



Research Paper

A Glimpse of Khasi Dance in Khasi Society

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ABSTRACT: The Khasis of Meghalaya have been preserving many ancient traditions. They retain their distinct identity, their customs, traits and many interesting performing art forms. This paper is an exploration of Khasi dance. Khasi dance form part and parcel of the rich and vibrant democratic institution of the Khasi society that has existed since time of old. Notwithstanding the phenomenon of Khasi dance as a component in the way of life of the Khasis, only diminutive works have been conducted so far. In an attempt to explore the scenario of Khasi dance in Khasi Hills, I deem it necessary to explain in the present paper the articulation of dance in the life of the Khasis. Through this objective, the paper will attempt to analyze how Khasi dance is inextricably woven into various domains of the Khasi society.

KEYWORDS: Hima (Native State), Khasi, Kur (Clan), Ka Niam Tynrai (Indigenous Khasi Religion), Matrilineal System, Raid (Administrative Unit), Shad (Dance).

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I. INTRODUCTION

The indigenous people inhabiting the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, commonly known to all as the Khasis, are art lovers. Of all the art forms, dance is integral and inherent to them. In his work, P.R.T Gurdon underlines the role of Khasi dance and maintains that instead of forming only a principal part of all the Khasi festivities, dance has always been an adjunct to Khasi religious ceremonies^[1].

Since the days of yore, the Khasis have been instilled by their forefathers with a democratic percept that maneuvers their society on various grounds, be it religious, social or political aspect. The community stood up and strong until recent times because it interweaves every individual with traditions, customs and polity that are in rhythm with the design of life shaped by the ancestors since the days of old. It may be remembered that the ancestors of the Khasis were unaware of reading and writing, an art lost when they crossed an ocean in the flood according to a Khasi legend. Notwithstanding the crisis, they were gifted with an analytical mind to invigorate elements for setting up a democratic society from the days of yore. They had the power to reason, to envisage and to create. These were the foremost expressions of the intrinsic quality gifted by the creator to them. In due course, they envisaged a society for peace, harmony, unity, goodwill and mutual existence of all and thereby founded many good things. One of these was dance. The dance created by them was symbolic and reflective of the manifold designs that wield the Khasi way of life. For this reason, the Khasi Hills has been a home of innumerable dance forms since time immemorial.

Amongst the Khasi dances, some are central in religious ceremonies and are therefore termed as religious dances; some form part of a harvest festival, hence are called as agricultural dances; some are held for thanksgiving to the Lord Almighty, hence emerge as the thanksgiving dances. These dances are intertwined with rituals that are conducted with purpose. In this light, we may perhaps observe the interplay of dance in the various institutions woven into the Khasi way of life.

While serving his term on earth, a non-Christian Khasi who profess *Ka Niam Tynrai* (Indigenous Khasi Religion) participates in all rituals which are needed in *Ka Niam-Im* (The rites and rituals for the living) and *Ka Niam-Iap* (the rites and rituals for the dead). Rituals are indispensable from any religious practices of the Khasis because they have been prescribed in *Ka Niam Tynrai*.

The rituals might concern a family, *Kur* (Clan), Village, *Raid* (Administrative Unit) or *Hima* (Native State) for varied purposes. As per Khasi custom, it is a *Sang* (taboo) if rituals that are necessary to perform are not observed during any ceremony. If ritual proper is not followed bad consequences shall befall in the family, *Kur*, Village, *Raid* and *Hima* as well.

To be certain that everything is in order, divination is invoked in rituals. The signs accumulated are believed to be the information from God. When good signs are traced in the ritual, the ceremony culminates

with a celebration which most of the time it is expressed in the form of performing art forms like Music and Dance. Herein, dance is symbolic of reconciliation, in a sense, it shows the unison of the Khasis with the Supreme Being. Khasi dances are accompanied with vocal music or with the playing of music alone. Therefore, we witness numerous dances performed differently in different parts of Khasi Hills. For instance, in the Northern parts, commonly known as *Ri Bhoi* some of the dances are *Ka Shad Lakympong* and *Ka Shad Nguh Meikha* of *Raid Nongtung*, *Ka Shad Sajer* of *Raid Nonglyngdoh*, *Ka Shad Lukhmi* of *Raid Iapngar*, *Ka Shad Krud Kba* and *Shad Langhei* of *Raid Marngar*. In the Central Upland, commonly known as *Ri Lum* some of the dances are *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* of *Seng Khasi*, *Ka Shad Nongkrem* of *Hima Khyrim*, *Ka Shad Mawnariang* of *Raid Mylliem*. In the Southern plateau, commonly known as *Ri War*, some dances are *Ka Shad Lyngdoh* of *Wahkhen*, *Ka Shad Phur* of *Sohbar*, *Ka Shad Kiew Iing* of *Raid Mawja*. These dances are all performed alongside rituals that are complex and elaborate.

It is to be noted that when rites and rituals predominated in every Khasi family, dance finds expression within the domain of the *Kur* (clan). The social organization in Khasi society builds up from the *Kur*, the nucleus from which the varied layers of the community have developed. Many *Kurs* trace their descent from the ancestress called *Ka Iawbei-Tynrai* (Root Ancestress)^[2]. The descendants are called *Shi Kur* or one clan. The *Kurs* are strictly exogamous, for which multiplication arises through intermarriage with members of other *Kurs*. With the increasing number of *Kurs*, many members migrated to other places for better means of living. The migration of members of a *Kur* in search of new facilities led to the formation of *Ka Jaid* (Sub-Clan). The *Jaid* springs up from *Ka Iawbei Tymmen* (Younger Ancestress), in the *Kur*^[3]. In the process of migration, the *Jaid* may be known by new names but they belong to the same ancestry and the same *Kur*. For instance, *Jaid Swer*, *Jaid Shanpru*, *Jaid Syiem* and *Jaid Malngiang* are some of the different *Jaid*s belonging to the same *Kur*. Each *Kur* has many *Kpohs* (*Kpoh* implies “the womb”) that claim their descent from *Ka Iawbei Khyrrow* (Young Ancestress)^[4]. From each *Kpoh* evolves many *iings* or families. The brother of *Ka Iawbai Tynrai* is known as *U Suidnia* or *U Kni Rangbah* (Eldest Maternal Uncle) and her husband is *U Thawlang* (First Grandfather)^[5]. All clans that trace their line from the same ancestress are inter-related having a blood relationship.

The mutual existence and solidarity of the *Kur* are reflected in the practice of *Thep Mawbah* ceremony (*Thep* means “to insert”. *Mawbah* is a cromlech maintained by each clan for depositing the bones of its deceased members). This is a highly ritualized system of worship which is concerned with keeping the bones of the dead members of the *Kur* in the cromlech called *Mawbah*. This may be considered as the final resting place of the deceased bones. This ceremony can also be marked with *Ka Phur Ka Siang* (a festivity during *ka Niam-Iap*) of *Ki Khunkha Khunlong* (Grand-children from the son) to *Ka Meikha* (the father’s mother) before her bones are put in the *Mawbah*. It is on this day that *Ki Khunkha Khunlong* shows reverence to *Ka Meikha* through the ceremony of *Ka Phur Meikha* (a ceremony for paying homage to the father’s mother)^[6]. Protocol wise, the son and his children come forward to venerate *Ka Meikha* with a dance performance called *Ka Shad Nguh Meikha* (a solemn dance performance which is executed alongside *Ka Ksing* and *Ka Shawiang* musical instruments). Through this ceremony we come to realize that to a Khasi, his/her *Meikha* and her lineage are worshipped and held in high esteem.

From the social structure of the Khasis, we also come to learn that the Khasi community follows the matrilineal system of succession. The system gives the woman a rightful place with honour and dignity in the home, in the clan and the society^[7]. According to the Khasi custom, Khasi women are bestowed with responsibilities to safeguard the house and property, are respected for being the mother; the preserver of the clan’s lineage and are also valued with dignity for their role as propagators of the Khasi race. They are included in the religious ceremonies as a family priestess, to prepare all the religious accessories for the religious offerings. However, their role in the political or administrative sphere is considered insignificant. Simultaneously, Khasi men are bestowed with the responsibility of regulating affairs in the family, clan and society. A Khasi man has dual status as endowed by Khasi tradition. In matters concerning his children, he is a father and in matters concerning his nephews and nieces, he becomes *U Kni* (maternal uncle). Household accountability, therefore, is being shared between the maternal uncle and the father^[8].

The abovementioned thought content is recreated in *Ka Shad Kynthei* (Khasi female dance). The structure of the dance expresses ingredients such as gender roles in which male dancers execute highly energetic leaps and graceful gestures in the outer circle while female dancers glide only with their feet devoid of gestures or facial expressions in the inner circle of the arena.

Within the political sphere, Khasi dance is seen as a utility. The traditional politico-administrative system which is democratic and is being observed until today alongside the modern-day system of governance also started from the *Kur*. With the growth in population, members of the *Kur* inhabit a tract of land which later culminates as their village. Members of the village also fold other *Kurs* who wish to settle in their villages, thus, enlarging the village in both population and dimension. In this process, the *Village Dorbar* that constitutes *U Basan* and *Ki Tymmen Ki San* or *U Basan* and *Ki Tymmen Shnong* were formulated to look after the discipline of the village. When the villages grew in number, many villages decided to unite together for innumerable

reasons. This agglomeration of many villages culminates into a *Raid* (Administrative Unit) which is under the jurisdiction of *U Basan* (administrative head) or *U Lyngdoh Raid* (administrative head). The system of administration with the *Basan* or the *Lyngdoh Raid* as the institution maker was before the formation of Syiemship system. Syiemship in Khasi Hills began to take shape when the *Basans* and *Lyngdohs* united together for the reason of one common protection^[9]. Hence, with mutual agreement between *Basans* and *Lyngdohs*, the conglomeration of *Raids* occurred gradually. It leads to the formation of Khasi *Hima* (Khasi Native States) under the protection of a native ruler called *Syiem*.

Some *Raids* in Khasi Hills do celebrate the anointment ceremony of *U Lyngdoh* with dance performance apart from rituals. Local sources say that in the olden days, the anointment ceremony of the *Lyngdoh* of *Raid Nongkrem* is usually observed with *Ka Shad Wait* performance throughout the day. Furthermore, it has been observed in dance, such as *Ka Shad Nguh Lyngdoh* in *Ka Shad Mawnariang* ceremony and *Ka Shad Nguh* in *Ka Shad Sajer* ceremony that paying homage to the *Lyngdoh* is mandatory during the annual religious ceremony of the *Raid*. Here, the *Lyngdoh* is being honoured with a dance performance from the *Bakhraws*(elders) and the dancers who represent *U Khun U Hajar* (the children of the soil) of the *Raid*.

The coronation of each *Syiem* is characterized with a series of functions. For instance, at the time of appointing the *Syiem* at Mawsynram in the olden days, a dance called *Ka Shad Lymmuh* is performed by men who held leafy branches of trees in their hands. This dance is followed by the dance of young girls decked up with *pansngait*, gold chains and silver chains^[10]. The coronation of *Syiem Shyllong* is commemorated with *Ka Shad Shynrang Shad Kynthei* as a sign to remember the contribution made by *Ka Pah Syntiew* to the Khasi community^[11]. The coronation of *Syiem Sohra* is intersected with the funerary ceremony of the former deceased *Syiem*. The *Syiem* can be anointed if only he completes the ritual of *Ka Niam Iap* on the deceased *Syiem*. This ceremony on the deceased *Syiem* of Sohra is called *Ka Thang Syiem* (the cremation ceremony of U Syiem). *Hima Sohra* is renowned for this grand ritualistic ceremony which is not to be seen for so many years now. The ceremony was propitious to the Syiems of Sohra, not for the grand display of the ceremony or the number of resources involved in the process but it was special due to the proceedings and ingredients which connect the *Thang Syiem* with the coronation of the new *Syiem Sohra*.^[12]

II. CONCLUSION

It is worthwhile to mention here that Khasi dance is embedded in various institutions of the Khasi society. A probe into the role played by Khasi dance in the religious activities of the Khasis shows that veneration to the ancestors is often noticed in every ritual. As corroborated by many scholars, Khasis believe that the dead ancestors are elevated to a higher supernatural status, capable of aiding the mortals in their times of need. Hence, it would not be wrong to state that the dances associated with rituals are symbolic and are used as one of the means to communicate with unseen forces. This is intended for the good and prosperous life of the successors in the future. Concerning the role of man and woman in society, Khasi dance also contains a message of gender identity. The structure of the dance expresses elements such as gender role in which man, *U Khatarbor* (twelve powers) executes highly energetic leaps and graceful gestures while the young maiden as *Ka Shibor* (one power) is being sheltered and surrounded by the male dancers in the inner circle of the dance arena. The form and content in the dance rightly justify the position of the woman and that of a man as endowed by Khasi custom. Within the political sphere, Khasi dance is observed to be one of the means to commemorate the anointment ceremony of the representatives at different levels of traditional administrative institutions.

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