



A Representation of *Shad Suk Mynsiem* Festival of the Khasis as a Cultural Performance

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ABSTRACT: *The culture and identity of a people is often reflected in their social and cultural activity and in their sense of dress and food habits. In the culture of any race, festivities and celebrations form part of an important event to keep their history, tradition and identity alive. This paper attempts to portray the Shad Suk Mynsiem festival of the Khasis as a cultural performance. It also seeks to analyse the different elements that contribute to the whole dance festival. It also tries to highlight the significance of the dance performance, the traditional music and musical instruments and the costume and attire of the performers from the perspective of the Khasi culture. Through the dance performance, the actions, behaviour and cultural values of a particular group are put on display for communication and perpetuation. The festival dance is being structured as a live performance accompanied by the traditional music and musical instruments in assisting the performers in the rhythmic movement of their bodies in motion with the dance with spectators or audience. Further, the dance is also attributed by the traditional costume and ornamentation that lends an aesthetic appeal to the overall performance.*

KEYWORDS: *festival, cultural performance, music, traditional musical instruments, costume*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The culture and identity of a people is often reflected in their social and cultural activity and their sense of dress and food habits. In the culture of any race, festivities and celebrations form part of an important event to keep their history, tradition, and identity alive. A festival is an annual celebration or an anniversary of a group of people or a community who come together for various purposes such as religious, social, and cultural, to commemorate an event. As an important part of the performance, the festival remains a significant feature of the culture and community of a people. A festival may be marked by an organised series of performances where ceremonies, observances, and feasting takes place. Often the religious and traditional aspect of a festival may highlight the tradition, history, and culture of a community that is communicated through a series of performances, thereby providing an insight into the sense of belonging and unity among families and groups within that community. Festival is traditional in character and gives occasion for social interaction and identity formation of the individual with the community as well as shared emotional experiences (Smith 1972). According to Beverly J. Stoeltje, festivals occur at calendrically regulated intervals and are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in purposes (Stoeltje 1992)

A performance in performing arts usually encompasses an action in which a performer or an assembly of performers behaves in a particular way for another group of people that form part of the audience. One of the noted performance theorists, Schechner divides performance into two categories: artistic performance and cultural performance. He states that artistic performance is considered as an art form, whereas cultural performance includes events that occur in everyday life in which cultural values are displayed for their perpetuation. According to Schechner, performances are actions that are framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed and must be construed as a 'broad spectrum' or 'continuum' of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet (Schechner 2013).

Performance constitutes the key elements of a festival as it ‘usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed specially and put on display for an audience’ (Bauman 1992). Bauman is of the view that all performance is situated, enacted, and rendered meaningful within socially defined situational contexts. A festival involving ‘cultural performances’ has to be ‘scheduled and prepared well in advance, temporally bounded with a beginning and an end, spatially bounded and enacted in a space that is symbolically marked off, programmed with a structured scenario and characterised by coordinated public occasions and a heightened sense of the aesthetic expression’ (Bauman 1992). Performances are constitutive of culture. Simply defined, culture is the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. The term ‘cultural performance’ was first coined by Milton Singer in an introduction to a collection of essays on Indian culture that he edited in 1959 (Singer 1975). Cultural performances are ‘how the cultural content of a tradition is organized and transmitted on particular occasions through specific media’. The features of any performance are that it should have a limited period, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance’ (Singer, 1975).

Festivals are of various kinds and are constituted with different motives. Festivals have had their meaning and significance among all the communities of India from time immemorial. Among the Khasis, a festival is integral to the social, cultural, economic, agricultural, and religious life of the people. The Khasis are one of the tribal communities that inhabit the state of Meghalaya in the North-Eastern region of India. The North-Eastern part of India comprising the eight states is known for its multifarious facets of culture with people from diverse ethnic and multicultural backgrounds. Each state has its own distinct and vibrant culture and tradition with an amalgamation of many communities, faiths, and cultures inclusive of the different religions, festivals, food, art, crafts, performances, music, myths, legends, enchantment, traditional healing practices and not to forget the traditional ecological practices that are prevalent in almost all the tribes of North-Eastern India.

Although the Khasis celebrate a variety of festivals and dance, the two main festivals are *Shad Suk Mynsiem* (Thanksgiving Dance) and *Shad Nongkrem* (Nongkrem Dance). Quite unlike the *Nongkrem Dance*, *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* is not associated with any rituals or religious ceremonies, but a community prayer is usually held at the premises of the Seng Khasi Hall before proceeding to the dancing ground at Weiking (Rynjah 2011). Rana observes that dancing forms the main part of the Khasi festivals (Rana 1989). The form, content, structure, and style of *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* as a cultural performance are dealt with so that the totality and entirety of the experience are brought out.

SHAD SUK MYNSIEM FESTIVAL: ORIGIN

Shad Suk Mynsiem means dance of the peaceful heart. In the Khasi dialect *shad* means dance. It is held annually during the spring season to celebrate harvesting and sowing. It is a dance of thanksgiving to God for all the blessings of the past year and a devotional prayer for the blessings yet to come (Rana 1989). This dance which is usually performed in April at the Weiking Ground is of recent origin. It was started during the British period when British imperialism was at its full height. The initiative was taken by some thoughtful Khasi leaders who were apprehensive of the fact that the Khasis might forget their own culture, religion, dance, and music. In the consciousness to preserve their own culture and tradition, and to oppose indiscriminate westernisation, these leaders founded the Seng Khasi which is a socio-religious organisation of the Khasis, on the 23rd November 1899, the date which would also be remembered as the Seng Kut Snem. The four principles of the Seng Khasi are: (Khongphai 1979:129-130)

- 1) The association or assembly of persons who adhere to the tenets of kinship as specified by the Khasi ancestors.
- 2) The coming into being of a man in the world to earn righteousness through service or that man is born to seek love and propagate truth.
- 3) The respect for one’s fellowmen with a sense of humanity and divinity.
- 4) God, the Sovereign Lord, the Almighty Creator, the Giver of all.

A resolution was therefore passed by the Seng Khasi in 1910 that a dance would be organised annually in the Weiking Ground to preserve all the good customs and usages of the Khasis, one of which is the Khasi dance. The first dance organised by the Seng Khasi was on the 14th and 15th of April, 1911. In 1912, the name and purpose of the dance were spelled out by the Seng Khasi as *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* or the dance of the blissful heart, which would advance the culture of the Khasi race at the same time revealing the gratitude and joy to God the Creator for the care, protection and for sufficiently providing all of their needs (Singh 1982). The happy thanksgiving dance *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* held annually in April under the auspices of the Seng Khasi is celebrated as an offering of homage to God, the Creator on heaven above and on earth below, to the memory of the past, and also to retain their rights and customs. This festival is enjoyed and respected by all, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, and religion (Khongphai 1979).

During this festival, the people thank God for all His blessings in the past year and they invoke His blessings for the coming year for a bountiful harvest and general prosperity (Lyngdoh 1991).

DANCE PERFORMANCE

What characterises a festive celebration is its performance and aesthetic value. There are six modes of dancing performed at the festival dance of *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem*. These are *Ka Shad Nalai* (Nalai Dance), *Ka Shad DumDum* (DumDum Dance), *Ka Shad Klang* (Klang Dance), *Ka Shad Padiah* (Padiah Dance), *Ka Shad Pyllun* (Dance in a Circular Formation), and *Ka Shad Mastieh* (Sword Dance). These different modes of dancing have their style and rhythm according to the particular beats of the drums played by the musicians (Lyndem 2011).

The location of the dance performance is usually at the Weiking ground that belongs to the Seng Khasi. It is a beautiful open space located on the northwest end of Shillong town on the left bank of the Wahumkhrak stream (Khongphai 1979). The dance is usually held for three days and has no religious sacrifices and ceremonies (Lyngdoh 1991). Although there is no ritual or religious ceremony attached to the dance, yet each of the three days begins with a prayer of thanksgiving to God by the elders of the Seng Khasi followed by a procession that starts from the Seng Khasi Hall to the Weiking Ground.

DAY ONE

The first day begins at the Seng Khasi Hall with a Thanksgiving prayer to God for His manifold blessings for prosperity and the preservation of the cultural heritage. This is followed by a bow three times along with a prayer after which the male dancers shout and put their swords and *symphiah* (hair whisp) up and down. A small group procession consisting of male and female dancers in their traditional dancing attire, leaders of the Seng Khasi, and the rest of the people led by a flag bearer proceed towards the dance site at Weiking ground accompanied by the rhythm of the traditional beating of the drums and the high notes of the *tangmuri* or the windpipe. According to tradition, the dancing ground has three entrances in the North, East, and West; and the procession enters the gate from the East circling the ground thrice. Then the musicians mount the platform specially built for them (Singh 1982). The procession of drummers, dancers, and followers also sing the *phawars* or the rhymed couplets to the accompaniment of the drumbeat of *Ka Sing Lyni* (Rynjah 2011).

On reaching the dance site, the flags of the Seng Khasi are hoisted followed by a short dance performance called *Shad noh-kjat* or the inaugural dance with the accompaniment of the music played by the *duhalias* or the traditional musicians (Lyngdoh 1991). The dance takes place for a brief period which is like a prelude to the main performance on the following two days.

In the evening, the same procession of male and female dancers in their traditional dancing costumes, leaders of the Seng Khasi, and the rest of the people return to the Seng Khasi Hall, but this time the male dancers perform *Ka Shad Wait* or Sword Dance on the way. On reaching the Seng Khasi Hall, they perform *Ka Shad Mastieh* or the Warrior Dance. The first day of the festival dance ends with a meeting of the leaders of the Seng Khasi.

DAY TWO

The same sequence and dance movement of the performance take place on the second day.

DAY THREE

The third and final day of the dance festival is a grand one where dancers from all over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills participate in the traditional dance which continues the whole day and comes to an end in the evening with the unfurling of the Seng Khasi flag. The dancers along with the *duhalias* or musicians and members of the Seng Khasi return to the Seng Khasi Hall with the male performing *Ka Shad Mastieh* or the Sword Dance in front of the hall as in the previous two days. The festival dance comes to an end again with a meeting of the members of the Seng Khasi.

Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or the dance of a blissful heart is not much different from the usual Khasi dance that is performed at other occasions and functions of the Khasis. Unmarried maidens only are allowed to take part in the dance while male dancers may be married or unmarried and of any age. The female dancers occupy the inner circle of the dancing arena and perform their dance with a movement of their bare feet gracefully backward and forward while at the same time casting their eyes downward which shows their purity and simplicity. The women have to move their feet in conformity with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes (Lyngdoh1991). The dance of the females consists mostly of the crawling of toes with a slow balanced moving of bodies, and with steadfast gesture and grave countenance (Bareh 1985).

While women dance in the centre of the dancing ground, the male dancers divided into small groups often keep up a faster stepping dance around the group of women dancers (Bareh 1985). The male dancers occupy the outer circle by dancing around the women which signifies the male's protection and care of the family, clan, and race. The steps in the male dance are more lively and enthusiastic with the male dancers waving the *symphiah* or hair whisp on their right hands. In *Ka Shad Wait* or the Sword Dance which is a typical warrior dance, a male dancer holds a sword in one hand and a shield in another as if they are assaulting,

thrusting, and fighting. *Shad Mastieh* or Warrior dance is another male dance that exhibits a type of an old war dance (Lyngdoh 1991). The dancer holds the sword on his right hand and the *symphiah* or hair whip on his left. This dance consists of stepping forward and backward, bowing their heads and dropping down their swords and *symphiah* or hair whip, and then recedes. This movement is repeated several times in the process of the performance. The dancers in groups face each other charging forward and receding in the above style (Bareh 1991). It may also be noted that these dances are accompanied by the fast beating of drums. The process of repetition in the dance conforms with the musical arts (Bareh 1985). What is significant in the male dance is that the male dancers in pairs of two with swords in their hands perform the Warrior Dance or *Shad Mastieh* for a few minutes as a closing final.

MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Stoeltje says that a festival dance is also accompanied by music and musical instruments that not only permeate through it but even set the pace for the activities and key the emotions of the participants in the performance (Stoeltje 1992). Herein lies the concept of rhythm in dance where the timing of the music and musical instruments has to be carefully regulated to lend a rhythmic style and expression to the dance. In the performance of *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem*, music is played by the blowing of pipes called the *tangmuri* and the beating of drums (*Nakra and Nalai*) (Bareh 1985). Each traditional musical instrument with its unique style and musical composition assists the performers as they sway to the rhythm of the drum beats and the piping of the *tangmuri* (a windpipe) accompanied by the 'rhythmic beauty' of the cymbals. The combination of the different musical instruments is an indispensable factor in providing a rhythmic movement to the dance performance. It may also be stated here that the rhythmic movement of the dancers has to be learned and nurtured to avoid committing any flaws or else the beauty of the dance will be lost. In *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* as in any other social, cultural and religious occasion, the drum plays a significant and indispensable role in the Khasi tradition and culture. According to Syiem (2005), drums are Membrane Instruments, that is, instruments made out of animals' skin. There are several kinds of drums which include *Ka Bom* (Big Drum), *Ka Ksing Shynrang* (Male Drum), *Ka Ksing Kynthei* (Female Drum), and *Ka Padiah* (Small Drum) with different playing techniques and can be used in different contextual framework or patterns (Syiem 2005).

The performance of both the male and female dancers to the different drumbeats reflects the status of both the males and females in the Khasi society. According to Bareh, the art of drumming is socially connotative. *Ka Ksing Lynti* is a marching beat equivalent to a procession. *Ka Ksing Mastieh* has beats that run fast, an attribute of men's style of vibrations and *Ka Ksing Shad Wait* conforms with sword dance and is a fast drumbeat indicating alertness and a sense of readiness to strike at. The beating of the drum *Ka Ksing Dum Dum* is used for counseling the young ones; while *Ka Ksing Nalai* serves as the instruction to virgin dancers at dance rehearsals. The drumbeats of *Ka Ksing Pyllun* provide the background to a group dance and *Ka Ksing Klang* is an attribute of alertness and thriftiness (Bareh 1991).

In highlighting the significance of the different drumbeats played by the traditional musicians, Lyngdoh(1991) states that each tune has a meaning and precious advice to society. She emphasised that the tunes of the drums have different connotations according to the male and female dance forms. The beating of the drum *Ka Ksing Pyllun* shows that the women and children are under the inspiration, care, and protection of the uncles, brothers, and menfolk; and the beating of the drum *Ka Ksing Klang* is a reminder for the children to be smart and active and to perform their tasks dutifully on earth. Kyndiah (1979:155) comments that 'perhaps none appeals more to the aesthetic ear than the music of the drums which is considered not only entertaining but a class by itself.'

It may also be noted that the dance of *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* would be incomplete without the melody of the *Tangmuri* or the windpipe. The *Tangmuri*, a Wind Instrument is usually played in the open fields and the dancing arena. Its importance is closely associated with the social, cultural, and religious dance beats of the two drums *ka Nalai* and *ka Dum Dum*. The melody of the *Tangmuri* is sweet and coaxing and can depict the varied aspects of life like joy, sadness, etc., and it can create an aesthetic atmosphere. It is considered as the 'Queen of Khasi Musical Instruments' (Syiem 2005). H Bareh considers the *Tangmuri* as 'an important flute blasted at dances, forms the quick changing notes sometimes running wild and sometimes suited to the human moods and always composed of the high octaves' (Bareh 1991).

Besides the drums and the piping instruments, the cymbals also add a rhythmic movement to the different dance forms in *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* festival. The cymbals called *ka Kynshaw* in Khasi is a brass instrument that can be categorised under the Ideophones. It is made up of *Rnong*, that is, Copper and while playing, a performer has to hold it from the threads which are tied on both sides of the cymbals to create a melodious sound (Syiem 2005).

COSTUME AND ATTIRE

The costume including traditional apparel along with the adornment of gold and silver ornamentation provides an aesthetic appeal to a performance. Smith (1972) rightly says that the traditional costume may be an expression of belonging. In *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* festival, the dancing costumes with gold and silver ornaments of both the male and female dancers are very costly and cannot be afforded by one and all except the rich; and those who do not own them have to borrow only for the dancing occasion. The splendor and value of the dancing ornaments and jewellery signify a rare and unique identity of the Khasi tradition. Rynjah 2011 has given a detailed account of the male and female traditional apparel in clothes and ornaments associated with *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* festival. The female dance apparel consists of the *jainsem* or *dhara*, which comprises two pieces of cloth worn loosely over the shoulders; the *pansngiat* or virgin's crown which is the silvery projection of the shape of the *'tiew lasubon*, a wild flower; the *'Siar kynthei* or *'Siar khang*, female gold earrings consisting of the *top-iop* which is a pendant or the *'Siar Khang* or fan-shaped form and the *'lyngkymeng*, which is the supporting chain at the dancers head; *U Shanryndang*, a gold necklace; *U Kpieng Paila Ksiar*, the coral gold necklace in three rows worn by both male and female dancers; *U Kynjri tabah kynthei*, the female bunch of silvery chains; the *'Taj tyrpeng rupa* or the silver armlets made of silver or gold; the *Mahu Rupa* or the silver fore-wristlets, and the Silver strand of hair *'saikhyllong* that adorns a female dancer on her back.

The attire of the male dancers focussed on the war-like apparel of the olden days Khasi warriors where strifes and wars were prevalent. The costume comprises the *Thuia* or the feathery crest or plume attached to the *spongkhor* called *jainsspong* in Khasi which is a headdress or a turban. It symbolises his homage and tribute to his creator in fulfillment of his rights and correlated duties as a male. The *Kynjri tabah shynrang* which is a bunch of silver chains worn by men across shoulders enhances the image of a male dancer. Then the male dancer is also adorned by a *kynjri syngkai rupa* or a silver waist belt signifying responsibility and alertness. Besides, the adornment of gold earrings or *'siar kynthei* and gold and coral bead necklaces or *'paila ksiar* is also important. The *Symphiah* or hair whisp also has an important role for the male dancers for it signifies his status as the guide, the leader, and the caretaker of his home, his clan, and his homeland (Rynjah 2011). Aesthetically, the *symphiah* or hair whisp adds to the beauty of the performance.

Khongphai asserts that the most important items in the male dancing apparel are the sword, the quiver, and the arrows that serve as a constant reminder of the fact that the forefathers have laid down their lives to guard and protect the honour, purity, and chastity of the womenfolk whose position in the Khasi society is highly honoured and respected (Khongphai 1979).

II. CONCLUSION

The dance festival of the Khasis, *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* is a true representation of a cultural performance that provides a clear manifestation of the cultural expression, cultural activity, identity, and tradition of the Khasi community. The participants engaged in the dance performance functions as an active communicating factor with the audience thereby enriching, perpetuating, and reminding one of their roots while the audience and spectators being equally important as a sense of communication and perpetuation will be rendered. The dynamics of the dance are exhibited through the energy and enthusiasm displayed by the dancers as well as the traditional musicians. Each step of the dance is highly significant as the steps of the dancers have to be in sync with the traditional music that accompanies the dance. In addition, the use, function, and significance of music and traditional musical instruments in the performance of the dance itself contributes to the beauty of the festival as a whole. Moreover, the dance showcases the traditional costume, attire and ornaments that serve as a distinctive appeal in highlighting the ethnic identity of the Khasi race. Therefore we can say that *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* or the dance of the blissful heart is indeed not only a true manifestation of the performance value and aesthetics of a festival dance but also a reflection of the rich cultural identity of the Khasis in the preservation of their cultural heritage. *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* festival has a special meaning and significance as it exhibits a sense of collectiveness and belongingness among the Khasis.

As the name of the dance suggests, feelings of peace, contentment, and gratefulness universally shared among the Khasis are truly reflected. It is indeed a dance of the peaceful heart and thanksgiving to God for the manifold blessings in the past and for the years to come. *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* festival of the Khasis, as a cultural performance truly displays the rich cultural heritage of the Khasi tradition and how this transmission takes place through the specific medium of a dance performance.

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