance of the elder uncle with the *Lyngdoh* or anybody from the *Lyngdoh* clan. Then follows the dance known as the *mastieh* of the *kur* or the dance of the different clans. Here they dance two by

two, the dancers should be from different clans and not from the same clan. They dance as follows : (1) U Rymbui and u Pohti, that means a man who belongs to the Rymbui and Pohti clans, (2) u Pohsnem and u Myrchiang, (3) u Bareh and u Padu (4) u Peduna and u Pohrmen, (5) u Pohlynniar and u Manar, (6) u Pohlong and u Pna, (7) u Pohing and anyone from the Lyngdoh clan. The dance is accompanied by the music played by the drummers and pipers. The dancers carry their shields and swords.

After the dancing is over, next they go to the Lyngdoh's house, to show respect to him. At his house certain rites and ceremonies are performed with due solemnity. After these ceremonies, a dance is performed which is similar to the dance at the elder uncle's house. Here the Lyngdoh will dance first with anybody from the organising clan, then the other dancers from the different clans follows. After the ceremonies and dancing are completed, they all go to the village gate where the head of the tiger is cut off and fixed at a bamboo pole. Supposing, they want to put the body of the tiger in the east gate, then they go first to the west and if they want to put in the west gate, then they go first to the east. This is known as *ka pyngruh phlong* which is a kind of respect. If in the last festival, the tiger's head is put in the east, then in the next festival, it must be put in the west and vice versa. Here at the village gate they also dance, and before putting the head of the tiger, they pour out libations and prayers are said. Here the religious ceremonies come to an end, and they all leave to their respective houses. At night, there is only a female dance, which continues throughout the whole night till morning, along with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes by the musicians.

Dress and ornaments

The dancing dress of both men and women are different from that of the Nongkrem and the Weiking dance. The women dancing costumes consists of a *jainsem dhara* which is a costly silk material and a traditional dress of the Khasi women. It is of many colours and is tied at both ends in the shoulders and reaches below the knee. They also put on a *jaintawah* which is kind of a small shawl. They also wear their *sopti kti* or long sleeve blouse. They put on necklaces of gold and coral beads, but they do not wear a crown like the female dancers in the upland region. They put a flower made of paper and is tied to their hair knot. The men's dress consists of a long sleeve shirt, and a kind of a lungi with black borders. On their heads, they put on a turban. Like the male dancers of the Nongkrem and Weiking dance, they also carry

sort of a fly flap, a sword and a shield.

Conclusion

Although the Tiger festival is being organised by a particular clan, yet the people in the village as a whole take part. People from the neighbouring villages also come to take part in the dance and *Tongmuri* competition, which is a sort of music competition. Competitors from the different villages come to compete and prizes which are always in terms of cash are given to the winners and even the losers. The judges are selected from the elderly persons who are considered knowledgeable persons of the art and their decision is final. The Tiger Festival is important because it is in this kind of festival that both religious and cultural activities are combined together.⁶

The last ceremony of the festival is the sacrifice which is known as *Rongchyndi - Rong Khli*, which is held after the festival. It is a concluding ceremony in which a goat, two hens, a dove and bananas are offered.

As we have seen, the people of Nongtalang have many festivals, but most of these festivals are no longer observed regularly due to the social change which is going on among them, as also among other tribals. Some of their festivals are celebrated in connection with their agricultural activities, and also as thanksgiving to God their Creator, other few festivals have cultural and religious connection. The Tiger Festival is performed even these years, but some other festivals like the *Rong Pyrtuh*, *Rong beh lyngkan*, and the *Phur* are not held regularly.

Notes & References

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3. D. T. Laloo, *Ka Ksaw ka Kpong u Hynniew Trep*, P. 7
4. L.S. Gassah, *The Journal of NEICSSR*, Vol. 7. No. 2 Oct. 1983.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 23-24.