

A Brief History of *Raid* Iapngar and the Religious practices of the People

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Introduction

Raid is a political unit which is smaller than that of a chiefdom or *Hima* in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of the state of Meghalaya in north-east India. During the pre-colonial period, there were a number of *Himas* in Ri-Bhoiⁱ area of the Khasi Hills such as Iapngar, Mawbuh, Khatar Lyngdoh, Myrwet, etc. However, in course of time, these *Himas* got disintegrated and their boundaries shrink to a smaller political unit called *Raid*. Moreover, the *Raids* in Ri-Bhoi later fall under the protection of *Hima* Shillong (It was one of the biggest state in pre-colonial period) of the Khasi Hillsⁱⁱ. Due to paucity of evidences, it is not certain as to why and when the *Raids* accepted the suzerainty of *Hima* Shillong. But, according to oral tradition, the ruler of *Hima* Shillong aided the *Raids* when the Syntengs or the Jaintiasⁱⁱⁱ came to invade and henceforth, as a token of appreciation, these *Raids* accepted the protection of *Hima* Shillong. After the partition of *Hima* Shillong into two *Himas*- Khyrim and Myllem in 1859, these *Raids* came under rule of either one of the *Himas*. Presently there are 29 *Raids* in Ri-Bhoi^{iv}. Most of which are govern by the *Syiem* or Chief along with other *Bakhraws* or *Basans*(Ministers) chosen and elected from a specific clan and succession to office is often hereditary.

Raid Iapngar, one of the older *Raid* is located in the eastern part of Ri –Bhoi district of Meghalaya falls under *Hima* Khyrim of the Khasi Hills. It was earlier much larger than today and was considered to be a *Hima* or chiefdom which constitutes today's *Raid* Nongtung and *Raid* Bhoi Lasa, but was disintegrated and reduced to a smaller political unit. *Raid* Iapngar is ruled by the Syiem from the Shadap clan and other distinguished clans such as Rymbai, Marpan, Sumer, etc are incharge of the different affairs of the *Raid*. One of the most important religious practices of the people of Iapngar is the Lukhmi festival. The Lukhmi festival is associated with agriculture which constitutes to be the main economic activity of the people till today.

This paper will attempt to trace the history of *Raid* Iapngar and the origin of the Lukhmi festival of the people as reflected in the folktales collected out of my field studies and available in the vernacular literature. Though this *Raid* is important in the history and culture of the Bhoi people in northern part of Meghalaya, only a handful of scholars have tried to write about its history and some while writing about the history of the Khasis in general and the Bhoi (sub-group of the Khasis) in particular, have not even mentioned about it. Hence, this paper will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the history of Iapngar and thus will bridge the gap areas relating to the history and culture of the Khasi people of Meghalaya particularly the Bhoi^v.

A Brief History of Iapngar

The history of Iapngar is enshrined in the oral tradition of its people. The chiefdom was derived from the name of its ruler. In earlier times, Iapngar was ruled by a woman known by the name on Ka Ngar. She alongside with five other clans- Rymbai, Marpan, Sumer, Nongbet and Sohshen^{vi} were in charge of administering the chiefdom. It was a wealthy and prosperous

Hima and its wealth and prosperity was well known throughout the Khasi-Jaintia hills. Its wealth and prosperity was heard even by the Syiem or chief of Jaintiapur (Jaintia Kingdom) who came to visit Iapngar. Ka Ngar caught the eye of the Syiem and wanted to make her his wife and chieftess. However, she refused the offer which greatly enraged the Syiem who now began to make preparations to force her to bring to his own kingdom. Ka Ngar, unable to defend herself against the invader, committed suicide by jumping off a huge boulder. This was how the chieftdom of Ka Ngar came to be Known as 'Iapngar'. 'Iap' in Khasi means 'death' and Ngar is the name of the ruler who died during the invasion of the Syiem of Jaintiapur.

It is not certain who succeeded as the ruler of Iapngar after the death of Ka Ngar. But oral tradition of the people established that after her, another woman named Iong Saring became the ruler. She was a very wise and capable but was also very proud and arrogant. One day while Iong Saring was busy engaging herself in the naming ceremony of her son, a poor woman named Ka Luh Shadap came approached her and asked her if she wanted to buy some sour fruits from her. But Iong Saring who was a proud woman, insulted Luh Shadap. The two then decided to place a bet on whether Iong Saring's luxurious food would make Luh Shadap so desirous of the meat as to make her mouth water and swallow her own saliva or Luh Shadap's plate of sour fruits would temp Iong Saring so much to make her gulp down the saliva. It was agreed that whoever gulped down the saliva first would get the kingdom.^{vii}

Luh Shadap won the bet. She became the ruler of Iapngar. Chastened by the turn of events, the people of Iapngar wanted that Iong Saring should be hanged at Mo Iam Bei (A huge boulder in which miscreants were hanged in olden days in Iapngar) however, Luh Shadap prevented that from happening and allowed Iong Sarin to stay within Iapngar. Till today, the

chief or the ruler of Raid Iapngar is from the Shadap clan, however, did not trace his descent from Ka Luh Shadap, but from another person which will be discuss later.

Raid Iapngar was an independent commune or chiefdom in earlier times. However, due to frequent attacks and nuisance created by the Jaintias which disturbed the peace and harmony of the people, the elders of the *Raid* went to the chief of *Hima* Khyrim to seek his aid and protection. Accordingly, the Chief agreed and as a token of appreciation, the best and the most fertile plot of the rice fields was given to him. Thus, till today *Raid* Iapngar fell under the jurisdiction of *Hima* Khyrim.

The Religious Practices in Iapngar

Even prior to the coming of the British, the people of Iapngar had a well established believe system. The people primarily performed certain rituals in respect of two particular deities namely Ramshandi and Durkali- both considered to be siblings where the former is associated with the deity of the land (hills, forest,etc) and the latter with the water(rivers, streams, etc.). The people believe that if a person died of accident on land, then it was said that Ramshandi had taken their soul and if a person died of accident in water, then Durkali had done the same.

Moreover, the people also practice human sacrifice known as ‘Ka Knia Blei Parda’ in offer to Durkali. The people would performed the ritual by offering a human which more often happened to be a wanderer from the plains would become a victim. They would never offer their own people as human sacrifice. In case, they were unable to find one to perform the ritual, they would travel to the market in Khatsawphra^{viii} (the capital of *Hima* Khatsawphra located near Mairang in west khasi hills in Meghalaya) in which humans or slaves (again

only the people from the plains or the *Dkhars*) were being sold. The humans who were being sold were covered with a white sheet of cloth and the prices were written on them and it was not allowed to bargain for the price of the humans. The clans who were involved in the performance of this particular ritual were- Marpan and Rymbai. Each clan nominated one person to become the *Basan* or Minister or Elder of the *Raid* and it was they who were incharge of the duties during ritual. A *Basan* from the Marpan clan was incharge of the *Knia* or the ritual practice and on the other hand, a *Basan* from the Rymbai clan was incharge of beheading the person sacrificed. This particular ritual was practice once a year until it was banned by the British in the 1800s particularly in 1829 in Lord William Bentinck banned it by enacting the Prohibition Act of 1829.

Another important religious practice of Iapngar was the Lukhmi. This particular religious practice is still practice by the people of Iapngar today. This festival is associated with agriculture and was performed in order to reap a good harvest in rice cultivation. The Lukhmi religious practice originated during the time of Luh Shadap. Due to continuous harassment from the Jaintias, Luh Shadap convened a meeting with the five clans suggesting that there should be the deity to protect them from such nuisance. The clans agreed and after performing necessary rituals, accordingly they named their deity 'Ka 'Lei Lukhmi'.

'Ka 'Lei Lukhmi' is a deity associated with prosperity and complex rites and rituals is involved while worshipping her once a year. Luh Shadap appointed a Lyngdoh or a priest from her own clan and also representatives from other clans to assist the priest to perform the rituals. Now that her clan, i.e., Shadap had become the chief priest for the Lukhmi ritual, Iapngar needed another clan to become the chief or the Syiem of Iapngar. Thus, under the

initiative of Luh Shadap, the five clans agreed to procure a women from Kharpati (located near the borders of present day Assam) and that women shall bear the Shadap clan name

whose descendent will become the chief of Iapngar. Thus, it was said that the practice of human sacrifice originated from that time when the clans brought the woman from Kharpati^{ix}.

Some Observations

The folktales indicate that Raid Iapngar derived its name from it founder 'Ka Ngar' and from the initial stage of its foundation, it was being ruled by women or chieftesses such as Iong Saring and Luh Shadap. Also it seems that anyone could become the ruler irrespective of their social background and status in the society. This is seen when Luh Shadap who was a poor woman, won the bet against Iong Saring, the then ruler of Iapngar, who was rich and powerful, she became the new ruler of Iapngar. The chief of Iapngar today trace his descent from a women from Kharpati(most likely a plain dwellers or *Dkhar*) who adopted the Shadap clan name after Luh Shadap.

The people of Iapngar had a religion which was unique and quite different from other parts of the Khasi-Jaintia hills. By observing the names of the two deities of the people of Iapngar-Ramshandi and Durkali, one can draw a conclusion that the religion of the people was being influence by Hinduism from the plains. Human sacrifice was prevalent in this part of the Khasi hills and a slave market also existed in the upper area of the Khasi hill in Hima Khatsawphra where humans were purchase by the people of Iapngar for performing such rituals.

Thus, we can say that folktales can help us a lot in reconstructing the history of the people, particularly the culture and the beginning of certain religious practices of the people and they are important sources of information for historical reconstruction.

ⁱ Ri-Bhoi Is one of the district of the state of Meghalaya and is considered to be part of the Khasi hills area.

ⁱⁱ Hamlet Bareh, *History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1985, p. 69.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Jaintias or the Syntengs are people living in present day Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. They were part of the Jaintia Kingdom which during the pre-colonial period its extended up to Sylhet in present day Bangladesh .

^{iv} Hiarless Tm ung, Ka History Jong Ka Synshar Khadar Ha Ri-Bhoi, Self –Published, Shillong, 2007, pp, 1-2.

^v Bhoi- A sub- group of the Khasi.

^{vi} Telis Rymabai, Ki Khanatang Ka Raid Iapngar, Self-published, Shillong, 2015, p.2.

^{vii} Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1991, p. 20.

^{viii} Hiarless Tm ung, op.cit., p.25.

^{ix} Telis Rymabai, op.cit.,pp-15-16.