

# A Semiotic Study of *Ka Shad Tyngkoh* of the Khasis

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All that is on the stage is a sign- Jiri Veltrusky ( Prague School)

The World is a stage- William Shakespeare

Different scholars look at 'orality and beyond' in a different manner. One studies folk discourse of the oral tradition and also of the great traditions of the epics, poetry and drama. However, there is also a beyond. One has to consider that folk discourse is not limited to folk literatures and oral tradition. It is to be extended to the realm of performance. There is a tradition of folk dance forms, folk theatre, drumbeats, music and above all the hidden choreography in each form. We all know that oral traditions in Indian life and culture are undergoing a transformation. However change in the non-verbal forms is almost negligible. Scholars have mostly focused on the written and the oral text. There is little work in the field of the performance text. On the surface it is an ever-changing phenomena from one performance to another. But at the level of the deep structure it has a permanence that could have a time frame of at least a thousand years. Areas of study like choreography, proxemics, gesture study, tonal quality of performance is more as a footnote to the text studies as mentioned above. In fact experts who study the written text treat the experts of the oral text in the same way as they (the experts of the oral text) treat the one who study the non verbal communication in a performance. In academics all could live and stay together but it does not really happen.

Not that these kinds of studies have not been undertaken elsewhere in the world. In the Indian context, folkloristics has come of age. However it is limited at best to the literature and the oral tradition. It is quite clear that a new poetics is required. Those who look at it as a semiotics of performance have undertaken it.

Earlier scholars have studied performance from different point of view. Two anthropologist Victor Turner & Richard Schechner thought in terms of ritual and theatre. Then we have experimentalist in theatre like Grotowski , Peter Brook and Richard Schechner. There is again another set of people who had been interested in studying theatre in performance, Prague School and the semiotist. They used performance as an object of study. Mention can be made of people like Keir Elam, Paul Buissac, Andrei Helbo, Ann Ubersfeld and Patrie Pavis. It can easily be seen that they work in an interdisciplinary area of work. From Indian scholarship we can include Kapila Vatsayan and Kapil Kapoor who looked at performance from point of view of the Sanskrit tradition<sup>1</sup>.

For the purpose of this paper we chose Victor Turner. Richard Schechner, Keir flam, Kapila Vatsayan & Kapil Kapoor.

Turner talks of how 'Postmodern theory would see in the very flaws hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance, clues to the very nature of human process itself, and would also perceive genuine novelty, ...What was once considered contaminated promiscuous, impure is becoming the focus of postmodern analytical attention.' (Turner 1986b: 77)

For Turner 'If man is a sapient animal, a toolmaking animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less a performing animal ....a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that man is a self-performing animal his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself' (Turner 1986b:81).

Talking of structure Turner feels 'Structure is always ancillary to, dependent on, secreted from process. And performance, particularly dramatic performances, are manifestations par excellence of human social process.'(Turner 1986b:83)

For Turner 'Performances are never amorphous or open-ended, they have diachronic structure, a beginning, a sequence of overlapping but isolable phases, and an end. But their structure is not that of an

abstract system: it is generated out of the dialectical oppositions of processes and of levels of process. In the modern consciousness, cognition, idea, rationality were paramount. In the postmodern turn, cognition is not dethroned but rather takes its place on an equal footing with volition and affect. The revival of what has been termed psychological anthropology.' (Turner 1986b: 73-74)

We then turn towards Richard Schechner. For him 'In all entertainment there is some efficacy and in all ritual there is some theatre', (Schechner 1983: 151)

Regarding theatre and performance Schechner says 'theatre is actually an attitude on the part of the spectator- to set up a chair in the street and to watch what happens is to transform the streets into a theatre', (Schechner 1983: 163) and 'The performance is itself the text.' (Schechner 1983: 175),

Schechner has compared the Western approach to a ritual and performance to the Indian approach, by comparing the Turner's category of Liminal (an authentic ritual event) and liminoid (a voluntary performative event) with the Hindu concept of Lila and Mela. 'There is a saying in India: Every lila (performance) is surrounded by a mela (fair and market)', (Schechner 1983: 180)

Discussing about illusion and reality, 'acting is playful illusion'. In fact he finds that, 'in Asia the masks is often credited with being closer to the way things are in the world than the face behind the mask can be : acting becomes not a species of lying but a means to the truth,' (Schechner 1983: 206)

Schechner compared a field worker with a performance director 'My restatement of this process as it applies to the field worker is: The stripping away of his own culture-habits-a brutal separation that is the deepest struggle of fieldwork, which is never completed, learning to see with the native eye. The field worker always lives in between. So does the director who is part of the audience to the performers and part of the performers to the audience. Field workers and theatre directors are restorers of behavior. The time is on us when field workers, like directors, produce for us not only versions of faraway cultures but performative works of our own multiple

actualities. ...Theatre workers, field workers: we are one with the clowns and jugglers, the double agents and dissimulators, the con men and shamans.' (Schechner 1983: 231)

Keir Elam is one person who has gone into every aspect of theatre as a performing art. According to him 'In the theatre the basis icon is the body and voice of the actor' (Elam: 21-22)

He tries to define what a semiotist of theatrical performance should do. He felt that such a person 'will be equally concerned with modes of signification and with the resulting acts of communication and will wish to provide a model that accounts for both.'

Biarn talks of the Prague school scholarship on semiotics of performing art. They were successful in forming a typology of performing art. According to him it was Tadeusz Kowzan who formed a typology of thirteen systems. They are listed as language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, decor, lighting, music and sound effects (including noise off).

This brings us to the question of competence of the audience to appreciate a performance. The fact of the matter is that a performance can be enjoyed or aesthetically appreciated only if the audience is of the same level as the performers are. Natya Shastra assumes that for enjoying a theatrical performance the spectators should be 'Sahradaya'. Meaning thereby that the audience should be competent to appreciate the performance. This is the condition laid down by the ancient Indian tradition. Similarly in Linguistics Noam Chomsky talked about 'Linguistic competence' and Keir Elam talks of a 'theatrical competence'.

This is set in the audience as 'Transactional conventions are sufficiently powerful to ensure that there is no genuine ambiguity concerning the frame (i.e. everyone in the theatre knows more or less what is going on)' (Elam: 88-89). To continue 'An aesthetics of theatrical reception, a genuine phenomenology of audience competence founded on empirical research- of the kind being conducted on readers- is an indispensable, though so far neglected. component of any proposed theatrical poetics.' (Elam: 94)

Elam further theorizes '... The performance text becomes, in this

view, a macro-sign, its meaning constituted by its total effect. This approach has the advantages of emphasizing the subordination of all contributor elements to an unified textual whole and of giving due weight to the audience as the ultimate maker of its own meanings' (Elam: 7)

Turning towards the Indian scholars we find that Kapila Vatsayan does not agree with the *desi* and *margi* theory. She finds a common pattern of performing arts across the Indian continent. For her there is no dichotomy between classical dances and the folk and tribal dances. It is she who found the sign of a swastik in the choreography of the Zeliang Nagas.

For her 'the terms of folk and classical though are not simple categories representing undevelopment and development rural and urban, pre-industrialized and industrialized social order or a capturing of moments of antiquity in a fossilized state on two levels. The terms, though inadequate signify many complex cultural processes. The folk forms are constantly changing and transforming themselves. They are, therefore, not mere vestiges of primitive societies, of groups, of underdeveloped minorities, subsisting in a large urban civilization as in the West. It is also true that what we see as tribal art has a borrowing from the so-called main stream tradition. In fact borrowing has occurred both ways. The highly stylized forms of today have direct correlation with what would be called as folk or tribal dance.' (Vatsayan).

Vatsayan links the Tribal with the Vedic 'The many forms of rituals, even magic and trance dances known to Asia and India, and today witnessed only on the context of tribal and folk dancing, can be traced back to the rites and rituals of the Yajur Veda. In hymn X.94, there is a vivid description of a community dance. With the sisters they have danced, embraced by them, reading of the hymn tells us of a circle, and of couples who moved in the circle to a humming sound. *Couples dancing in circles is popular in all parts of India, even today*' while the humming sound reminds us of the Omkaras of Naga dancing, the couple formations and circular pattern recall the innumerable types of Rasa dances, seen practically everywhere'

(Vatsayan)

In the Indian tradition Prof. Kapil Kapoor's contribution to Sanskrit poetics is incomparable. He demarcates different ways of looking across the Western and the Indian culture.

'Consider next the questions of creativity, creative process and the sources of creativity. In the Western tradition, Plato discusses the carpenter as the paradigm artist. A whole worldview informs this choice. The carpenter is a geometrician- he quantifies, measures, segments and rearranges the "reality" (wood in his case). He is the master, the "maker." In Indian thought, the potter *kumbhakara*, is the paradigm artist.'

The potter does not segment or rearrange his material- he puts his hands on the lump of clay and the form in his mind flows through his fingers and becomes one with the form that inheres in the clay. The form is there in the clay and the potter makes it manifest, makes *avyakta*, *vyakta*, gives *rupa* to *dravya*. The potter sees what is not perceptible and images its essence, the *bhava*. The artist/craftsman is not a creator- he is a *sadhaka*, a worshipper, a *yogi*, an ascetic, a *bhakta*, a devotee full of love and reverence for the object of representation. In this sense, the aesthetic experience in India is a sacred experience.' (Kapoor:2002)

To conclude a post-structuralist study of a performance would go for the particular performance of the day for its analysis. One has to look at the stage and assume that everything on the stage is a sign. The role of audience is the most important one. The Sanskrit category of 'sahraday' is the key for enjoying the performance.

### Ka *Shad Tyngkoh* of the Khasis

A structural analysis of the Khasi dance *Ka Shad Tyngkoh* is attempted in this paper. *Shad Tyngkoh* is one of the dance which is danced during the Nongkrem festival, at Smet near Shillong. We all are aware of the importance of the Nongkrem dance and its importance to the culture of the Khasis. Elsewhere this festival and the Nongkrem dance has been discussed in detail.<sup>3</sup> We give below

the details of *Ka Shad Tyngkoh*:

### *Ka Shad Tyngkoh*

Place : Main hall- in presence of *Rishot blei* 'holy pillar'

Time : towards early morning but before sun break

This is a dance which is danced in a pair in front of *Rishot blei*. This follows the fish distribution ceremony. The pairs are in the following manner. This data is from the dance during 1988:

1. Head Priest and Head Drummer
2. Nongbrih and Head drummer/another mantri
3. Mawlei and Marehshan
4. Nongkynrih & lawai
5. Nongkseh and Nong unlong
6. Head drummer and junior drummer
7. Syiem and Lyngskor. ( In case lyngskor is not present then lyngdoh/mantri dances)
8. Deputy syiem/one from syiem family and a mantri/lyngdoh/son of a former syiem/cousin of syiem

The dance order during 1990 was as follows:

During each dance- one male drum, a padiah, a tangmuri and cymbals are played.

However when the Syiem dances only the female drum is played. This relates to the matrilineage social structure of the Khasis.

The lyngdoh of Nongkrem is afraid of dancing as there is some dispute-*Thandlieh-Thaniiong*. It is a dispute of 6th clan. They have been banned in religious ceremony. Of course administrative duties of Nongkrem can take place. This is an ancient dispute. This happened when the syiemship separated from Hima syiemship.

The dance is interesting and unique to the Khasi society. Before dancing the pairs bow with folded hands to *Rishot blei* and then to the *Syiem*. Afterwards each dancer hops on alternate legs and moves towards the *Rishot blei*. This is done very slowly. Drumbeats are *Sing shad tyngkoh*. Then the two cross over and return to the beginning. Again they cross over and go towards *Rishot blei* and cross to the other side. All the time the slow dance continues. Finally after some time they reach the hearth and stop. The next pair takes over. What is

of interest to note is that the pattern of foot movement is sinuous. The dance is slow. With the *Rishot blei* in the centre and the sinuous movement towards it and back is a motif which is commonly observed in the Pan Asian designs. Another aspect, which is not clear to this scholar, is that the current *Soh blei* 'head priest' always wears a tie and a suit at least for this dance.

Only when the *Syiem* dances the drum changes. Two men stand near the *Rishot blei* with torch and fire. Female drum is played. This as said earlier is indication of Khasi being a matrilineal society. The king has both the roles. Male drums are played when there is a council meeting. Councils comprising of the *Syiem*, *myntris*, *basans* and *bakhraws* only. The council symbolizes the political authority of the members.

There is a close relationship between the state and religious aspect of the Khasi society.

Though I was allowed by the *Syiem* to observe the ritual and the dance, the *syiem* in a conversation with me (November 11, 1988) felt that maybe it was not wise to allow outsiders to watch the ceremony. I had agreed with him. I had not liked a Christian priest who had entered our house during a ritual in my family. Moreover the mystic levels of a religion and a dance associated needs the only one who is of the same faith. One should not allow the outsider and certainly not the anthropologist.

Similarly at some time during the past when electric bulb was brought to the *ling sad* the people vehemently opposed it. It was then removed. The same situation has been dealt in a similar manner in some of the Hindu temples. What is not realised is that darkness creates its own sensuality when the deity is seen through light of burning lamps.

### A semiotic study

This dance normally follows a ritual. Turner would probably look at the dance along with the ritual. As the ritual is another performance we shall have to study this dance independently. Again elsewhere<sup>3</sup> I have found a sinuous movement in this dance's choreography. This is similar to the movement of individual girls who dance *Ka shad kynthei*

on the 4th day of the festival. This follows a similar method used by Kapila Vatsayan to study the dance of the Zeliang Nagas. She has found the swastika in the choreography of their dance, which in turn she links it to the vedic period.

However this study looks at the dance of an individual drummer<sup>4</sup> on the day. The way he danced was in the same manner as the other danced but it was different. It was different because he moved his hips in a manner, which was sexual. Not in a blunt bump and grind manner of the bollywood cinema but sexual certainly. What is more important is laughter emanated from the audience. It was a kind of enjoyment of a new form without realizing that it was sexual in nature. All laughed. Children, women and then men laughed guardedly. There was no expression from the Royalty. I looked for the man in the coming years but he did not come. Also in the subsequent years the dance followed the old classical method, which must have come down during ages. It is clear that dance movements either seen in movies or on the TV influenced him. It could also have come from his exposure to the Republic day and festival of India visits. However the last part is a conjecture. Was it a case of finding a new form on one's own creativity? However this question is fraught with all kinds of danger. One could ask whether a drummer who for ages has been practicing in the same way, dared to change the grammar of this dance. It can be answered in both ways. However to confirm, one needs an interview which alas could not take place.

It is also true that this performance could be taken as an exception to the rule. But post structuralism would not accept it. The transitory is more important than the traditional regular performance. It forces us to look at the plurality of meaning in the performance text. The important part is that the audience laughed. It laughed with gusto. This aspect I have never seen in the Nongkrem performances<sup>5</sup>. This laughter makes the audience as 'sahraday' in their aesthetic appreciation. In this analysis we have to understand that the entire setting of the dance is full of signs. There is a history of this performance. This is evident in the choice of actors or the political people. Then the position of *Rishot blei*. The sensuousness of the entire hall with its dim light.

And what about the drum beats. We have already discussed about the choreography of the dance. One can also look at the subtle and slow hand movements. And the way the two actors cross each other. In fact in the Keir Elam manner there is a density of signs. Above all we must be clear that the entire episode is a performance and every actor knows it. It is also performed in what Richard Schechner would call as the environment theatre. Inside the hall is the 'lila' and when the fishes are distributed amongst the audience then it is a 'mela'.

So one thing is very clear that there are multiple possibilities in this performance. For understanding it we have to develop new tools of our trade. One way could be blending of disciplines like anthropology and performing artist.

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#### Endnotes :

1. Birendranath Datta has worked extensively on folk performing art of the North-East part of India

2. Emphasis is mine.

3 Presented a paper: 'Nongkrem Dance- Some Patterns' in a Seminar-Cum Exhibition on the 'Timeless Tribal Art and Culture of North-East India', organised jointly by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Arunachal Pradesh University, 19-21 November 1995.

4. Ph. D. thesis 'Information transfer in a bi-cultural situation using theatre as a system' as submitted and approved by the Centre of Linguistics and English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.' I have looked in my field notes and tried to find his name. I have not been able to find out. But I have written in my notes and hope to rectify this lacuna.

5. I have started auditing the Nongkrem festival since 1984.