

The House-Warming Ritual of the Khasi-War

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Abstract: House-warming ritual or 'Leh niamShad Kiew iing' among the Mawja, a 'War' sub-tribe of the Khasis. This Mawja has a unique celebration for housewarming in the form of ritual dance. The celebration starts right from the collection of the house-building materials. On the finishing day, after getting the permission from house owner, they start the celebration and it lasts for three consecutive nights. In this celebration, first, they perform a ritual to invoke God which is followed by the five kinds of folk dance. This paper is a case study focusing on the five ritual house-warming dances and the meaning behind this dance. The main objective of this paper is to describe the origin and meaning of the dance. The methodology used in this paper is unstructured interviews as well as from secondary resources.

Keywords: Meghalaya India, Khasi-Pnars, Mawja, the origin of the house warming, House design and house construction, House warming of the War, Conclusion

1. Introduction

Meghalaya is situated in Northeast India bordering Assam in the North, the East, and the West, and Bangladesh in the South and the West. Meghalaya is the residence of the two major tribes, the *Khasi-Pnars*, (*Khasis*) and the *Garos*, these two tribes follow the matrilineal kinship. The Khasi is the largest tribe in Meghalaya which is followed by the Garos. The *Khasi* has several sub-tribes. The major sub-tribes of the *Khasis* are The Pnars, the Bhoi, the War, the *Lyngngam* the *Khynriam*, the *Maram*, etc. The Wars, are inhabiting the southern slopes of the state bordering Bangladesh. The Wars are again divided into the 'War Synteng or War Jaintia' those who are inhabiting the south of Jaintia Hills and the 'War Khasi' those inhabiting the East and West of Khasi Hills. K. Dharendra Ramsiej (2014: 49) writes, the Khasi is the hill tribe living in the Khasi and Jaintia of Meghalaya. Those who are living in the East are known as *Synteng* or *Pnar*: those who are living in the plateau tableland are known as Khasi and those who are living in the hills slopes bordering Bangladesh are known as Wars. Those who are living in the north bordering with Assam are called *Bhoi*. Those who are living in the West Khasi Hills District are called *Lyngngam*

The Mawja

One of the communities of War is the 'Mawja', the name *Mawja* is called to those Wars living within the *Raid Mawja*. Mawjas are very simple and honest people. They live close to nature, and their main occupation is agriculture such as brooms, bay leaves, and wild black pepper most of their vegetables are from forests and forest products. *Raid Mawja* is located in the western part of *Ri War Mihngi*, in this *Raid*, there is a village called *Langdem*, it is here that the house-warming ritual in the form of dance originated, and from here it spread to other parts of *Riwar*. The house-warming ritual was originally performed at *Lyndem* and *Pyrnai* and spread to other *Raid* as well such as *Raid Wahkhen*, *Raid Shabong*, and so on.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i) To Describe the House-warming ritual of the Mawja
- ii) To explain the meaning of each dance

2. Methodology

This study on the housewarming of Khasi-War is a case study on the Mawja, a small community in the Wars. The data was collected from the primary source using the unstructured and focused interview.

The Origin of the Ritual Housewarming

Mr. M. Lyngdoh wrote that a long long time ago, there were three siblings' two brothers and a sister. One of the brothers is named Tung other one is named Bai and their sister is named Jarr. The trio was living in a tent in a rock cave. The brothers were very lazy and selfish, though Jarr kept on insisting on building a proper house to live in, but not of no use. Tired of insisting, she requested friends and neighbors to build a house for her. Jarr was very happy, at last, she got a house to live in to protect her from the sun and rain. But before entering her new home, she invited all those who help to build her house for a feast cum dancing. Before feasting, the priest performed a thanksgiving to God, the creator, teacher, instructor, and provider, to the house to shower his blessings for the growth and welfare of the family in her new home. After the ritual, the feast and dancing started, this celebration lasted for three consecutive nights. Jarr was very happy and contented with the housewarming ritual she also thanked her friends and neighbours for their help. From then on, this kind of ritual continues till today. The community helps too, especially in constructing a house is still practiced. Even in the agricultural field friends and neighbors help each other to establish social connections. In most of the War village still today, money does have much influence on the life of the people. In the words of John Field (2009), "Relationships matter. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people

can work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty”.



Choosing a Site for Building a House

In the War region, each Raid has a community land where everyone is free to grow crops and build houses, besides this, there is also a village land which is meant for house construction only. Bah M. Lyngdoh wrote that anyone who wants to build a house has to find out the site of his/her choice. Once it is done, the site is marked to show that the site is already occupied. Some people would ask permission from the 'Mei Ram-ew' (Mother Earth) and the 'Mei Hukum' (the mother of decree) by placing a handful of rice or egg on the site after uttering a prayer they cover it with soil. After a week or so, they uncovered the soil if the same is undisturbed means the place is fit and free from any diseases or natural calamities.

The Preparation of Building Materials

When autumn comes the cutting and collection of wood is in full swing. For building a house wood is cut only in the autumn season, because this reason the tree is fully matured, hard, with strong resistance, and does not get rotten very easily. They would invite friends and neighbors for wood cutting, grass collecting grasses, or thorny palms to cover the roof. The cut woods are gathered in one place. After peeling the bark they would dry it in the route side. In some places, cutting and peeling are done at the same time.

When the winter comes, all the woods are already dried up, they again invite friends and neighbors to bring them to the spot where the house is to be built. So the crowd carried all the building materials to the site together with the *Kynhoi risa* (a typical enthusiastic poetic chanting when working together) all the way praying that these woods would be ant resistance, the inmates of the house would be free from

sickness, and so on. This continues every day until all the necessary materials are brought home. The owner would prepare food and water for the helpers to clean themselves.

When everything is ready, they start digging and leveling the floor. This is followed by erecting the supporting stones or woods on all sides and the structure is built on top of that. For building a house, each builder knows the work that has been assigned to him. For the young builders, guidance by the elders is necessary.

On the finishing day, is also a feasting day for all those who helped in building the house, right from the collecting of the materials till the finishing day. It is on this day that the helpers approach the house owner for a house-warming ritual.

House Design

The housing design is of two types one type is called '*Iing dkhar*' (Assamese type) and the other one is *iing Khasi* (typical Khasi house). It is the tradition to raise the house above the ground between one to three feet depending on the size of the house, it is supported with well-dressed stones known as *Mawshan* (supporting stones), and the structure is built on top of these stones. The reason for raising the house above the ground is simply because the crawling insects or reptiles such as snakes would not enter the house. Another reason is that the wood will last long if it is raised above the ground. In this region, there are lots of termites, and the wood rots very fast if it is eaten by termites. So if the floor of the house is on the ground the termites will shelter it and the wood will get rotten very fast. The floor is surfaced with *Tyrpait* (a dressed bamboo for making floor) or plank with

bamboo and the roof is covered with grasses or thorny palm locally available. There are two thatch roofs, one is with 'tynriew' (thorny palm leaf) the other one is *traw* (a special type of grass used for covering the roof) or *orphlang sop-iing* (grass).



Figure 1: A Typical Khasi house

It is a tradition of the Wars that whenever any villager or neighbor builds a house, the whole village helps. Or the owner of the house would invite some kith and kin, friends, and neighbors to help and those who are not invited come of their own free will. They have the feeling that they should at

least have a hand on it. It takes three days to complete the house. Gathering and collecting building materials for the house is all community help. It exists even today, in some villages of the War.

House construction

The house construction is very simple. Originally the way they constructed the house in such a way that the hearth was at the center. There are no proper bedrooms, on either side of the hearth they keep a partition with the local 'tyrpait' made out of bamboo. There is only one entrance to the house, on the side of the entrance they keep as a water store room. Above the hearth, there are two or three tiers hanging platforms. The small hanging platform just above the hearth is called *tymdiat rit* (small hanging platform). Here they preserve meat to be eaten in a day or two. Above *Tymdiat rit* is a *Tymdiat heh*, (middle), here the firewood is dried any wet basket of the day or cone, etc. is being dried. Above the *tymdiat*, there is *tympan*. The *tympan* is the permanent storage of all the baskets canes or anything necessary for future use even the seeds of various crops such as mustard seeds, millet seeds, etc. keeping things over the fire is safe from the attack of insect-worm. It is also the best way to preserve and it can last for years. It is noted that *Raid Mawja* is located in the same latitude with Cherrapunjee and Mawsynram, the two wettest places on earth. Therefore they receive almost the same amount of rainfall.



Figure 2: A view of the house inside

Among the *Mawja*, whenever the neighbor constructs a house, everyone joins and helps with a day or two days each. If the owner of the house invites for help, nobody rejects, even if the house owner does not invite, friends and neighbors would come and join hands for help, especially on the finishing day everyone would come and help. If the house owner is rich he would entertain the helpers with food and there would be a feast, but if the owner is poor the helpers would be very happy with one or two pieces of arum. No matter whether rich or poor everyone is happy to help because they know that someday their turn will come they will need help too. On finishing day the helpers would request the house owner for the house-warming ritual. The *Mawja* felicitates the owner of the house for getting a new house. They never honour the helpers because they know that someday his turn will come to get felicitated. Once being requested the house owner cannot say no.

House-Warming of the War (the main event)

In the Khasi community, each sub-tribe has a unique way of celebrating the house-warming. Among the *Khasi-War* community, housewarming is known as '*khawai kiewiing* or *Shad kiew iing*. The *Shad kiew iing* is a ritual housewarming dance with a set of dances along with rituals and ceremonies, this ritual is performed the whole night and ends at dawn. There are five dances excluding '*ka shad khyrwiang*', they are 1. *Shad kyrdem kjat*, 2. *Shad kynjat syiar*, 3. *Shad ryngkang syiar*, 4. *Shad kyntuid* and 5. *Shad kynjoh khapiah*. All these five dances are commonly known as *Shad Mawja*.

Shad Mawja is a set of folk dances that are performed in all the villages of the western *Riwar Mihngi* each dance is having their respective name and the meaning behind it. One of the most common and enthusiastic dances of the *Mawja* is '*Ka shad khyrwiang*' (circling dance), in this dance young and old males and females join together. These five dances

originated and were performed for the first time at *Lyndem* and *Pyrnai* villages. The housewarming ritual also originated in these two villages.

On the first day of the housewarming ritual, the guests from the host village are allowed; the only outsiders are their kith and kin of the host who has come to help. The second day and third day are merriment days, and people from other villages are allowed to come. In the earlier days, it was the house owner who initiated the housewarming ritual friends and neighbors were invited. However, it changed slowly, and the villagers and the builders themselves sought permission from the house owner. Whenever permission is sought for the housewarming ritual, the owner has to allow it to have a good relationship and love with the neighbors and friends who built the house.

Having completed the house, the hearth is made. The first ritual is *ka thang khiew skain*. They make a fire, they burn every piece of leftover wood and burn so that the smoke would go around to every nook and corner of the house sending away the insects and flies that must have hidden in the wood. Everyone is excited and beginning to shout '*Hoi kiw*' (*hurrah*) and utter some prayers so that all the mosquitoes, flies, and evil spirits that might have accidentally brought in along with the wood would go away and go back to the jungle, the dressed wood is the home of human beings now. This kind of ritual is only the *Ka jingia kyrkoh* (the enthusiastic chanting of joy) after this *jingia kyrkoh*, the helpers select two or three people to approach the house owner for the housewarming ritual. Having given permission owner of the house owner himself prepares the rooster, water, rice, and the *Nongkhan Nongknia* (a priest who performs ritual) for the cult, and the cult is also performed to drive away the evil spirits that may have been brought along with the tree that may cause harm to the inmate of the house. When the cult is completed, the housewarming dance begins. It is as follows:-

1) This Dance starts with the male's *shad kyrdem kjat*. The men folk sit on the floor and tap the floor with one foot and sing along, the meaning of this dance is to lead others for a more enthusiastic performance ahead. After this, there is a *shad lai kyrwiang* (circling dance) Whenever any dance is completed, it is always followed by the '*Shad lai kyrwiang*'. This dance is performed by both males and females, children and adults. '*Shad laikyrwiang*' means circling the hearth three consecutive times in a clockwise direction though it is meant to be circled three times; the dancers circled more than three. Since it is a very enthusiastic dance most of the time they perform keep on dancing until everyone is fully satisfied.

2) *Shad kynjat syiar* - this type of dance is performed after the *shad kyrdem kjat* and it is performed by males only. In this dance, a rooster is cut in the neck in such a way that it will not die instantly. The cut rooster is kept on the floor circled by the dancers. While dancers kick the rooster the blood comes out, they keep on kicking until the rooster dies and the dance stops. While kicking the rooster each dancer has to be careful that if the rooster escapes from anyone's leg while kicking, that is the signal that a person will die young. This is like the prediction for his future. When the

rooster dies, the host takes the chicken away, and the dance ends. The dead rooster was cut and its intestines were examined by the *Nongknia*, as usual, there are two parts of the intestines, one represents god's intestine which is always longer, and the other represents human intestines which are shorter. When the sacrifice is bad the human's intestines are longer. This means the sacrifice is bad, something might happen to the host or owner of the house. Rooster has been honored by the Khasi, in the words of H. O. Mawrie, *ka don ka jaka ha kaba ki pait pnat ar tylli ki snier kiba la soh lang ia kiba la sop da ka khlein. Ia uwei na kine la khot 'u blei u long ha jrong bad u briew pat u long hapoh* (H. O. Mawrie, 2002; 44). The above lines meant that the intestine of the rooster is a part where the intestine branches into two parts the longer intestine is god and the short intestine is human.

3) *Shad Rynkang Syiar*---this dance is jumping the person over his head by another person. This dance is performed by males in pairs, first one person must jump over one person from one side later on it is the turn of the other side. After this, it is followed by the *shad lai kyrwiang*. The meaning of this dance is to show that human beings can jump over on any living creature including the human being just in case and no one should not to feel bad about being jumped over.

4) *Shad Kyntuid Sleit*--- this dance is performed in the middle of the night. It is performed in three pairs three males and three females. If females are not around or asleep, they would wake up the neighboring females even in the middle of the night just to get accompanied for the ritual dance. In this dance, the female dancers flatten the male dancers on the floor nudging their hips one after another or at the same time and it are repeated three times, after being flattened for three consecutive times; the males rise and hold hands with the females. This shows that they accepted the defeat and would not leave to either the family of procreation or the family of orientation. This dance symbolizes that the house belongs to females. All the belonging such as gold silver, land, and property including the clan belongs to her. She takes care of the family ritual too. She is the custodian and the caretaker of all members of the house, male and female, young and old including unmarried members. This dance shows the typical meaning of matrilineal society. After this dance, it is followed by the *Shad lai kyrwiang*.

Earlier, all the Khasi males were warriors. Their life was unpredictable, like the people on Sentinelese Island who are hostile to strangers. The early Khasi used to kill any stranger they met, either kill or be killed. For that reason, all the Khasi males were not sure about their lives, so they put all the responsibility on females. That is the reason why they adopt the matrilineal kinship.



Figure 3: Shad Kyntuit

5) *Shad Kynjoh Khapiah*---. This dance again is performed by males only. In this dance, the *Khapiah* (dry fish) is hanging on the ceiling at a certain height. The dancers would try to catch the fish, and the dance ended when the dry fish was caught. This dance is performed almost at dawn. Bren Khongthah has said that the meaning of this dance is to show that humans can cruise in the ocean and also go up to the sky.

When all dances are over, it is followed by the *Phawar*. “*Phawars are poetic rhyming which is recited by an individual while the crowd responds with shouts of hoi kiw*” (Mawrie, 2009; 77). The person who performs this *phawar* recollects everything about how they built the house with what materials, he would name every detail right for the collection of building materials, such as who dug a hole, what tool they used, what type of trees they cut, what is the size of the house, who covers the roofs with what, palm leaves or with *phlangsopiing*, and so on. This kind of *Phawar* is called festive *phawar* and only one person is *phawar* and it is joined *Hoi Kiw* by the crowd.

Jeebon Roy (1897: 19) writes, *Haka sngi ba ki leit shong ha iing thymmai ki khot lem katto katne ki kha ki man ki kur ki kmie, kiba riewbha ki knia da u sniang, kiba duk ki shu leh tang da ka kha-piah. Ki shim ki khapiah san tylli ki buh ha tbian ki suit da ka iad um ia ka ramew iing. Tad la suit, ki teh lai tylli ha tum, ki ia kynjoh, ka uba shait u ioh iakita ki khapiah. Kiba knia sniang ki teh da ka kyrngiang ki sa ia kynjoh*. This means that on the housewarming day, some of the kith and kin of the family are invited, the rich would feast with a pig, and the poor only the dry fish. They took five dryfish kept on the floor and poured the rice beer on it for the family goddess. Out of these five, three are tied up under the roof of the house where everyone would try to reach out by jumping it up high. Whoever reaches out to the dry fish is the winner and can take it home.

The typical housewarming ritual lasts only one night all five kinds of dance are completed on the same night only. The other two nights are a merry-making dance. On the second night of the housewarming dance, people from outside the village are allowed to come and no further ritual takes place. On the third night, more people from far away villages come. For the next two nights, the dance takes place outside the house only for a short moment they perform inside.

All the newly built houses cannot be asked for a housewarming ritual, only if the floor of the house is surfaced with the plank. If the floor is surfaced with bamboo, the floor would be spoiled in a single night. But there was a case where the house owner invited for a housewarming ritual even if the floor is surfaced with bamboo. The house owner does not care about being destroyed, they will resurface it again. All they want is a housewarming ritual.

3. Conclusion

The five kinds of *Shad Mawja* are performed not only in the housewarming ritual but it can also be performed as entertainment and festive dance. It is very popular among the ‘*Wars*’, it is also performed during the festivals. All five types of dances cannot be performed at a time only part of it can be performed at a time due to time-consuming.

In *Raid Shabong*, another *Raid in Riwar Mihngi*, House-warming dance is performed as part of the religious festival. Before the festival, they built a ‘*Lyngdoh’s house*’ (religious house) with only natural materials. Having constructed the house the next day they perform a housewarming dance after this, other rituals will follow until the final day when everyone from outside the Raids comes and witnesses the festival.

The house-warming ritual nowadays has disappeared, in the last five or six years house-warming rituals have not been seen or heard of. The main reason for the disappearance of this dance is due to the construction of cemented buildings. The construction of a cemented building signifies that the people are rich and they do not need community help. Nowadays, people avoid the house-warming ritual, even those who construct a wooden house. When inquired many said it is time-consuming since the host has to prepare lots of things. Some simply said they want it as a result house-warming ritual discontinued.

Vocabulary:

Garo-Garo is another tribe in Meghalaya whose origin is different from that of the Khasi-Pnar

Hoi kiw-This word is uttered to express joy and happiness. It is usually a chorus in any Khasi song.

Iing dkhar-A housing design similar to the plain people

Iing khasi-A housing design of the Khasis

Ka jingkiyrkoh-(noun) The uttering of joy and happiness in War dialect

Khasi-One of the major tribes of Meghalaya

Khawai Kiew iing-Housewarming

Khynriam, Lynggam, Maram-They are the communities of the Khasi tribe

Kynhoi risa-Uttering of joy and happiness

Lehniam Shad Kiew iing-Ritual housewarming

Lyngdoh’s house-The religious for performing ritual and cult

Mawja-the sub-tribe of War inhabiting Raid Mawja

Mawshan-The dressed stones kept to support the whole structure of a house.

Mei hukum-The mother of the decree

Mei Ram-ew-The Mother Earth

Nongkhan-Nongknia-A priest

Phlang sop iing-The type of grass used for making the roof of the house

Phawar-Phawars are poetic rhyming which is recited by an individual while the crowd responds with shouts of hoi kiw

Pnar-The sub-tribe of Khasi, they are inhabiting in the Jaintia hill district

Raid-The district in the kingship state under the supervision of a Sirdar

Raid Shabong-The district under the Khyrim kingship state

Raid-The district of the kingship state supervised by the Sardar. There are many Ra

Raid Wahkhen-The district under the Khyrim kingship state

Riwar Mihngi-The eastern part of the War region

Riwar-the country of war,

Shad lai khyrwiang-The circling dance

Shad Mawja-The folk dance of Mawja

Shad Kynjat Syiar-Kicking rooster dance

Shad Kynjoh Khapiah-The dance for catching the dry fish

Shad Kyrdem-The foot-taping dance

Shad Kyntuid sleit-Hip nudging dance

Shad Ryngkang Syiar-Rooster jumping dance

Thangkhiewskain-Smoking the house so that all the mosquitoes and flies will go away due toSmoke

Traw-The type of grass used for covering the roof of the house

Tymdiat-the small hanging platform over the hearth.

Tympan-The platform over the Tymdiat for storing things

Tynriew-A thorny palm leaf covering the of a house.

Tyrpait-a well-dressed bamboo for flooring the house

War-War is one of the communities of the Khasi tribe

War Jaintia or Synteng War-those who are inhabiting the southern slopes of Meghalaya.

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