

FESTIVALS AS A PART OF JAINTIA CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION

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Cultural festivals play an important role in the life of every individual. They inform the community members of their traditions and serve as bonds of unity. They are part of intangible cultural heritage that communities have built along with their values. All festivals are cultural in one way or another. There are several types of cultural festivals such as national, religious, and seasonal festivals. Many such festivals have religious origins and entwine cultural and religious significance in traditional activities, especially in tribal societies. They rejuvenate the human relation with God, nature, and one another, and thus, festive practices provide an index of the vital pulse of a society. Festivals of the *Jaintia/Pnar* tribal community of Meghalaya in India have helped them maintain their ethnic and socio-cultural identity, build up communal or ethnic ties, perpetuate traditional cultural institutions, and preserve knowledge for the posterity of their community. In this article, the author analyzes the following cultural festivals of the *Jaintia/Pnars*: *Beh-dien-keblam*, *Chad Laboo*, *Chad Sukra*, *Chad Chipiab*, *Chad Pastieb*, and *Chad Pliang*. For the *Jaintia/Pnars*, these festivals are expressions of their duty to spread the cheer of life to everyone irrespective of their position in the society and religious affinity. For them, festivals are meant for celebrating their identity as people of God, created, nurtured, and nourished by Him, who eagerly waits for their return to heaven.

Keywords: socio-cultural identity, tribal festivals, *Jaintia*, *Pnar*, Meghalaya

Northeast India is located in the frontier part of the Indian Union. This region is distinct from the rest of India because it has a long international border, surrendered almost from all directions by foreign countries and bounded together internally by the state of Assam (Subba, 2012). Surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan, and China in the north, Myanmar in the east, and Bangladesh in the

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south, this region lies between '20⁰' and '29⁰30' North Latitude and '89⁰46' and '97⁰30' East Longitude. These 'seven sisters and a brother' (referring to the eight states of the Northeast) invited "anthropological, missionary and administrative attention" (Subba, 2012, p. xiii) even before the colonial hegemony. It comprises an area of 2,62,230 square kilometers, which is almost 8 percent of that of India, and is one of the largest diverse lands in the world. It comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The Northeast India has a wide spectrum of cultural and ethnic composition, which is an invitation to celebrate pluri-cultural identities, a unique feature in whole of the country (Jose, 2017). Writers described it as a miniature India—an epitome of the sub-continent. Anthropologists consider it a paradise for their research, an anthropological museum. "Taking into consideration the geographical diversity, the ethnic plurality, the linguistic multiplicity and political intricacies found in the region it is apt to describe India's Northeast as a rainbow country: extraordinarily diverse and colourful, mysterious when seen through parted clouds, a distant troubled frontier for all too many" (Verghese, 1996, p. 1).

Meghalaya: Land of Matrilineal Tribes

Meghalaya, a land with pristine natural beauty and picturesque landscape, is truly an 'abode of clouds', as the very name suggests (*megha* meaning 'cloud'; *ālaya* meaning 'abode'). It lies in the northeastern part of the country located between '25⁰1' to '26⁰5' North Latitude and '85⁰49' to '92⁰52' East Longitude, with the total area of 22,429 square kilometers. According to the 2011 census, Meghalaya has a population of 29,66,889 individuals. It is the 23rd most populous state in the country (Govt. of India, 2011). This state is bounded on the north by Goalpara, Kamrup, and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; on the south by the People's Republic of Bangladesh; on the east by the North Cachar Hills district and Barack Valley of Assam; and on the west by Goalpara district of Assam and Bangladesh (Bareh, 2001). "It is a hilly strip in the eastern part of the country and about 300 kilometers long from east to west and 100 kilometers wide" (Nayak & Thomas, 2007, p. 57). Meghalaya is described as "the undulating terrain of the land basically characterises itself; hill spurs after spurs rise and roll before the eyes, presenting their intensive craggy formation in the most steepish part of the terrain is noticed" (Bareh, 1994, p. 1). Lord Willingdon, the Viceroy of India, observed thus in 1933:

There is no place within our Indian empire wider diversity is found within a smaller compass than in the uplands of Assam where Syiems and Princely houses of Khasis represent perhaps the oldest and certainly one of the most interesting of the ancient tribal migrations. It is a proof of the stamina and virility and competence of the people that when greater empires in the east and the west ...[are] come and gone, you still maintain in your pleasant hill the freedom of your small republics based on the ancient ways and tenets of your race. (Singh, 1980, p. 10)

This land of clouds, Meghalaya, occupies a prominent place in the Northeast Indian canvas. It occupied an elevated position during the colonial rule since it was a center of power during the British rule in India. The state has most of its land covered by hills interspersed with gorges and small valleys. Endowed with dense forests and rivers cascading down the undulating terrain, this region is one of the most scenic of the northeastern states. However, area wise it is the third biggest state in the region after Arunachal Pradesh and Assam (Nayak & Thomas, 2007). The lovers of nature describe Meghalaya as the ‘Scotland of the East,’ an epithet since the colonial times. The botanists and zoologists find in the state the pleasure of rare discoveries among the varied fauna and flora of the land (Sharma, 1998).

Study Area



Figure 1. Showing the Map of the state of Meghalaya in India.

Meghalaya's population is greatly made up of the indigenous tribals. The *Khasis*—the biggest ethnic group—occupy the central part of Meghalaya, trailed by the *Garos* in the western part and the *Jaintias* in the eastern part. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, was also the capital of undivided Assam from 1874 till January 1972. The state has most of its land covered by hills interspersed with gorges and valleys, with an elevation ranging from 150 meters to 1,950 meters. The three major ethnic communities that inhabit the state namely *Khasi/Khyntiam* and the *Pnar/Jaintia* belong to the Proto-Australoid Mon-Khmer ethnicity, whereas *Garos* belong to the Bodo family of the Tibeto-Burman ethnicity who are said to have migrated from Tibet. For many years, the people of Meghalaya, both in the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills, have been broadly called by outsiders as *Khasis*. However, the generic term included people of five sub-groups, namely, *Khyntiam*, *Pnar*, *Synteng or Jaintia*, *War*, *Bhoi*, and *Lyngngam* (Sen, 2002).

After the statehood in 1972, the United Khasi and Jaintia kingdom was divided and Jowai sub-division was upgraded to Jaintia Hills district, with Jowai as the district headquarters. On July 31, 2012, the Jaintia Hills district was divided into two: East and West Jaintia Hills districts. It has a total geographical area of 3,819 square kilometers with a population of 3,95,124, as per the 2011 census. Jaintia Hills district is the largest producer of coal in the state. Limestone production in the state is on the increase, as there is high demand from cement industries. The origins of the *Pnar/Jaintia* is shrouded in mystery. It is suggested that the word *Jaintia* is derived from the shrine of Jayanti Devi or Jainteswari, an incarnation of the Hindu goddess Durga. Secondly, it could be due to the aryanization of the original word *synteng*. The word *synteng* underwent morphological alterations in contact with the Aryan culture, and became *Zaintain*, and then *Jaintia*. The word *synteng* is the combination of two words like the Khasi: *syn* meaning 'children' and *teng* meaning 'ancestral mother.' Thus, *synteng* means "children of ancestral mother" (Bareh, 1997, p. 10; Maliekal, 2005, p. 20). However, historians offer another theory which says that the name is derived via *Pnar* (the tribe of the rulers) from Sutnga, a former settlement; and that the myth of Jayanti Devi was probably created after the hinduization of the Jaintia kingdom. The *Pnars/Jaintia* and *War* speak *Mon-Khmer* languages that are related to Khasi (Maps of India). Bordoloi (1991) says that the name *synteng* originated from *Sutunga* or *Sutnga*, the first royal dynasty of the *Jaintia* people.

The *Pnar* society is purely matrilineal. Mothers play an important role in every family. She is the custodian of the family and domestic affairs. The husband remains as a progenitor while the uncle becomes the cultural father (Kharkrang, 2012). Whether the society is patrilineal or matrilineal it is the children, both boys and girls, who make the continuity and perpetuation of the family and clan possible. They carry forward the family/clan identity, property, authority, and family religious tradition. They are counted as the vehicle for biological and cultural continuity. Thus, children are the most valued constituent elements in every society and family. The three basic characteristics common to both matrilineal and patrilineal are: (i) in both, unilineal descent groups are exogamous; (ii) women have primary responsibility for the care of children; and (iii) men have authority over women and children. The critical difference between the two systems is that whereas both the principle of group membership and the line of authority run through the male line in patrilineal societies, they are separated between males and females in matrilineal systems. That is, the principle of group membership runs through the female lineage whereas the line of authority goes through the male lineage. Gurdon (1906/2010) was the first scholar, who gave a detailed description about the *Khasi* and the *Pnar* citing a subtle difference between the matrilineal among them. He writes: “The most remarkable feature of the Khasi marriage is that it is usual for the husband to live with his wife in his mother-in-law’s house and not for him to take his bride home, amongst the *Synteng*, however the case is different; for them the husband does not go and live in his mother-in-law’s house, he only visits her [his wife] there” (p. 76).

Pnars: Their Appearance

The *Pnars* of the Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya are hardworking laborers. The color of their skin is usually brown varying from dark to a yellowish brown according to the locality. Gurdon (1906/2010) observes that “the *Syntengs* of the Jaintia Hills are darker than the *Khasi up landers*” (p. 76). He gives a comprehensive narration about the physical features of the people of this hilly terrain. To him, their “eyelids are somewhat obliquely set, but not so acutely as in the Chinese and some other Mongols. Jaws frequently are prognathous, mouth large, with sometimes thick lips, hair black, straight, and worn long, the hair of the people who adopt the old style being caught up in a knot at the back” (1906/2010: 3). He further comments about the males: “It is quite the exception to see a beard, although the moustache is not infrequently worn” (p. 3).

History of the *Jaintias*

The history of the *Jaintias* could be told and taught from one generation to the next mostly based on the oral traditions. The historical evidences and the proofs for their origin seem to be scanty and insufficient. “With the inclusion of the oral tradition, the subjective element ... had kept on hunting the historians and proper care should be taken handling these sources and to corroborate them with other external secular sources” (Lamare, 2005, p. 2). British administrators, who were posted in India, had written the monographs, out of their curiosity and compulsion, about the people amidst whom they were posted. P. R. T. Gurdon, a superintendent of Ethnography in Assam, was the first person who took initiative to document the information about the *Khasi / Pnar* way back in 1903. Jaintia historian Lamare (2005) comments:

The Jaintias are one of the many tribal groups of northeast India who do not have a script of their own and for that matter any written history. Whatever little is known about them is being handed over by their ancestors orally right from the time immemorial. Though the people have stayed in this beautiful landscape, the history and origin of the Jaintias or Pnars... is shrouded with mystery. In fact nothing is known about their ancestral land, their migration, before they came over to these hills. (p. 3)

Stephen Fuchs, in his work *The Races of North East India*, states that “Jaintias were the second inhabitants to have migrated into the northeastern region, the first being a Negrito race that was either exterminated by the later immigrants or assimilated by other ethnic groups” (as cited in Lamare, 2005, p. 4).

Migration to the Present Habitat

Pathak (1998), an eminent demographer, writes that the origin of the tribe was located in the South Western Turkey. For him, matrilineal people of Jaintia have some similarities with the Lukkan or Lycian people who were living along the river banks of Sianta, now known as Koca, flowing into the Mediterranean Sea in South West Anatolia. He points out that Lukkans or Lycians apart from all other people continue to practice of naming themselves not after their father, but after their mother. These people could have migrated to the present habitat after the Northern foreign invasion of Anatolia and Greek areas. Due to this invasion, a huge number of people fled through sea route to Egypt and Cyprus. The prominent groups that have migrated are

Lukkans, who might have come and settled in the present habitat of Jaintia Hills.

Another scholar G. Paul concludes that the Jaintias are the “original inhabitants of a state called ‘T’ Sin-tiang in China. This people were called ‘T’ Sin-tiang or ‘T’ Sin-tie.’ In course of time, they came to known as ‘Synteng’ or ‘Syntein” (as cited in Lamare, 2005, p. 7). Gurdon (1906/2010) has given the first systematic account about the Khasi people and “points out the north as the direction from which they migrated, and Sylhet as the terminus of their wandering, from which they were ultimately driven back into their present hill fastnesses by the great flood after a more or less peaceful occupation of that district” (p. 10). Gurdon also mentions Mr. Shadwell, an authority on Khasis, who considers that they originally came into Assam from Burma through Patkai range, having followed the route of one of the Burmese invasions. Another authority, Pakem, writes:

Many scholars opine that the Jaintias came from the East.... The Burmese accounts indicated that the Jaintias could have come from the West.... It was the early Mediterraneans ... who gave the world the Austro-Asiatic speech. There were also accounts that the Mediterranean Dravidians passed through Assam to Indonesia. And finally the relation between the Austro-Asiatic and the Sumerians has also been established.... There has been local tradition about their coming from the region around the West Asia. The gist of this tradition is that from Mongolia the ‘Seven Huts’ went to Palestine from where a branch of Jewish tribe under a female line crossed over to Egypt and Ethiopia. From Africa they crossed the Red Sea into ancient Sumer and Akkad and ultimately to India. From the plains and the foothills of Northern India the tribe continued their eastward migration to South China. It is from here that they spread into various directions...one branch went to eastward the other to Burma where they were known as the Mons. The Mons had many similarity with Jaintias.... From Burma they ultimately came to the present-day Jaintia Hills in the third century B.C.... It is to be noted that racially the Jaintias came from the North as Mongoloids, linguistically from the east as Austro-Asiatics and culturally from the West as Proto-Austroloids or Turanians. (as cited in Sen, 2017, p. 22)

Jaintia Kingdom

The *Jaintia* tribe, being self-reliant, lived in isolation for a very long period of time in the hills. Though their origin is obscure yet, the earliest references

to the Jaintia kingdom were found in the inscription of their coins, copper plates, and buildings of the Ahom Dynasty (1228-1826) (Maps of India). “The Jaintia kingdom extended from the east of the Shillong Plateau of the present day Meghalaya into the plains to the South and North to the Barak River Valley in Assam India” (Sharma, 2014, p. 68). Though the Khasis had many kingdoms (principalities), the *Jaintias* had only one. The chronicles of the Ahom, Koch and Kachari kings mentioned most prominently and most exclusively only *Rajas* of Jaintia and *Khairam* (*Khyrim*) (Chaudhury, 1978). The capital of the Jaintia kingdom was Jaintiapur, which was located on the plains at the foot of the Jaintia Hills, and is now ruined. Nartiang seems to be the summer capital of the Jaintia kingdom. Nothing much remains about the kingdom in Nartiang except the Durga temple and nearby megalithic site. The whole of present Sylhet in Bangladesh was under the jurisdiction of the Jaintia kings. “After the 17th century invasion by the Kachari king Satrudaman, the Jaintia kingdom came under increasing Kachari and Ahom political influence. The Jaintia kingdom was annexed by the British East India Company in 1835” (Sharma, 2014, p. 69). The available names of the rulers of the Jaintia kingdom from 1500 CE are:

Table 1. The List of Erstwhile Jaintia Kings

No.	Names of Kings	Period of Reign (CE)
1.	Prabhat Ray	1500-1516
2.	Majha Gosain	1516-1532
3.	Burha Prabat Ray	1532-1548
4.	Bar Gosain	1548-1564
5.	Bijay Manik	1564-1580
6.	Pratap Ray	1580-1596
7.	Dhan Manik	1596-1612
8.	Jasa Manik	1612-1625
9.	Sundar Ray	1625-1636
10.	Choto Parbat Ray	1636-1647
11.	Jasamanta Ray	1647-1660
12.	Ban Singh	1660-1669

No.	Names of Kings	Period of Reign (CE)
13.	Pratap Singh	1669-1678
14.	Lakshmi Narayan	1678-1694
15.	Ram Singh I	1694-1708
16.	Jaya Narayan	1708-1731
17.	Bar Gosain	1731-1770
18.	Chattra Singh	1770-1780
19.	Bijay Narayan	1780-1790
20.	Ram Singh II	1790-1832
21.	Rajendra Singh	1832-1835

Jaintias Under the British Rule

The first encounter of the British with the *Jaintias* occurred in 1774 when Major Henniker attacked them. Gurdon, (1906/2010) narrates that “the first contact between the British and the inhabitants ... followed upon the acquisition by the East India Company, in consequence of the grant of the *Divani* of Bengal in 1765 of the district of Sylhet” (p. xvi). The quarries in the position of the *Jaintia* kings were the main suppliers of lime to the delta region of Bengal, but with the British, the contact was not very smooth and they were attacked 1774. Subsequently, the *Jaintias* were increasingly isolated from the plains via a system of ports as well as via a regulation of 1774 (Gurdon, 1906/2010). After the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War, the British allowed the *Jaintia* king to rule north of the Surma River. The kingdom was finally annexed on March 15, 1835. The king was handed over his property in Sylhet along with the salary of Rupees 500/- (Lamare, 2005, p. 54). The British administered the plains directly and the hill region indirectly via a system of fifteen *Dolois* and four *Sardars*.

Population Demography of Jaintia Hill Districts

The population of both the East and the West districts together, as per the 2011 census, is 3,95,124, of which 1,96,285 are males and 1,98,839 are females. Out of the total population, 3,66,694 are found in the rural areas of the districts while 28,430 are in the urban area called Jowai, the lone town in both the districts. The Jaintia Hills have 61.64 percentage of literacy

with 87,371 male and 1,00,156 females being literate. They also have 1,317 scheduled caste individuals, of which 784 are males and 733 are females. They form 0.33 percentage of the total population. The scheduled tribe population is 3,76,099 which is 95.19 percent of the total population, of which 1,85,866 are males and 1,90,233 are females. The density of population is 103 persons per square kilometer. The decadal population growth (2001-2011) was 96,016 of which 46,394 were males and 49,622 were females. For the administrative purpose the districts are divided into five community and rural development (C&RD) blocks. Among the five blocks, Thadlaskein is the most populated block with 1,37,939 inhabitants, of which 67,905 are males and 70,034 are females; whereas Saipung with 37,107 inhabitants is the least populated C&RD in the Jaintia Hills districts with 18,605 males and 18,502 females.

Table 2. Showing the Block-wise Population of the Jaintia Hills

District/Block	Area (Sq. Kms)	Population (2011 Census)		
		Persons	Male	Female
Jaintia Hills (Dist.)	3,819	395,124	196,285	198,839
Thadlaskein	904	137,939	67,905	70,034
Laskein	390	90,402	45,244	45,158
Amlaram	398	43,844	21,903	21,941
Khliehriat	1,280	85,832	42,628	43,204
Saipung	846	37,107	18,605	18,502

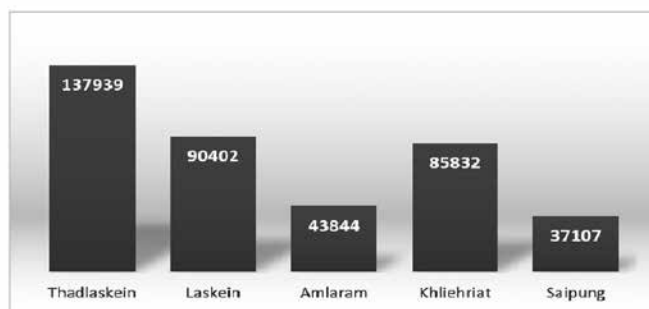


Figure 2. A comparative depiction of the block-wise population of Jaintia Hills.

Festivals as Cultural Expression

Festivals play an important role in the life of every individual, especially the tribals. Their life is colored with varieties of celebrations, which connect with the nature, God, and ancestors. Changes in the season, sowing and harvesting, are observed with splendor and gaiety and their departed members of the family, clan and tribe are reminisced and venerated with respect and love during the festivals. During the festivals, they pay homage to their ancestors, adore gods and goddesses, make offerings to appease the malevolent spirits as a retribution for any wrong done, and seek blessing and assistance from the benevolent spirits. Festivals are often celebrated with songs, dances, merry-making, and varieties of food and drink. Through these celebrations they keep their life peaceful, prosperous, and forget the anguish and struggle of life, celebrating it to the fullest. These festivals play a major role in building up strong social contacts, strengthening community and clan relationships, and maintaining social solidarity. Festivals offer a sense of belongingness and provide entertainment. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic themes also seek to inform the community members of their traditions, ensure the involvement of elders in sharing stories and experience so as to provide a means for unity among families.

Festivals have been a part of intangible cultural heritage that communities have built along with their values. They are an expressive way to celebrate glorious heritage, culture, and traditions. They are meant to celebrate special moments and emotions in one's lives with the loved ones. They play an important role in adding structure to our social lives, and connecting us with our families and history. They give us a break from our day-to-day, fatiguing and repetitive life, and inspire us to immortalize significant moments and milestones in life. All festivals are cultural in one way or another. There are many types of cultural festivals such as national, religious, and seasonal festivals. They all serve the purpose of bringing happiness to our lives, and strengthening our sense of community. Religious festivals are important for families that help us teach principles and ethics to our next generation. All different religious festivals bring the same message of love, brotherhood, forbearances, tolerance, and understanding. During the festive occasions we express our gratitude to God and request His continual assistance in our life. Seasonal festivals reflect the grateful attitude of people towards nature, especially to mother earth, who provides us with sustenance. Many festivals

have religious origins and entwine cultural and religious significance in traditional activities. Most of the festivals culminate in the consumption of specially prepared food and drinks. Festivals work like stress relievers and they balance our emotions and bring people together and reduce frictions and differences. They bring people together in a bond of love and play a pivotal role in building the society. Agriculture, in addition to religion and folklore, has significantly contributed to the tradition of festivals. Many festivals are associated with the season of harvest. Festivals contribute greatly of social cohesion. Many of the festivals focus on cultural topics and seek to inform community members of their traditions.

The foregoing discussion applies also to the community-adhered festivals of the *Pnars* that helped them maintain their ethnic and socio-cultural identity at the greater regional network, building up communal or ethnic ties, rejuvenating traditional culture, and ensuring continuity of knowledge for their posterity. The endless series of mountain ranges, the beauty and majesty of the peaks, the colorful flowers with variety of design and fragrance, the fruits with their varieties and tastes, the clouds which seem to touch the stars in the background—all have left their impression on the religious ceremonies, festivals, and other fairs of the *Pnars* of Meghalaya. Among the many festivals that the *Pnars* celebrate, the annual celebration of *Beb-dien-khlam*, occupies the primary position, making it a significant celebration in the entire state of Meghalaya in general and Jaintia Hills in particular.

Beb-dien-khlam

Beb-dien-khlam is the traditional and the biggest festival of the *Pnar* community under the embrace of *Niam-Tre*. It is held in the month of June-July. One can attest this festival to be the greatest ever annual gathering of the *Pnar* people, which breaks the barriers of their clan affiliations, solemnly submitting themselves to the tradition that has continuity of knowledge over eons.

Beb-dien-khlam literally means chasing away the pestilence with sticks (*beb* = chasing, *dien* = stick, *khlam* = pestilence). The feast is celebrated ever since the *Pnars* started settling in Jowai. The first two settlers of this place were *U Niang Lyngdoh* and his sister *Ka Long Lyngdoh*. They migrated to this place due to a plague that wiped away the people of their original land. Gradually, people came to know about this place and started coming to settle

down in this new place. They called the new place 'Jowai.' Later, these two individuals decided to perform a ritual so that such devastating plague or pestilence should never attack them again. They decided to call the festival *Beh-dien-khlam*. Thus, the ritual starts off from the houses of one of the four daughters of *Ka Long Lyngdob*, and the members of her family act as the high priestess of the celebration. Usually the festival is celebrated in the month of July. The *Dolois*,² *Pators*,³ and the *Wasans*⁴ assist the high priestess in ritual performance and collect fund from the people of Jowai. The next day, they disperse in four groups and move to four corners of Jowai to perform the ritual called *Knia Khang* to appease the four protecting deities of the locality, *U Moo-Khai*, *U Moo-Ralong*, *U Moo-Tong*, and *U Moo-Sniang*, through sacrifices and prayers.

When moon appears, a ritual called *Knia Pyrtha*⁵ is performed by the priests from Charmang, Yalong, and Tuber villages only on the hilltop outside the town of Jowai. After this sacrifice, begins the preparation for the *rots*⁶ in different areas (*dong*) of Jowai. Then the people go in search of a tall and straight tree that is to be venerated as *Dien-Khlam*. The members of the *Khon Raid* fell a second tree, which is bigger than the first and is regarded as *Khong*.⁷ The last three days are very important for the celebration. Two days before the final day, the tree (*Dien-Khlam*) will be taken out from the jungle by the male members of the respective *dongs* and is brought to the market with jubilation. They lay these overnight in the ground and on the next day keep these in an upright position. Meanwhile, the *Khong* is taken out only by the members of *Khon Raid* and no one else participates in carrying the *Khong*. By evening, people place a replica of *Dein-Khlam* on the top of their house.

² A *Doloi* is the administrative head of an *Elaka* (the administrative area of a *Doloi*). He exercises his functions within the jurisdiction of his *Elaka*. The *Dolois* in Jaintia Hills are not autocratic rulers and have no dictatorial power over the people of their respective *Elakas*. Their provinces are really republics though they are tiny in size. The *Dolois* also have to run the administration according to the popular opinion of their *Elakas*. This is clearly noticed from the fact that all actions initiated or taken by a *Doloi* are to be approved by all the citizens of the *Elaka*, through the general *Durbar* of the *Raid* or *Elaka*.

³ A *Doloi* can either function directly or through his deputy, *U Pator*. In some cases, an extra tier between the *Elaka* and the village is instituted wherever the *Elaka* is too large to be managed by one *Doloi*. Such an extra tier is usually placed under a Lieutenant Governor or *U Pator*.

⁴ *U Pator* assists the *Doloi* to govern the *Elaka* with the help of *Ki Tymmen Ki San* (Elder) or simply *Ki Wasan* (Elders) who are representatives of their respective clans.

⁵ The festival begins with sacrificing pig to 'Knia Pyrtha' (Sacrifice of Thunder).

⁶ Tall bamboo structures decorated with color paper and tinsel.

⁷ A polished tree trunk introduced as a mark of respect to *Ka Bon* (one of the early settlers of Jowai). When this tree trunk enters the pool, place of the festival, there is a great scramble and mad rush among the people to touch it.

The last day begins with the ritual *Kyntin Kbnong*⁸ being performed in the house of high priestess to honor the four ancestors of the tribe (*Ka Bon, Ka Tein, Ka Wet, and Ka Doh*). After this ceremony they have the famous ritual called ‘beating the house’ (*Sympat Yung*). This is the symbolic act of driving away the evil spirits of plague, sickness, and pestilence. This takes place by beating the house tops with bamboo poles by the men folk. Then people would gather at a pool called *Aitnar*⁹ for watching the immersion ceremony. Tall decorated structures called *rots* are brought to the *Aitnar*. After the immersion of these *rots*, the polished sacred trunk called *Kbnong* are brought into the pool by the *Khon Raid*. As soon the *Kbnong* enters the *Aitnar*, there is an enormous rush from the part of the people to touch it by running into the muddy water.



Figure 3. Depicting the procession of *Rots* (Tall bamboo structures decorated with color paper and tinsel) from various villages, being brought to the *Aitnar* (sacred pool)

In the afternoon people gather at Mynthong to witness a game called *Datlawakor*, a football game with round piece of wood in the place of ball by two contending teams from the upper and the lower regions of Myntu river. During this time the *Wasan* makes a sacrifice at the ‘priest forest’

⁸ *Kyntin kbnong* ceremony is held at the residential compound of *Ka Lyngdoh* (a priestess) they start throwing the small *kbnongs* upwards with the help of wooden sticks, one after another in honour of the four sisters who were the original settlers of Jowai town namely, *Ka Bon, Ka Teiñ, Ka Wet and Ka Doh*.

⁹ A sacred pool where the *rots* are placed during the *Beh-dein-kblam* festival.

(*Ka Khloo Lyndoh*). It is believed that the winning team will reap a better harvest (Lamare, 2005). In the evening, there is much funfair and merry making, which marks the end of the festival *Beb-dien-kblam*. The state of Meghalaya is blessed with numerous intriguing and fabulous festivals, among which *Beb-dien-kblam* is truly an exquisite one. Being celebrated in the month of June through the month of July, *Beb-dien-kblam* of Meghalaya is chiefly feted by the people of the *Pnar* community. Being one of the most sacred and spiritual festivities of Meghalaya, *Beb-dien-kblam* signals the end of the sowing period. The *Jaintia* tribes play the host for this dance festival.

Like majority of the festivals of Meghalaya, *Beb-dien-kblam* also shares an integral bond with farming as it is celebrated to recite conjurations addressing the Almighty in order to achieve a mega harvest. The most significant characteristic that demarcates *Beb-dien-kblam* festival of Meghalaya from others is that women are barred from taking part in this holy dance. The sole reason is that they remain engaged in the preparation of delicious food that would be put before their ancestors as a tribute. The culmination point of this humongous event is marked by two gangs of men engaged in brutal conflict to obtain an undressed beam. Eventually, this tug-of-war descends into a dirty ditch designated as *Wab-ait-nar*. On the third and ultimate day of this three-day long event, the whole community assembles at *Aitnar* and shakes their legs to the enchanting tunes of musical instruments. Other highlights of this event are stupendously ornamented structures called *rots* and posts made from wood known as *kbnongs* that descend into a pool of emerald blue water. A replica of soccer called *Dad-Lawakor* is played at *Mynthong*.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the festival, being related to agricultural season, testifies to an advanced culture of wetland cultivation as against the *Jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation) practiced by other indigenous communities. “During the festival, family members and relatives experienced the joy of home coming. It is the time to be at home with Mother Nature and dance on its lap, its soil and its water” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 157). It is also believed that every one of the rituals performed throughout the year in preparation of *Beb-dien-kblam* is intrinsically linked with agriculture. Only after performing the ritual of *Thob Landob*, people start planting vegetables such as cucumber, and pumpkins; and it is only after another ceremony, *ka Chat thob*, that farmers start tilling their paddy fields. *Beb-dien-kblam* festivals are celebrated in six places by the *Pnar* community. The first is celebrated by

the *Raij Chyrmang* followed by the *Raij Jowai*, *Tuber*, *Ialong*, *Mukbla*, and the last celebration is that of *Raij Muthlong*. The largest of all the *Beb-dien-keblam* is that of Tuber Kamichnong, which has the highest number of rots. Altogether 25 *rots* from different parts of the district bring their rots to Tuber Kamaichong (Bhattacharya, 2017).

The main part of the festival is the coming together of all the children of the *Niam Tre* at the sacred pool *Aitnar*, a pond where the last significant part of the festival is performed. The dance in the water symbolizes the oneness of the people where everyone joyfully participates. *Beb-dien-keblam* has physical and spiritual aspects. Cleaning the house and the surrounding areas with the aim of destroying the breeding grounds of the dreadful disease is an essential part of this festival. The onset is marked with offering prayers to God accompanied with performances of certain rituals and sacrifices. It involves invoking the blessing of the Almighty through traditional rites performed under the leadership of the priest, *U Lyngdob*, and the social aspect signifies the sheer joy through dancing in the rain and making music. *Doloi* of Jowai *Elaka*, as a religious head, assists the priest in performing the rituals. The festival culminates in the collective expression of triumph over evil when people take to streets performing traditional arts of dancing and singing accompanied by the folk musical instruments of *bahuri* (clarinet), flutes, and drums, which culminate at the sacred pool *Aitnar*. This festival calls every *Pnar* to relive the creation narrative as well as maintain the traditional practices, which bring them together as the children of the God (*U Tre Kiroi*). During this festival they welcome their creator God, who promised them to visit once a year for a period of four days and three nights, in a befitting manner with joy and laughter. Whenever this festival is being celebrated, it brings the joy of reliving and re-enacting the old stories that make them feel that their God is close to them, hearing their supplications, blessing them and their labor, and rejoicing with them in their celebrations.

Laboo Dance (Chad Laboo)

Laboo dance is one of the oldest and traditional dances of the *Pnars* to venerate and express their gratitude to the creator God (*U Tre Kiroi*) for His blessings received together with the comforts and nourishments offered through mother earth. This dance was earlier referred to as *Chad Chipiah*. Both males and females perform the *Laboo* dance. Any number of people can

participate in this dance but they should dance in groups of three. Attired in their best finery, usually, young men on either side of a woman holding arms together, dance in steps. The female dancer should be virgins, who represent the priestess *Ka Lyngdob* and the male dancer on the right side symbolizes the uncle, who is the protector of the family, and the one on the left represents the husband who is the progenitor of the clan. In place of the usual drum and pipe, a cheer leader, usually a man gifted with the talent of impromptu recitation, recites couplets to the merriment of the audience. This is usually a religious dance. Therefore, on close examination of the *Laboo* dance, one will see the concrete and precise representation of a family. One can also deduce the importance of religion in the family. Purity and chastity in the female dancer is very essential for the purpose of participation in the dance. Married women are not allowed to participate in the dance. Apart from these, there are other types of *Laboo* dances performed during various agricultural activities such as preparation of the field (*Ka Pub Hali*, *Ka Pub Kper*), planting the seeds (*Ka Tung Kba*), harvesting (*Ka Chob Kba*), carrying the sheaves (*Ka Kit Kba*), and so on.



Figure 4. Laboo dance is being performed by young boys and girls. Here is depicted that part of the dance, showing the preparation of ground and planting of paddy.

Sukra Dance (Chad Sukra)

The annual *Chad Sukra* (sowing festival) is celebrated during the middle of April or early May by the *Pnars*. The *Pnars* believe that a farmer can sow the seeds only after the *Sukra* festival. The festival is observed to invoke God,

the Creator, to protect their crops from all forms of natural calamities besides ushering in peace and harmony among the people. This dance is mostly taken part by the young girls and boys who are below 15 years old. This dance does not have any religious ritual attached, but is an expression of the joy and happiness at the providence of God, the Creator, *U Blai Wa Boob Wa Thoo*, and an invocation of the blessing of the Creator on all kinds of seeds. It is performed before the sowing season. The dancers are mainly six to eight young girls with equal number of boys who dance to the music and drum beat.

Chipiah Dance (Chad Chipiah)

Since long, *Chipiah* dance had not been performed among the *Pnars* for reasons unknown. It was later revived by the members of the *Nikhla* clan. A grand old lady who disappeared at the time of her death at Mynthong near Jowai appeared in a dream to another lady called, Syndur, of the same clan and asked her to revive the *Chipiah* dance. Soon the news spread everywhere, and the members of the clan took it seriously and believed that the old lady had some element of divinity in her. Sacrifice was offered at a place called Moolikso in Jowai. After this, *Chad Chipiah* came to be known as *Nikhla* dance (*Ka Chad Yung Nikhla*) (Lamare, 2005). This dance is the old version of *Lahoo* dance. If we look at the symbolic arrangement of the dancers in *Chad Chipiah*, one cannot deny the gendered notions about the role of women in the society. A female dancer dance in the middle and two male dancers flank her one on the right and the other on the left. The one to the right symbolizes the maternal uncle, and the other to the left stands for the husband. This arrangement denotes that the female depends on the male members of the society. She is protected and guarded by her uncle and her husband. She needs safety and the dance itself symbolizes that she cannot live all by herself.

Pastieh Dance (Chad Pastieh)

It is an important war dance of the *Pnars*. The dance is attributed to the four doors spread in four different corners of Jowai, i.e., *U Moo-Khai*, *U Moo-ralong*, *U Moo-tong*, and *U Moo-sniang*. “In this dance form, only the males take part carrying their sword and shield dancing to the beat of the war drums and the *ghungru*. The *Doloi* leads the dance followed by the *Lyngdoh* and the remaining dancers,” observes Lamare (2005, p. 68). This dance form is performed occasionally, and not on a regular basis.

Plate Dance (Chad Pliang)

Chad Pliang or plate dance is performed by the women using plates in their hands. While dancing, they keep the plates on head, forehead, mouth, and hands and move according to the tunes of the music. Later, male dancers join them in western outfits and a hat in their head (Lamare, 2005). This festival originated in Jaintiapur (today's Bangladesh) during the time of Jaintia and was later introduced to the present Jaintia Hills. It is a dance of amusement carried out by the people during any festival and merry making. Now a days this dance remains only for entertainment where women folk perform this dance while men remain as mere spectators.



Figure 5. Chad Pliang by a group girls

Apart from these important festivals there are various minor celebrations such as *Ka Chad Rawa*, *Ka Chad Khla*, *Ka Chad Mih-iaw*, *Bam Phalar*, *Tpep* ceremony, *Ka Knia Khang*, *Ka Knia Blai Lyngdob*, *Ka Knia Kupli*, *Ka Knia Umtisong*, *Ka Knia Pyrthat*, *Ka Knia Pyrdong Chnong*, *Ka Knia Kblam*, *Ka Pom Blang Iaw*, etc. (Lamare, 2005).

Festivals and celebrations offer possibilities for human interaction that might be missed in the day to day life. It rejuvenates the human relation with God, nature, and one another. It is evident that festive practices provide an indication of the vital pulse of every society. Yet festivals can also assume

important functions of social dynamism. The idea of festival draws positive feelings and sharing of joy among the members of the celebrating community. While analyzing the *Pnar* festivals one finds that these festivals bring the entire *Pnar* community together, irrespective of their religious affinities. The festivals of the *Pnars* break the monotony of life and bring fun and joy into their lives. The festivals bring them together with family and friends and help them appreciate the presence of the other and celebrate life and relationships. The creator God commanded them to respect one another and earn the favor of God by virtuous living. The festivals are one of the major means to honor the three jewels of the *Niam - Tre* religion (golden teachings) that speak about life in relation with God, the nature, and the other. The three jewels are as follows:

To earn righteousness (Ban Kamai ia ka bok): God sent the *Pnars* to the earth not just to multiply but to live by means of one's own labor by following the path of righteousness. Any wrong means used for earning money or prestige leads to condemnation. Lying and coveting other's property bring shame and disaster in the family. Thus, showing respect to God and loving service to others is always expected from every *Pnar*. The life purpose of a *Pnar* is to earn righteousness and it has to be shown in all dealings. A *Pnar* has to regulate one's life through one's conduct and application in life, meeting one's material needs by the sweat of one's labor. By accepting this rule, every *Pnar* is taking up a responsibility of propagating righteousness and truthfulness.

To know God and fellow human beings (Ban Tip-Briew Tip-Blei): This rule teaches that in order to be aware of God, one has to be aware of fellow human beings through service. In other words, it is 'to God through the other.' This invites everyone not just worship the *U Tre Kiroi* but reach out to the people in need of. To be conscious of God, one should know how to live in harmony with fellow human beings on earth. It also exhorts us to perform our duty towards our fellow beings for their good and prosperity. No one shall cause pain or suffering to another for one's own gain or profit. One should love others, reach out to help them in their need, and most of all, treat them with love and compassion.

To know the maternal and the paternal relations (Ban Tip Kur Tip Kha): *U Blai* created the human being to lead a righteous, honest, and truthful life. They should follow justice (*ka bok*) in all their dealings. They should know and love

God and his fellow human beings, and respect their relatives both from the mother and the father's sides. According to the traditional religion, a person alone is responsible for one's own actions; no one can share the burden of his or her sins. *Pnar* religion expects them "to live righteous life, and their dealings with their fellow men should be followed with truth and honesty not only in their thoughts and actions, but in their wishes as well" (Lamare, 2005, p. 62).

Conclusion

The *Pnars* believe that through the festivals they learn more about their God, their duties and responsibilities towards their family (*yung*), tradition (*pateng*), and clan (*kur*). Through their celebration they accept, appreciate, and acknowledge the maternal (*kur*) and the paternal (*kha*) relationships. Celebration of various festivals spread joy and bring greater bond of unity among them. It also provides opportunity for them to learn about their roots and traditions and provide occasions to help others in the society. Festivals are the occasions for the *Pnars* to teach the younger generation the traditional practices and values that are to be followed meticulously. Festivals also give opportunity to learn about their ancestors and the mythology associated with those festivals and carry them forward in their lives. For *Pnars*, festivals are not merely moments to be celebrated in joy, but are moments that God has given to reflect about their existence here on earth and teach them to return to the Almighty and join back to other nine huts¹⁰ (*Khyndai Trep*) in heaven. It also teaches them to be thankful and appreciative of all those who contributed to their life. For the *Pnars*, festivals teach them that it is their duty to spread the cheer of life to everyone irrespective of their position in the society and religious affinity. Thus, for *Pnars* festivals are meant for celebrating their identity as people of God who created, nurtured, nourished them and who eagerly waits for their return to heaven.

¹⁰ At the beginning of creation, the Mother Earth and her husband felt lonely in their empty world. They prayed to God to be blessed with some children. God blessed them with five children: sun, water, wind, fire, and moon. The Mother Earth was thrilled with her children. But she still felt something missing and requested God to send someone to help her tend her vast and beautiful gardens. God called the biggest council ever seen in heaven to elect the future caretakers of the earth. After many days of deliberation, it was decided that seven out of sixteen clans living in heaven should descend to earth and populate the wilderness. They were to be known as *Ki Hynniew Trep*, the 'people of seven huts.' Their country was to be called *Ka Ri Hynniew Trep*, the 'Land of Seven Huts.' God blessed them by saying that those who live virtuous life on earth would return to heaven and join with the other nine huts.

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