

CHAPTER III

TRADITIONAL MARNGAR SOCIETY

The village of Marngar came into existence due to migrants from Assam and other parts of the state itself. The migrants from within the state follow a matrilineal system while those who came from outside the state follow the patrilineal system. Thus we find two sets of people having opposite systems of descent living together.

The traditional economy, beliefs and values and social institution of the Marngar is discussed in this chapter.

TRADITIONAL ECONOMY

The characteristic of their traditional economy was barter system. For example, a basketful of dry fish was exchanged with a basketful of cotton. The amount as well as values of the goods were taken into consideration in such exchanges. This system of exchange was practised by the Marngars with the people of Assam on Jakiroad and Sunapur market. The present market place in Iew Mawlong at Nongpoh was used as a market place by the Marngars even in those

days. Every year, in the month of May, the Marngars performed rites and rituals in this place in order to chase away the evil spirits. This rite is locally known as Ka Knia Iew.

Sale and purchase of land was not known to them because the land was owned by the clans. Land was given free of cost to anyone who needed it. But there was an unwritten agreement that those who asked for the land should help the donor's clan in times of need.

Shifting cultivation was practised by these people in the past. This was one of the major reasons why they migrated from one place to another. They at last found a fertile land in Marngar and settled there.

In shifting cultivation, a part of the forest was cleared then the felled trees and vegetations were dried in the sun. After they were dry enough they set the fire on. The ashes were then spread evenly in the plot. Burning usually took place during the months of March and April. After the ashes were spread seeds were planted into the soil with the help of a hoe or dibbler.

The soil remained productive only for two to three years. Only paddy was grown for the first few years but after a lapse of three years or more Dieng Ryndia (mulberry tree) and cotton plant were also grown. Cultivation of rice and other cereal crops were also practised later on.

It is reported that the food eaten by them earlier was locally known as Phan Khlaw or Soh Kyrsiew, which meant a tuber or wild potato, which they collected from the forest.

Irrigation in the lower elevations was done mainly with the help of bamboo pipes or dug out canals.

Utensils used by them were mostly made of bamboo. We still see hollow and dried gourds used as water jars. For fetching and storing water they used a long bamboo vessel known as Ktang Um. For plates, they used leaves of bananas and of other trees.

TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND VALUES

The traditional religion of the Marngar is known as Animism. It was a polytheistic religion in which they worshipped many gods and goddesses such as, Jomai Pyrthat, Ghoroh Gohai, Bijli Gohai, Jongon Mura, etc.

Jomai Pyrthat is a lightning god which they worshipped when lightning struck. They made a sacrifice to propitiate this god. The owner of land or property where lightning had struck had to rear a pig for five years and after that they had to make a sacrifice.

Ghoroh Gohai is the goddess of the family. Sacrifice of a hen was made once in a year to propitiate this goddess so that they could live a prosperous life.

Bijli Gohai is a clan deity of the Lyngdoh. This deity was first worshipped by the five lineages of the Lyngdoh clan. All the members of this clan used to assemble once in a year at their ancestral place called Ka Iing Heh to propitiate their god called Bijli Gohai.

Jongon Mura is a god of the Baro clan. They made the offering every year during the month of March for their deceased ancestors or ancestress.

According to them, if any one lived a pious life on this earth one would go to heaven. But if one led a bad life, that would naturally lead one to hell or Jomoh. They even believed that the death of any person was due to some reason. Further, if

one did not finish one's rites and rituals during his life time or if one breached a taboo, this would also lead to one's death or the person would go to Jomoh. They also believed that if the fire did not burn the dead body properly, they tried to find out the reason by examining the entrails of a cock. If the eyes of the dead person burst at the time of cremation, they believed that the person was jealous.

There were many priests in Marngar. Some of them were invited for worshipping the village deities while others were called for performing the rites of the clan deities. There was at least one such priest from each clan. Such persons were known as Dandha, Kutwal or Sohsla and the Shangman.

If any person suffered from any disease, the family concerned invited a diviner for diagnosing it and curing the person. The villagers as well as clan members gave donations to such priests in the form of rice, money and so on. Especially in the Domahi ceremony they had to give a gourdful of beer (Shi klong ka 'iad um) to the priest. This ceremony was performed during the month of May before sowing. It was held once in every five years.

There were many other rites and rituals performed by the people. The most important of these are discussed below:

Gurkhia Gohai is the goddess of the cowherds. The sacrifice of cock was made in every five years at the most sacred place. The sacrifice was done so that the goddess would look after those cowherds and protect them from causing any harm to them.

Gaphru Nasha is a rite performed by U Syiem before entering a newly built house. While performing the sacrifice, a dance was held on the compound of the new house. In this dance, only virgin females would take part. But as for the male, both married and unmarried ones could participate. Until and unless the Binong and the Syiem clan members started the dance, no one should join. Further, the members of the Binong and the Syiem clans dance in the middle, while members of the other remaining clans danced around forming a knot. On the next day the owner of the newly built house prepared a feast where each and every participant must have food. A string of flesh locally known as Kyndong Mongo was given to each of those participants. To commemorate the new house, they offered a pig sacrifice known as Shiji

Kura to their household deity.

Hangrinia is a harvesting festival performed only by the Syiem clan. It is held once in every five years. All the rites and rituals are to be performed by the Syiem clan only. During this festival they ate only a sour plant locally known as Jajew which was cooked in the paddy field. They even used fishing traps to catch fish from the nearby streamlets during this festival.

Raid Kanon is a festival celebrated by the Marngars in connection with the ploughing of paddy field. It is held every year. It is a community festival and therefore every family contributes for this festival.

Domahi or Bihu is a festival celebrated every year during the month of April or May. They collected donation from the market place with the consent of the Syiem of Myllem. It was in this festival that they give bath to their cattle (cows and oxen). They also carried a hoe, a heavy bladed knife locally known as Ka Wait and so on. A fine had to be paid if any one cultivated crops on that day. This was performed in order that they would have enough food or rice

for the whole year. It lasted for about two weeks. The last day of this festival was known as Owai Kura which was performed only in the Iing Sad, i.e., the house where U Syiem performed the family and the state sacrifices. To conclude this festival, drum beatings with nine types of sound was done. On the following day, they could start ploughing their field and do any other types of cultivation.

Each and every clan had a specific day in celebrating certain rites and rituals. The Syiem clan used to perform its rites on Saturday and Sunday, and the Damlong clan on Sunday and Monday. This was the practice since the olden days and it has continued till today. The days were chosen with the consent and agreement of the elders and ancestors or ancestresses of the clans in the past. The reason for choosing the days for performing sacrifices is but not known to the present villagers.

Rod Puja (Knia Khlam) is a sacrifice offered to their goddesses known as Ka Lei Duwan. An offering was made at a sacred place which was known as Ka Duwan Knia Khlam (literally meaning the altar for offering sacrifices for epidemic diseases). The ceremony was held to drive any type of epidemic which might befall

on the villagers. For this ceremony, the diviner must be from the Syiem clan. It was from the Syiem's house that a diviner had to carry a large bladed knife locally known as Ka Wait or Dakar for killing the goat. This ceremony is locally known as Pomblang. When this is over, a village feast is then held in which all the villagers take part.

Lukhmi was an important religious festival of the Raid Marngar and other place in the Bhoi area. It was held during the month of March after harvesting. This festival was connected with agriculture which was the main occupation of the people. This festival was performed to propitiate Ka Lukhmi or Ka Leikha, the goddess of rice and agriculture. According to one knowledgeable person, Rev. Father Sngi Lyngdoh, the word Lukhmi might have originated from the word Lukhi which means rice in the language of the Marngar people.

With regard to this festival, the people cleaned the area where the sacrifice was to be performed. On a particular day, a bunch of paddy was stolen by two diviners of the village from the field and then tied in a bundle and hidden. On the following day the search for this specific stolen bundle of paddy

would be taken up by the villagers. When the bundle was found by those diviners themselves information was given to the Chief that they had found it. Then each and every house carried along a handful of paddy, which was put in a straw tied with bamboo looking like a basket locally known as Pura to the place where the sacrifice was to be held. Division of work was also maintained while performing that ceremony such as the Sohkhwai and the Binong clans played the drum, locally called Ksing Padiah, whereas the Damlong clan played the drum called Nakra or Tuntruth. The Majhong clan played the flute, i.e., Tangmuri locally known as Kahlia.

Next day, all the villagers went to their own paddy field. Then the diviner of each clan made a sacrifice for his own clan. Then the sprinkling of a kind of ground-rice, which was used for sacrificial ceremonies locally known as Pujer, started from the paddy field to the Iing Sad or place where the festival was held. The procession started from their own paddy field to the gate or Khyrdop first, and then lastly to the Iing Sad. As a sign of thankfulness for their prosperous life, and for asking the blessings of their gods in future a sacrificial offering was

made to their gods with a cock and a goat which is known as Sajol Mura. This was done by the whole village together.

After finishing all the ceremonies the dancers from the various clans participated in a dance which was known as Ka Mastieh. Thus, the festival ended with that dance and each and every villager would sprinkle a ground rice (Pujer) from the gate to his house.

TRADITIONAL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The traditional society mostly had joint families, which consisted of the parents, the children, and their wives and husbands in one household. The eldest brother was the head of the family and he performed all the rites and rituals relating to the family. He had the power to make any decision on any matter relating to the family. But there was an exception, i.e., he could not make any decision regarding the marriage of his sister's son or daughter. With regard to all the rites and ceremonies he was the head of the family and he was also one of the Longsan (Minister) of the raid. From each and every clan there was at least one or more Longsan who would represent the clan to the Raid.

Traditionally some clans traced their descent from the mother's side and others from the father's side. In the matrilineal clans it was the man who went to his wife's place and stayed with his in-laws, whereas in the patrilineal clan it was the woman who went to her husband's place and stayed with her in-laws.

The following were the Kinship terms used by the Marngar which show that they had both descriptive and classificatory types of kinship terminology:

<u>Kin terms</u>	<u>Kins</u>
U Pa	Father
Dada/Detho	Younger/Elder brothers
Pihi/Dethai	Younger/Elder sisters
Mai	Mother
Mama	Mother's brother
Dethai/Mahui	Mother's sister
Ata	Father's father
Abu	Father Father's mother
Detho	Father Father's brother
Pihi	Father Father's sister
Kaka	Elder brother
Bhai	Younger brother
Bow	Younger brother

<u>Kin terms</u>	<u>Kin</u>
Bow	Elder brother's wife
Bowari	Younger brother's wife
Bhagi	Younger sister's husband
Bomari	Elder sister's husband
Bai	Elder sister
Buni	Younger sister
Swali	Daughter
Huru Jongai	Younger daughter's husband
Dongar Jongai	Elder daughter's husband

In case of arranged marriage, the relatives of the girl were approached by a go-between from the side of the male and when the former accepted it, they consulted their priest or U Nongknia to find out whether there was any taboo or not. If there was no taboo the marriage was finalised, and if there was a taboo it was cancelled.

Traditionally, marriage with parent's approval was common among the Marngars. For this type of marriage, they made a sacrifice to their gods, i.e., a household deity in the forest for the couple before the day of marriage. Sacrifice was made so that no harm of illness would befall on the new couples.

Property was inherited by the daughters only among those who followed the matrilineal descent. The largest share went to the youngest daughter. In case of those who followed the patrilineal type of descent, the inheritance of property male ultimogeniture as the largest share went to the youngest son.

Further, according to the Marngar customary laws, a person could be debarred from his/her right of inheritance. A murderer could inherit any property.

Death ceremony of the Marngars was of two types. They were known as the Borkam and the Kamrit. Borkam was mostly performed only for those people who had high status or power such as the Syiem or Chief and the Myntri (minister). The sacrifice made in the Borkam was totally different from that of the normal sacrifices. A sacrificial ceremony was held for seven days for the Borkam. The materials used for the Borkam were Am Khuri, Jam Khuri and Gomari tree, which were special kinds of wood used for burning the dead bodies. They even had to buy a new pot for putting food and other essential commodities for the deceased person.

For the Kamrit they cremated the person on the fourth day. Kamrit was performed for any layman.

The sacrifice was very similar to that of the Kamrit of today. They sacrificed pig, hen, etc. for the dead. Any type of wood could be used for cremating the dead.

When any member of the Binong, Damlong, Majhong and Diri clans died, the members of one's clan had to go and catch fish from any stream with a fishing trap only and not by any other means and on that very day.

On the day of cremation a female known as Giiati or the priestess of the clan gave bath to the dead body. After that, 'iad um (beer made from a gourd) was poured on the dead body by one who performed the religious ceremonies of the clan locally known as U Nongknia. Then the dead body was taken to the cremation ground. A male locally known as Giiati cremated the dead body and walked around the pyre and bowed his head three times. The female and male Giiati got some amount of money for the service rendered by them.

They believed that if the dead body did not burn properly there must be a reason for it. The reason could be (i) one had not finished performing all the rites and rituals during one's life time, and (ii) one must have breached some taboos during one's life time.

After that, all their friends, relatives and neighbours ate pujer, a kind of rice cake. Then the cleaning of the house was done. On the following day, they distributed half a bottle of cooking oil to each and every villager who had attended the funeral. Further, they believed that those who came to the funeral must eat something or else the soul of the deceased person would not go to heaven.

The Binong, Damlong, Majhong and Diri clans formed a Phratry. The members of these clans used fish instead of pig during the death ceremonies. After cremation, they cleaned the area where they had cremated the dead body by daubing it with mud and cowdung. Then they offered a sacrifice and also kept food for the dead person. All the commodities used for the dead person were the same as in other clans such as cooking oil, banana leaves, etc.

BIRTH AND NAMING CEREMONY

Before giving birth to a child, they made a sacrifice of eggs locally known as Habih Khedawa in the forest. Similarly, they made a sacrifice in the house of the pregnant woman. They even believed that the birth of a child was the reincarnation of their ancestors or ancestresses. If the child born

was a boy they made a bow and a heavy bladed knife known as Ka Wait, and if it was a girl they made a Dahda or an arrow like thing. Three days after the child was born they again offered a sacrifice to the household god by asking the mother to carry the child and walk round the area of sacrifice for seven or nine times. Naming ceremony of a child was held in the same day after they completed certain rites and rituals dealing with it.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing description of their traditional economy, beliefs and values, and social institutions depicts the Marngars in their pre-Christian, pre-Hindu state of life which had been predominantly characterized by what Tylor called 'animism'. It had ancestor worship, spirit worship, and worship of various deities for prosperous harvest and peaceful life. The dependence on nature was almost absolute and the knowledge of science and westernization had not polluted their milieu. Their economy, beliefs, and institutions were intertwined with each other and often inseparable though they might have migrated from various places in Assam and Meghalaya many years ago.
