

CHAPTER IV

MARNGAR IN TRANSITION

In this chapter, I seek to discuss the changes in economy, beliefs and values and social institutions of the Marngars.

### CHANGES IN ECONOMY

The transition from consumption-oriented economy to a cash economy has changed the basis of social relationship among the Marngars themselves and between them<sup>and</sup> other neighbouring people. Cash economy has brought a kind of modernity, individuality and independence in the economic life of the people.

At present, traders from outside the village have to get permission from the village council to trade within the village. Items like broom stick, bamboo etc., are gathered together by a particular person who is either from the village or from outside the village but permitted by the village council. After selling these items, he has to distribute the money to those from whom he had taken those items.

Land in the traditional Marngar society was

owned by the clans. But now private lands are acquired by means of reclamation of the wastelands. In the past, land was given free of cost, but this is not so anymore. The sale and purchase of land have started taking place perhaps due to the coming of cash economy.

Earlier, leasing of land on rent was not known. But at present, anyone can lease in or lease out a land. But it is still the custom for the tenants to give a gourdful of beer (shi klong ka 'iad um) to the owner of the land at the time of concluding an agreement.

Division of labour in the village is mainly based on sex and age. Adult males normally do the heavier work while the females do the lighter ones. But the women also have to do other domestic chores such as husking paddy, fetching water from the stream and cooking, besides working in the field.

Children under the age-group of sixteen years do lighter works such as looking after the goats and cows grazing in the field. The village council fee is not charged for the children below that age. And if any one is found guilty of crimes, normally no punishment is given to them as they are considered under-aged.

The main agricultural implements used are the hoe (Mohkhiew), a heavy large bladed knife (ka wait) and a sickle (rashi) for shifting cultivation. In the past shifting cultivation or rep shyrti was the dominant practice of cultivation among the people of Marngar village. But nowadays, settled cultivation is also practised, though to a lesser extent. Tilling of the soil under settled cultivation is done with the help of power tiller by the richer people while the poor people still depend on ploughing.

The most important crop grown in the village is paddy. It is broadly of two types (i) hill paddy (dry paddy), and (ii) swamp paddy (wet paddy). Hill paddy requires much less water than the swamp type and the amount of rainfall which the area gets is sufficient for it. Swamp paddy requires sufficient water and must be raised on level ground suitable for irrigation. Hill paddy is broadcast, while the swamp paddy seeds are germinated in a seed bed and allowed to grow to about 6 to 10 inches tall after which they are transplanted.

Some of the principal crops grown on settled cultivation lands are maize, soyabean, topioca and

potatoes. Numerous other crops like carrot, turnip, raddish, wild potato (phan khlaw or soh kyrsiew), eatable root (phan dieng) and a big yam (phan shynreh) are also cultivated by them.

Pineapple is an important cash crop. It is grown extensively but requires to be protected against the attack of insects and diseases. Jack fruits are also grown there. Other fruits grown are papaya, soh-iong or black berries, turmarine (sohkyntoi) and sohbel (a hard skinned fruit). Lime and lemon fruits grow abundantly, the most common variety being sohjew and soh myndong, besides others called sohmad, sohsying, sohmyngor etc.

Plantain is either planted or gathered from the forest. The most important type found in this village in the Japanese dwarf plantain and the other types consist of those locally known as kait syiem, kait mon and kait jrong.

The agriculture calendar of the villagers is as follows:

- January - harvesting of broom stick.
- February - plantation of broom plants and fresh beans.

- March - plantation of bamboo and pumpkin.
- April - sowing of hill paddy and a sour eatable root locally known as jajew and phan dieng (eatable root).
- May - cultivation of swamp paddy in the nursery bed, sowing of nei (black sesame) and cultivation of yam locally known as wang.
- June - transplantation of the paddy seedling from the nursery beds to the field.
- July - cultivation of sweet potatoes locally known as phan karo.
- August - harvesting of hill paddy.
- September and October - sowing of mustard seeds or symbai tyerso.
- October - plantation of mints.
- November and December - harvesting of swamp paddy.

Livestock is of considerable importance not only for their meat and hides, bones, hair and hoof but also for various socio-religious purposes. Cow,

oxen, goats, pig and poultry are reared by most villagers.

The table below clearly shows the type of livestock which the people of Marngar rear.

Table V - Livestock reared by the Marngar people.

Type of livestock	Total livestock	Average number of livestock per household
Cows	382	1.3
Oxen	312	1.0
Pigs	599	2.0
Goats	118	0.4
Total	1411	1.2

Source: Field work.

Table V shows that the average number of livestock per household is 1.2. It is also clear that the rearing of pigs is quite popular in the village as shown by 2.0 average number of pigs reared per household. Pigs are also essential for the people as they need them for sacrificial purposes especially during the cremation ceremony and marriage.

Compared to piggery, we find that the rearing of cows is less popular. This is perhaps due to the fact that they are reared mainly for milk. The members of the Binong, Damlong, Majhong and the Diri clans and the Hinduized families do not eat beef; while for the rest of the population eating of beef is not forbidden.

Oxen are reared mainly for ploughing. Diji or oxen hiring is practised in the village. an oxen is equal to 6 kilograms of paddy when hired and this amount of paddy has to be given to the lessor by the lessee. Thus oxen are also used as a source of income by them. Goats are reared by the Marngars for their meat and for sacrificial purposes.

Animals are stall-fed till the time of harvesting after which they are allowed to graze on the paddy field.

The people of Marngar take good care of their animals. Sometimes they even show respect and gratitude towards their animals. For example, if any animal dies they bury it and offer food and rice beer (iad-um) at the burial place.

Pigs are sacrificed for the deceased person

and offered in the sacrifices to the lightning gods (Jomai Pyrthat) and for driving away evil spirits (Daijor-joh Khedawa).

Eggs are an important item in any sacrifice as they are used during the birth ceremony and dih kiad um thymmai (literally meaning drinking of new rice beer) an occasion which occurs once annually after the harvest and before sowing of cotton seeds.

#### CHANGES IN BELIEFS AND VALUES

The Marngars have their own religious beliefs, rites and rituals. But nowadays, some changes have been noticed in the religious realms due to their contact with the Hindu and Christian missionaries. Some of the traditional beliefs and ceremonies of the Marngar have still survived, while other have disappeared. For example, there is no trace of a particular sacrifice of the Marngar known as the Rongkoh Lyngdoh today. But almost all the rites and rituals are related to harvesting and sowing are still retained.

The Syiem is not only the headman of the village but also the head priest during any festival.

Magic, religion and medicine are closely inter-linked in the religious system of the Marngar. One of the most striking features of Marngar life is that the diviner is consulted on almost all important occasions.

They worship numerous gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses are supposed to exercise good or evil influence on human beings according to whether they are propitiated with sacrifices or not. The illness of a person is thought to be caused by one or more of the spirits.

Table VI.- Distribution of religion among the Marngar.

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Christian	1127	61.8
Hindu	108	5.9
Indigenous	590	32.3
Total	1825	100.0

Source: Field work.

From the table above, it can be seen that majority of the people are Christians (61.8%). The

percentage of the people following their traditional religion is 32.3%. And only 5.9% of the people belong to the Hindu religion.

With the setting up of some missionary schools, it has been easier for the various missionaries to convert the Marngars into Christianity or Hindu religion. Though a school like the Sankardev Mission of the Hindu missionaries was the first to be set up here, yet we find that Hinduism has not really been able to displace their traditional culture and belief system as much as the Christian missionaries.

According to the villagers, the Lukhmi festival was a later acquisition. They celebrate it after the harvesting of crops. They also make sacrifice to propitiate Ka Lukhmi or Ka 'Lei Kba or the goddess of rice, for prosperous life.

Traditionally, Borkam which was one of the death ceremonies performed for a person having high status and power was held for seven days. Now there is a change though with regard to the days of observance only and not about the ceremony itself. Only two days are spent for the Borkam, while for the Kamrit

performed by the layman, they bury the dead on the following day and not after four days as earlier.

Earlier special firewood such as Am Khuri or Jam Khuri was used. But now any kind of wood may be used.

Ancestor worship plays an important part among those who still profess their indigenous religion. They propitiate their ancestors by offering sacrifices to them, from time to time particularly when they are troubled. Jongon Mura is a sacrifice made by them to their ancestors and ancestresses.

#### CHANGES IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

(a) Family - Traditionally, they mostly had joint families but now such type of family is becoming rarer. In a joint family, the parents, their sons and wives along with their children stay in one household. Nowadays, we see a trend towards nuclear type of family which includes the parents and their children only. The table below shows the distribution of nuclear and joint types of families in Marngar.

Table VII - Types of Family in Marngar.

Types of family	Frequency	Percentage
Nuclear family	227	75.7
Joint family	73	24.3
Total	300	100.0

Source: Field work.

This table shows that most of the families there are of nuclear type. Those who have still retained the joint type are becoming lesser in number.

Regarding the role of the father and mother, we have seen no significant changes. The people of the village do not define either a mother or a father as the head of the households. Instead the senior most member according to age, whether a male or female, economically dependent or independent, is considered to be the head of the household.

Traditionally, among many clans, the maternal uncle did not have power or status to make decision regarding the marriage of his sister's daughter or sons. But now the maternal uncle has more power and

authority regarding the family matter and marriage which could be an influence of the Khasi culture.

The control over the family matter and other resources vested mainly on the males among those who migrated from the plains and who still follow the patrilineal descent. The father or the eldest brother (in case the father dies) exercises control over the family resources. The control of the important family matters and resources is by the mother and her brother. The mother and the mother's brother act as the check and balance to each other's powers.

In the everyday family life of the Marngar both the mother and the father have their respective role to play. One cannot be the hard task master over the other. For all practical purposes, there is a division of labour between a man and woman, the husband and the wife, and the father and the mother for the smooth working of family life.

(b) Marriage - Marriage is a bond between a man and a woman, a bond for procreation and cultural continuity. It is a bond which connects two kurs, the kur of a man and the kur of a woman.

In the past, Ringkongor or marriage by capture was prevalent. In such a case a girl was captured and brought to the village. Then a marriage ceremony was performed. This practice was carried on due to the low number of the female population in comparison to the males. Nowadays such type of marriage is absent.

Marriage by elopement was also prevalent. This was done when there is disagreement between the two parties. Today, we also find such cases but the village council has now imposed a fine for those who practise it.

Marriage by mutual consent seems to be the common type of marriage today. The first approach might have been initiated by the couple in love who reported the matter to their respective parents. The latter if agreeable, reached a decision to arrange such marriage. This is marriage by mutual agreement. The parents themselves might have negotiated directly with regard to the marriage subject to the consent of the couple. There are cases when a male asks his parents to initiate such negotiations with the family of the girl relating to his marriage proposal. Further, the parents and the maternal uncle of the boy has

to carry along with them betelnuts and leaves which has been packed in a banana leaf locally known as Bata Bahon. Exchange of this Bata Bahon is done between the families of the girl and the boy on the day of engagement. The girl's family used to employ a man known as Adam Sorpoh to act as a go-between or negotiator. Whereas from the boy's side a lady known as Gerthani was employed for such cases. These two negotiators or go-betweens have to carry Bata Bahon every time when they go to their house. If the girl is from the Syiem clan, the marriage day has to be fixed on Sunday. This particular day has been sanctified by the ancestors or ancestresses as the day for the Syiem clan only to make <sup>any</sup> offerings. The boy and the girl even make a sacrifice to their household god in the forest so that no harm or illness occurs before the day of marriage. The marriage ceremony is mostly held during the months of January to March, the reason being that during these months, people are free from their work.

After the great day is fixed, the boy, before leaving his home receives the blessing of his parents, maternal and paternal aunts, his friends, and near

ones so that he could establish a new home, take care of his wife and children, and be a respectable man in the real sense of the term. On reaching the girl's place the couple has to go to the ancestral place of the girl's family to offer sacrifice to the deceased ancestor and ancestresses in order that the couple will have a prosperous life in future.

The marriage ceremony begins with the sprinkling of fermented liquor on the ground and the swearing ceremony follows. The couple has to swear that they would not commit adultery, take care of each other throughout life, etc. which they have to swear before God and villagers.

On the next day, the boy takes his wife along with her relatives to his mother's house. After that they go to his ancestral place locally known as Ka Iing Heh.

Certain sets of marriage rules were strictly observed. Kur or clan exogamy is held sacrosanct; it is considered a grave sin to marry within one's clan. No polyandry nor polygamy among the Marngar is reported.

Separation or divorce is allowed only in case of adultery, barrenness, incompatibility. Before a separation or divorce takes place the consent of the parents and the maternal uncles of both the parties is needed.

Remarriage is also practised by the people of Marngar. Both males and females can remarry after a lapse of one year after the spouse's death or from the time of divorce.

As the village is formed by the people of diverse culture and origin, intra-village marriage is allowed. The rule of exogamy is strictly followed only in regard to one's clan.

(c) Kinship - Descent is traced either through the male or female line. This is so because in this village we find both those who trace their descent from the father's side and those who belong to the matrilineal descent.

Clan is logically known as Kur. This word is used by the people of this village; whether matrilineal or patrilineal. In the matrilineal type kinship is traced through the first ancestress. While the

first ancestor is very important in tracing the kinship system of the patrilineal people in this village.

Different clans have emerged from the ancestor or ancestress. There are 14 clans in the Marngar village today which are already enumerated.

In the past, the Syiem was known as Raja from Gobha (erstwhile Jaintiapur now in Assam) and was patrilineal. After coming to this village they changed their descent to that of the matriline type.

The clan names have also changed by the people coming from the plains. For instance, the Diri clan is changed to Giri and Hokhai to Sokhwai. The new clan names sound Khasi which might be due to their desire to be absorbed in the Khasi society.

There is also the presence of phratry groups in the village. Two or more clans are related to each other, may be due to the gift of land agreed between the two clans in the past. For example, the Marwet and the Shilling clans are related to each other in this manner and marriage is forbidden between the member of these two clans. We also find that the clan by the name of Binong, the Damlong, the Diri and the

Majhong form one exogamous group, whereas the clan Syiem, the Lyngdoh and the Pator form another exogamous group and the Marwet and the Shilling form yet another.

Another element uniting the people together is the lineage, which is formed by the group of families tracing their descent from the common ancestor/ancestress. In this village, we find numerous lineages — a sub-division of a clan composed of actual and fictitious kin. From the Syiem clan we find the Majhong and the Diri (Giri) lineages following the matrilineal type of descent. The Binong and the Damlong lineages have emerged from the Ket clan.

It seems that after so many generations that these lineages have originated, they have not achieved the status of a clan; especially when the names are different from that of the parent clans.

The type of kinship terminology in this village is found to be a combination of both classificatory and descriptive types. There are certain kinship terms which are common to both affinal and consanguineous kins. In this sense, they are classificatory in nature. Dethai, for instance, is used for both the maternal

and the paternal aunt. Detho is used for father's brother and for father father's brother and Pihi for both the father's sister and father father's sister.

Descriptive type of kinship terminology is also found among the Marngars. For example, U Pa is used for father; Mai is used for mother; Mama is used for mother's brother; Ata for father's father; Abu for father father's mother; Kaka is used for elder brother; Bhai for younger brother; Jongai is used for daughter's husband and so on.

Avoidance relationship is practised between the mother-in-law and the son-in-law, and also between the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law.

If the husband and the wife do not have children they adopt a female heiress or a male heir when such necessity arises. Therefore all the religious ceremonies are to be done by the adopted heir/heiress for this family. All the property will also belong to him/her and the title of the adopted heir/heiress is taken from the foster mother's and foster father's clan.

In Marngar, property includes land, houses,

cattle, poultry, household and agricultural equipment, tools, weapons etc. All the children have equal share, i.e., both sons and daughters have a share in the family property with the exception that the youngest get an extra share. The sons mostly get land, some agricultural equipment etc. Whereas daughters get house, household articles, land etc. Money is divided equally among all the children.

But when a woman is remarried, the property belonging to the husband usually goes to the sons, while her property goes to the daughters only. In case of Iap duh or when no heir/heirress is left since all the relatives have died out, it is admittedly the custom of U Syiem (Chief) to succeed to the property of such a family.

Thus, in this village, there is both continuity and change. Certain institutions have either vanished or changed, while other are still prevalent.

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