

THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE FESTIVAL OF MEGHALAYA

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental ideas about life of the people in Meghalaya are originated from the myth and the legend stories which are considered to be the integral to the culture and tradition of its region. There are philosophies which describe about the social construction of the society which is followed since the creation of the world and is reflected in the dance forms and festive spirit of the indigenous people of the state. These dances, songs and the rituals have its own proposition which bind all into one unity. Beside the political philosophies also rooted into the formation of democratic governance of the different clans while upholding its matrilineal system. Most of the festivals are associated with the spirit of veneration, virtue, purity, earnestness and holiness which in all respects upholds the honour of its divinity.

Key words: Myth, Legend, Tradition, Culture, Clans, Matrilineal.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Festivals are the means of identifying one's originality which are woven into the socio-cultural system of all human communities. Amidst these, the collective attitude of people, the philosophy of life and work come to one stand. The age old traditions that reflect the line of every individual which are manifest through dances, songs, attire and ornaments are the ways to be a part of family reunion, culture and rituals. These rituals are so rooted into the festivals that the pristine quality and ancient wisdom of traditions became most perceptible. In contrary, it creates an environment where the people from all sphere of life come together to strengthening their believes.

During the festive season, people get together in a common place where people eat, drink; and indulge in the different activities. As the people in Meghalaya are closely associated with farming, the festivals are celebrated in tune with its activities.

II. PROFILE OF THE STUDY

The word '*Meghalaya*' is actually a Sanskrit word which can be translated to - '*The abode of cloud*'. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee, Professor of Emeritus of geography, Calcutta University had coined the name during his field work of his doctoral thesis into this part of the world. In one of the chapters of his writings he had popularized the name '*Meghalaya*' which attracted the Union Home Ministry when the efforts were made for the creation of a new state for the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. (Joshi, 2004)

Meghalaya is situated in the North Eastern part of India. The region is surrounded by the Brahmaputra valley in the North and North West, Surma valley (Bangladesh) in the South and partly in the South west and some part of Cachar in the East. The total geographical area of the state is 22,429 square kilometres. Thus the state of Meghalaya has eleven districts which lies between 20.10N and 26.50 latitude and 85.490E and 92.520E longitude.

The eastern and the central part of Meghalaya are called the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills which is an imposing plateau with rolling grassland, rivers and hills. The southern side of this plateau is marked by deep gorges and abrupt slopes, below which a narrow strip runs along the international border with Bangladesh. The northern side of the plateau has hills of almost the same height which extend northwards to slope gradually merging with the plains of Assam. The western part of Meghalaya forms the Garo Hills at a lower elevation. The hills range in height

from 450m to 600m and drop steeply to the Brahmaputra valley on the north and to the plains of Bangladesh on the south. (DIPR, 2013)

Meghalaya also has a number of rivers which drain into the hilly state. In the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the rivers flowing in a north direction are Khri, Umtrew, Umiam, Umkhem and Kupli which flows between the border of Jaintia Hills and North Cachar Hills. To the south into Bangladesh flow the Kynshi, UmiamMawphlang and Umngot. While in the Garo Hills, Manda, Darming and the Jinjiram flow towards the north while Ringge and Ganol flow in the west direction. Simsang which is one of the biggest rivers in Garo Hills flows towards the south direction.

III. POPULATION

Meghalaya's total population is 2,964,007 (Census 2011) of which males constitute 1,492,668 and female constitute 1,471,339 with an average population density of 132 per square kilometres. The majority of the population lives in the rural areas which comprises 23, 68, 971 rural folk and 5,95,036 urban residents. The population in Meghalaya is mainly tribal. The main tribes of the state are the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. There are other plain tribes which include Koch, Rabhas, and Bodos, etc.

Table 1. Meghalaya Population of Schedule tribes

Meghalaya population of Schedule Tribes		
Name of the Scheduled Tribe	Total population	ST population
Khasi	1,123,490	56.4 %
Garo	689,639	34.6 %
Hajong	31,381	1.6 %
Raba	28,153	1.4 %
Koch	21,381	1.1 %
Synteng	18,342	0.9 %
Mikir	11,399	0.6 %
Any Kuki Tribes	10,085	0.5 %
Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes	3,526	0.2 %
Any Naga Tribes	3,138	0.2 %
BoroKacharis	2,932	0.1%
Hmar	1,146	0.1%
All Scheduled Tribes	1,992,862	100 %

Source : Census 2001

From the above table we can conclude that the highest Scheduled Tribe population in the region is of Khasi with 56.4%, followed by Garos with 34.6% and Hajong 1.6%. The least percentage of population is of Bodo Kacharis and Hmar with only 1% of the total population.

VI. TRIBE OF MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya is home to India's three ancient hill communities namely the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. They are the primary constituents of the hill ranges of Meghalaya which are named after the tribes that are the predominant inhabitants. However, these tribes are not of the same origin. The Khasi and Jaintias belong to the Mon-Khmers who are believed to have migrated from South East Asia as they are also linked linguistically and socially. The Garos are the Tibeto Burman Bodos who are believed to have their origins in Tibet. These three tribes also have a common trait through the matrilineal society followed and they ascended to their present abode in these hills after a temporary settlement in the Brahmaputra valley. These three tribes were governed by their own traditional systems until these areas found their place in the colonial state in India. (Joshi, 2004)

A. KHASI AND JAINTIA

'We are the descendants of the seven celestial families who decided to live on earth long before mankind came into existence' – this is how the Khasi and Jaintia describe themselves. This statement emanates from the legendary story which narrates that long before humans came into existence on the earth, a tall magnificent tree grew on top of a dome shaped hill to the north of Shillong. This tree was used as a ladder for the purpose of descending and ascending from the heaven to earth by the Sixteen Celestial Bodies. These bodies would come to the earth to wander in this beautiful landscape and to cultivate the land as it bore fruits easily. However at sundown they would return to their home in Heaven. Amongst them there was one who wanted to rule his brethren by breaking free from *'the Creator'*. When the seven celestial bodies descended to earth, the ambitious one took a chance and then with a sharp axe cut down the tree trapping the seven celestial bodies on earth. This place till today is called *'LumSohpetbneng'* or the naval of heaven. (DIPR, 2012)

The Khasis and the Jaintias are believed to be from the Austro-Asiatic race that landed in this part of the world from South East Asia. Their dialect is supposed to be one of the few surviving languages of the Monkhmer family. The people who live in the central plateau are known as Khasis, those who live in the Jaintia Hills are known as Pnars, those in the War areas in the south are known as the Wars, the northern area is the home of the Bhois and in the border area of the western side of the region is the home of the Lyngngams.

Adding into this connotation, there is no evidence that can describe the literature of the indigenous people of Meghalaya. The legendary stories had their own implication about the presence of an original script among the people of the region. In one account, the script was lost during the incendiary at Nongkseh while in other version; it was lost in a flood. In the latter story, while swimming across a flood, the Khasi man who carried the bundle of script in his mouth had swallowed these along the water. Thus, the Khasi were left with only the word of mouth to transmit information after this script was swallowed by this man. (Bareh, 2003)

B. GAROS

The Garos call themselves '*Achik*' who originally inhabited from province of Tibet named Torua. For some reason they left Tibet under the leadership of the legendary Jappa – Jalimpa and Shukpa- Bongepa. For centuries they wandered the Brahmaputra valley in search of a permanent home. In the process they survived the ordeal of wars and persecutions at the hands of the kings ruling the valley. They then branched out into a number of sub tribes and the main group under the legendary leader, Along Noga, occupied Nokrek the highest peak in Garo hills.

V. PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATION OF FESTIVALS

The fundamental ideas about life of the people in Meghalaya are originated from the myth and the legend stories which are considered to be the integral to the culture and tradition of its region. In connection with the seven celestial bodies who had come down to earth through a magnificent tree which link the relationship of the people and the creator, the '*Chiphiah*' dance or the '*Lahuh*' dance was performed as a thanksgiving which is mostly prevalent in '*RiPnar*' of Jaintia Hills. This dance is held on the first Sunday of February every year in the pilgrimage to the sacred '*U LumSohpetbneng*' peak. The festival is basically defining the originality of umbilical binding of a mother with her child which is the philosophical concept that could be felt through

the rituals and the spirit of the celebration. In the festival, prayers were offered seeking divine blessings on the summit of 'U LumSohpetbneng'. Ever since the festival is put into practice it is believed that the dance and song that performed during the pilgrimage has a cleaning effect both physically and spiritually. Therefore it is considered to enhance the unseen aura and protect a person from the negative forces. Besides, the social mingling of the different clans of the community is the other aspect of the festival.

The matrilineal system of the Khasis which give certain privileges to woman than any other part of the country also has its philosophical connotation. As the system is followed from the time immemorial, a child obtains its name from the mother line. The genetic philosophy of the social system is that the marriage within the clan is regarded as a taboo; as the blood line should be kept clean. This custom is followed by the various clans of the society. Besides, in respect of the patrilineal lineage, especially the grandmother holds a respectable position as she is known as 'Ka Mei-Kha' (mother who procreates). These are some of the philosophies describing the social construction of the Khasi society which is followed since the creation of the world and is reflected in the dance forms and festive spirit of the indigenous people of the state.

The political philosophies also rooted into the formation of democratic governance of the different clans in relation with the matrilineal system. The ruler or the king of the state is selected democratically in free and fair manners by the clans. As a king, he had to serve his people who are called as the children in thousands (*Ki Khun KI Hajar*). Another traditional festival which is popularly known as the 'Nongkrem' dance (*Ka Shad bad PomblangKhyrim*), is the constituent of the political and sociological philosophy of state. This festival is held annually at the headquarter of the Khasi State of 'HimaKhyrim', which is 25 kilometres away from the Shillong town. It is celebrated in the autumn season, with varied dance, music and religious rituals. 'Nongkrem' dance, commemorates the formation of democratic administration of the Khasi State of HimaShillong, sometime in 1479 A.D., which was later bifurcated into the present states of 'HimaKhyrim' and 'HimaMylliem' in 1830. (Sawain, 2014)

In this festival, the queen mother (*Syiem Sad*), the mother of the King takes charge of the preparation of the various rites and rituals and the males are to perform in the ceremonies. Though the queen mother does not take part in any of the activities of the community meeting (*Dorbar*), she advises and counsels the 'Syiem' in the matters of the affairs of administration of state in privacy in the divinity house called as 'Iing Sad'. It is seen that in every ritual and

customs of the festivals, the woman and man had equal number of responsibilities which can be define through the different perspectives of philosophical, sociological, historical legendary and as well spiritual dimensions. This division of errands among the male and female is the potency of the matrilineal system that existed in the society.

'*Shad Tyngkoh*' is another dance sequence, is also a good example of matrilineal thought where the king and courtiers of different clans accompanied by the female dance in front of the divine pillar. The '*Seng Khasi Organisation*' was established on November 1899 and had come to a point to preserve and promote the festive aspect of different rituals and practices. Thereby, the institution took up the mission of inducting a festival of dance named as '*Shad Suk Mynsiem*' meaning dance of the happy heart and soul, which is based on the '*Shad Phur*' festive dance. This had therefore made a different stage where the communities can able to enhance the cultural and philosophical continuum of dance. '*Shad Suk Mynsiem*' is one way to be with nature and the environment which is accompanied by the rhythmic note of musical piped instrument '*Tangmuri*' (the queen of the musical instrument of the Khasis) and the different drums. These are all perform in unison to pay homage to the divine creator and also invoking blessing for the good harvest, happiness and the goodwill of the society. In the flag of '*Seng Khasi*', the symbol of the cock depicting the dawn of the light, as the cock crow three times pitch the thought that truth would always prevail in times of the darkness. The cock therefore represents the humility and at the same times a statue of statesmanship, to argue in front of the brilliance of the divine for forgiveness of the infringement of human kind.

The '*BehDeinKhlam*' festival in the Jaintia Hills, is the festival that believe to chase away the pestilence, plagues, diseases and which also create a unity of the creator and the people. There is also a legendary story behind the festival with the historical bearing of the architectural structure of Jowai and the settlements in '*RiPnar*'. As the legendary story describes about the prince of thunder (*SyiemPyrthat*), along with four divine elders, *Mookhai*, *Mooralong*, *Moosniang* and *Mootong* who descended and who represent four large rocks in the vicinity of the '*WahMyntdu*' river that circulate the Jowai town. Even the four sisters of prince of thunder, '*Ka Bon*', '*KaTein*', '*Ka Wet*', '*KaDoh*' also settled into this part of the hillock town which is known as '*Lum Sai Ung*' which therefore procreating four different clans, the *Sokpoh*, *San Syngkong*, *Challam*, *PassahandShullai*. This festival also played the role of a women folk known as (*RiBlai*)

who in the occasion offer prayers and food to the family and clan ancestors and ancestress for the protection against the evil forces and also seeking their blessings.

The '*Seng KutSnem*', is actually the celebration of the anniversary on the establishment of the '*Seng Khasi Organisation*'. This was instituted by the sixteen youths for the preservation and for sustaining the social matrilineal system, the cultural and spiritual belief and the religion which is known as '*Niam Khasi*'. The festival is celebrated by carrying out a procession exhibiting a tableau of the cultural roots along with the performances of dance, songs and music along the street. What it depicts is the teaching that describes about the principle of love-yourself and respect- others, as the guiding star for the communal harmony.

There were few other festivals of Meghalaya, like '*Shad Sukra*', the '*Shad SajerSathoh*', '*Shad Latympong*', '*Shad Lukhimi*' in the RiBhoi region and '*Wangla*' Dance of Garo Hill are colourful festival which offer prayer to the divine creator for the blessing and also to bestowed with the good harvest. The seed which is associated with the harvesting also symbolises with the seeds of moralistic value, conventionalise in the ethical teachings of the forbears.

Most of the festivals are associated with the spirit of veneration, virtue, purity, earnestness and holiness which in all respects upholds the honour that the virginity imply. There were the rules and customs in the various religious ceremonies of which are followed, as only virgin maidens can take part, especially dance performance which is associated with the religion and cultures.

Besides, there are peaks which have a deep underlying significance in the life of the people of the region. As described before '*U LumSohpetbneng*' has the spiritual philosophy of creation and origin of the indigenous tribe of the region. There is '*U LumShyllong*' which represent the divine deity called as '*U BleiShyllong*' is the foundation of traditional democracy and who bestowed the art of governance and the rule of justice. Finally, the '*U LumDiengiei*' represents the victory of light over the darkness.

VI. CONCLUSION

Most of the dances and festivals of Meghalaya though connect with rituals and customs brings joy and happiness to the people. These festivals are one way to hold together and strengthened tribal society and reinforce their identity. '*U LumSohpetbneng*' is the mythology that explains the arrival of man into the world. Accordingly, rituals and dance were performing to pay homage to the creator and pray for the good harvestings and health of the people. '*Nongkrem*' dance is

where the queen mother takes her initiative for the festivals and who has equal right to give her counsel for the functioning of the administration. This is where the matrilineal system of society is reflected, of having equal representation in the society. Beside, the 'Seng Khasi Organisation' also inducted a dance form 'Shad Suk Mynsiem' mainly to preserve and promote the festive aspect of different rituals and practices. The rationale behind these festivals and traditions are to keep the culture and festive knowledge alive with mythology, legend, myth and the history not only through written words but by the practice of recitations, song and also by various implications behind the performance of the dance forms.

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