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RESEARCH ARTICLE

GRAPHIC AND PLASTIC ART OF THE KHARAM TRIBE OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The Kharam, one of the small tribes of Manipur is found inhabiting in four villages of Senapati District. The Kharam believe that their ancestors originated from a cave located near Makhel, which is about ten kilometers away from Oklong village, Senapati District. Another theory suggests that they along with other groups of Tibeto-Burman family came from south west China. The present study is about the graphic and plastic art of the Kharam tribe of Manipur. It is very interesting to note the different forms of the Kharam graphic and plastic art. It includes carving and engraving in the wood, stone ivory etc., sculpture in wood, clay modeling and toy making, painting, textile, basketry, personal ornamentation etc. The graphic and plastic art, found among the Kharam culture make them distinct from the other tribes. The art of carvings, paintings, decorative pieces etc., have a multiple reflect to each society (for instance it reflects the customs, economy, religious peculiarity as well as the way of life of the ethnic group etc.). Such carvings and paintings are found on the household utensils, personal ornamentations and memorial stones. The dance, music and songs have great importance in the social life of Kharams. Folk songs remove their dullness at the time of working and after works; they also sing songs at dormitories and different occasions of the village. Moreover, the dresses of dancers, style and gestures make the Kharam tribe distinct from other tribal communities. The Kharams are good artists and fond of fine arts. It is proved by their skills in weaving with different designs. They are experts not only in weaving but also in embroidery and appliqué works; they produce different kinds of clothes of their own culture. They use different kinds of musical instruments like gong and drum, trumpet, flute, guitar like string instrument, buffalo's horn, a complicated folk instrument called Roshem etc. in festivals and other important occasions of the village. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kharams of Manipur were recognized as scheduled tribe by the Government of India in January 2003(The second schedule, part x, 2003). During the first half of 19th century, Chandrakriti Singh the then king of Manipur recognized the Kharam tribe by issuing a royal decree. Racially, they are Mongoloid (Grierson, 2000). The term *Kharam* mean southerners; (*Kha* means south and *Ram*, southerner). Like other tribes of Manipur, the *Kharam* also trace their origin to a cave. It is believed that the said cave is located somewhere near the *Makhel*, about ten kilometers away from *Oklong* village, Senapati District, Manipur (Dhiren, 2007). Another theory suggests that they came from two regions: Southeast Asia and south west China. According to Gangmumei Kamei, as the Kharam are Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in south West China before 1000 B.C and migrated to eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into Irrawaddy valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and

they returned southward and entered north East India through Manipur river, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present habitat, Manipur (2004). The population of this tribe is found inhabiting in Senapati District in four villages namely, *Kharam Pallen*, *Tampak Kharam*, *Tuisaphai* and *Laikot Phai*. The total population of the tribe is about three thousands according to 2011 census. The present article is a humble attempt to examine the graphic and plastic art of the Kharam tribe.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data of the present article have been collected from available primary and secondary sources and also from field work interviews with village elders and intellectuals of the Kharam community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No serious research based study on the graphic and plastic art of the Kharam Tribe of Manipur has yet been made by any

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scholar by utilizing all the available sources. But some scholars have been brought to light on the subject matter in their respective works. However, still await thorough investigation and treatment within a wide canvas. The graphic and plastic art, found among the Kharam culture make them distinct from the other tribes of Manipur. The art of carvings, paintings, decorative pieces, song, dance, and music etc., reflect the customs, economy, religious peculiarity as well as the life style of the Kharam. An art may be defined from various angles. It may be the product of a stylized kind of human behavior. Thus the search of beauty expressing in the form of art is universal in human experience. It may be found in various forms. For instance, verbal art, stylized art, approaching art, graphic and plastic art and so on (Devi, 2005). Verbal art includes myths, legends, folktales, folklores, proverbs, narratives, word games, poetry, music, naming procedures, complements and insults when it takes elaborate and especial forms (Devi, 2005). Myths are often counted as the most important variety of verbal art. Strictly speaking myths deals with the supernatural beings while legends bear the meaning of semi-historic narratives (i.e. the accounts of the deeds of heroes, the movement of the community or the tribe etc.) which has an exposition of the basic value system of the society. In fact, every tribe has several myths about its origin. In such myths gods and human beings and godlike men lived together in an abnormal world. Likewise among the Kharams we find a myth relating to the origin of the people. Legends bear the meaning of semi-historical narratives that accounts for the deeds of the heroes, the migration of the people and the establishment of local customs, typically with a mixture of realism and supernatural or extraordinary in the society. Moreover, legends are sagas of individual(s) or societies and they are considered to be the real historical accounts. It provides clues as to what constitutes ethical behaviours in a culture. The most of the legends are related with the religious, political, economic, social and extra ordinary activities of the heroes.

Folktale (popular story of a community which is handed down orally from one generation to another) and folklore (study of the traditional beliefs, tales etc., of a community) are mostly imaginative and more entertaining than awe-inspiring (Majumdar and Madan, 1986). Their main function to the society seems to appear to be entertainment. They deal with human situations in which gods, deity, ghosts, heroes and heroines have their due place. Thus folktales and folklores are said to be tribal literature which contains the ideas of the people about the various natural beings and objects. Really speaking man's reaction towards native is clearly shown in the folklores. In this way folklores are also the important means to understand human culture (Majumdar and Madan, 1986). Here our main concern is about the graphic and plastic art of the Kharams. It is very interesting to note the different forms of the Kharam graphic and plastic art. It includes carving and engraving in the wood, stone ivory etc., sculpture in wood, clay modeling and toy making, painting, textile, basketry, personal ornamentation etc. The graphic and plastic art, found among the Kharam culture make them distinct from the other tribes. The art of carvings, paintings, decorative pieces etc., have a multiple reflect to each society (for example it reflects the customs, economy, religious peculiarity as well as the life style of the ethnic group etc.) Such carvings and paintings are found on the household utensils, personal ornamentations and memorial stones. The different art forms that are existed

among the Kharams can be discussed under the following heads:

1. Traditional dance, music and songs
2. Fine arts and
3. Crafts

Traditional dance, music and songs

The dance, music and songs have great importance in the Kharam social life. Folk songs remove their dullness at the time of working and after works; they also sing songs at dormitories and different occasions of the village. Moreover, the dresses of dancers, style and gestures make the Kharam tribe distinct from other tribal communities.

Dance

Folk dances are dances that developed by people that reflect the way of life of the people of a certain country or region (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/.folk-dance>). Among the Kharams, there are different dance forms. Some of the important forms are *Kataar Laam* (Dance for the village elders/*Kataar* members), *Ratha Machum Laam* (Group dance for both sexes, but without any song), *Simlaam* (Group dance with song), *Wailaam* (Group dance with song), *Khonglaam* (Literal meaning is drum dance without song), *Soklaam* (Group dance perform especially while inaugurating a village drum), *Lapi Laam* (Group dance by female singers only) and *Lapu Laam* (Dance for the male singer only). *Lapu Laam* has two sub-types known as *Khochung Laam* (Similar with *Kataar Laam*) and *Marul Laam* (Snake dance).

Kataar Laam

The members of traditional village council (*Kataar*) have their own dance called *Kataar Laam* which cannot be dance by any other dancing group. This type of dancing is performed when a person offers a grand feast in relation to the promotion of his rank to the village council. In Kharam dialect it is called *Pharr-kawai*. The same dance is also performed in other festivals like *Saangkadel* and *Inkahong*. The accompanying musical instruments are the drums and the gongs. While dancing the *Kataar Laam* the village elders sing a song called the *Kataar La*.

Ratham Achum Laam

It is a group dance performed by both sexes. Normally it begins first before the actual festival dances are started. Thus, they called it festival opening dance. The accompanying musical instruments are *roshem* and drum without any song.

Sim Laam

Sim Laam is also a group dance but it is accompanied by songs and music. It is a common dance for all the singers. The *Sim Laam* dance should be performed by the members of *Nungak-rothar* (unmarried youths). Hence, it is performed during *Nungak-rothar* festivals, *Karing Lung-inkam*, *Saangkadel*, *Pham kawai* *Inhong* feasts etc.

Wai Laam

It is a group dance. *Pham kawai* is performed by a man called *Phamtaang*, an individual who is given one of the higher ranks

in the village council. During the Pham kawai feasting, various dances are performed. Of them mention may be made of Katar Laam, Rotha Machum Laam, Simlaam and Wailaam. It is in the fourth series and considered to be the common dance. This dance is accompanied by the songs of Nungak Rothar called Nungak rotharla. It has twenty-one different tunes.

Khong Laam

This type of dance is performed by all the villagers on the day when the village paths or roads and the village gates are repaired. Sometimes this dance is also performed when an individual celebrates *Saangkadel* feasting (a grand feast offered by the individual who collects the highest yield of the year). While dancing the *Khong Laam* dance all the participants are divided into two groups: the male group and the female group. The female group form a circle first and that group is again encircled by the male group (from outside). It is performed on a particular day called *Laamtak chef*. No song is accompanied by this dance form.

Sok Laam

It is a group dance especially performed when a new village drum is inaugurated. The accompanying musical instruments are drums and gongs. The dancers of *Sok Laam* dance should be the members of the *Kalen* and *Lomtaang* group (Sangkham, 2006:241). If the members desire they can perform this dance during the *Saangkadel* and *Inhong* feasts also.

Laapi Laam

This is a special group dance performed by the female singers of the village concerned. No male are allowed to take part or join the dancing party. The dancers performed this dance in a rhythmic way. To keep the regular rhythm they use *Theikhong*.

Lapu Laam

It is the dance for the male singers of the village concerned. This group has performed two different but peculiar types of dances. They are the *Khochung Laam* and *Marul Laam*. They performed these two types of dances on the day of *Lapu* festival only. In such occasions they use drums and gongs as musical instruments. In addition to the above major dances, there are many other dances too. They are the *Bantang Keina Laam*, the *Laamtol Laam* etc.

Musical instruments

There are different kinds of musical instruments like gong (*Darkhong*, *Darbul*, *Suampam* and *Sumlairang*), drum (*Khuong/Khong*), trumpet (*Tampa loueeh*), flute (*Tamploy/Toudree*), guitar like string instrument (*Sarangdar*), buffalo's horn (*Loueeh*), a complicated folk instrument (*Roshem*) etc. All the instruments have cultural value.

Folk songs (La)

The Kharams are famous for their varied dances, music and songs. The dance and folk songs are inseparable items in the life of the Kharam (Sangkham, 2006:243). It may be stated that their social and religious life is incomplete without these dances and songs. They learn these songs in their dormitories.

Some of the important Kharam folk songs are given below along with their different tunes having different names.

Katar La: It is the song for the village elders or members of *Katar*. It is sung in one tune called the *Katarlakei*.

Lapu La: It is also the song for the male singers of the village concerned (married male members). This group sings this song in different four tunes like the *Marual lamm la kei*, the *Walaila kei*, the *Mithila kei* and the *Vonlung la kei*.

Lapi La: It is the song for the Lapi group (the female singers of the village concerned). They are all the married female singers. They sing this song in four different tunes, the *Nukrut la kei*, the *Seloula kei*, the *Lakoinala kei* and the *Indaina la kei*.

Nungak Rothar La: This is the song for the unmarried boys and girls. Like other groups they also sing this song in diligent tunes, the *Tuila kei*, the *Lamla kei*, the *Aakhol la kei* and the *Lapho la kei*.

Inhong Sadel La: It is the song sung at the time while inaugurating a large and especial house of an individual of the village with grand feasting.

Rien La: This song is rarely sung, as it can be sung only when an individual performs a feast of merit called *Rien*. It is one of the most important and expensive feast-of-merit of the Kharams.

Lomtaang La: It is the song of the *Lomtaang* group (constituted by all the male members of the village concerned except the *Katar* members). According to different tunes they used, different names were given to this song. They are the *Khong la kei*, the *Tolshok la kei*, the *Lamtaakchei la kei* and the *Labudok la kei*.

Raalpa La: This is the song for the *Kalen* group. *Kalen* is the youth's dormitory of the Kharam tribe. It is based on its own clan. Thus, there are many *Kalens* in every village and the members of each *Kalen* are unmarried boys/youths.

Inthaar lut La: This song is sung when a new house is inaugurated.

Kathi La: It is a farewell song given to the departed souls of the village concerned or of the tribe as whole.

Remtaang La: It is a solo song of any kind. Such type of song is sung by individual singers.

Ratharoina La: It is a group song of *Rothar* group.

Sempui La: It is named after the musical instrument *Sempui*. It is a variety of *Roshem*. *Sempui* has a louder sound than the other variety called *Semtel*.

Daarkhong La: It is also a song named after the gong made of bell-metal or iron.

Raalngam La: It is the song praising the legendary hero *Raalngam*.

Rawaan Kaset La: It is the song of the unfortunate lovers.

Fine Arts

The Kharams are good artists and fond of fine arts. It is proved by their skills in weaving with different designs. They are experts not only in weaving but also in embroidery and appliqué works. Hence they produce different kinds of clothes of their own culture.

Upper garment for the male

Ponjal: It is an upper garment for unmarried Kharam youth. It is used for day to day life.

Ponjaaldum/Ponjaardum: It is an ordinary upper garment for the Kharam male. It is black in colour. It does not possess any design except a few white stripes (running lengthwise). Even though it is a simple Kharam shawl; it is one of the items demanded as a bride-price called *Mann*.

Ponsenjaar: It is also an upper garment for male. This shawl sticks to one clan only. The *Saichal* clan is the owner of this clothe. They designed this clothe after a tiger. It is also the oldest Kharam shawl. This design resembles the black and yellow stripes of a tiger. This clothe represents the tiger which is believed to have guarded the mouth of the cave and killed whoever come out of it.

Saipuikhup: It is the upper garment for elder or statured persons. It is also an upper garment for men folk. It is black in colour but designed with many colours towards the end (both sides). The design represents the knee of an elephant. Hence the name *Saipuikhup* is given to it. Nowadays, *Saipuikhup* in white colour is also used.

Thompui: According to Kharam folktales, this clothe was designed by a skillful weaver-cum-designer called *Chongnu*. She designs the clothe resembling the crab which brought a piece of the flesh of her deceased husband, *Rulngam*.

Thibusa: Like the *Thompui*, the *Thibusa* is also designed by the same lady *Chongnu* representing a flower of a small plant called *Thibusa*. Thus the plant name is given to this clothe.

Lower garment for male

There are four different types of lower garments for male (Sangkham, 2006:264-65). They are: the *Maskhul puan*, the *Thonpuither*, the *Diar* and the *Koungsuoi/ Kongsuoi*. Most of them are white in colour with red borders (lengthwise stripes). Each lower garment has designs at the two ends.

Upper garments for female

There are only three upper garments for the females. The first one is *Thibusa* (also used by male as described above), the second one is called *Ponlang* and the third one is called *Ponjaaldum*. Unlike the male dresses, the female dresses are designed with multiple colours. The common colours are green, blue, black, pink and white with mixed stripes at the borders. They also designed these clothes especially towards the two ends.

Lower garments for the ladies

There are four lower garments for the Kharam ladies. They are: the *Thibusa ponvel*, the *Kataar ponvel*, the *Thompui*

ponvel and the *Ponsenthui bow ponvel*. Out of these four rape- rounds, three are nicely woven with many designs. The *Thibusa ponvel* is decorated with the patterns of the flower of a small plant called *Thibusa*. Similarly the *Thompui ponvel* - with the crab design and the *Ponsenthui bow ponvel* with the star design. There is also a small clothe used as a belt by the Kharam women. It is called *Rasaje*. It is designed with paddy flower. Thus different clothes are assigned to different clans. It is based on their textile designs.

Crafts

The crafts of the Kharam tribe are comparable with other neighboring tribes of Manipur. It can be clearly seen in personal ornamentation, basketry, carpentry works, carvings and engravings in wood, stone, ivory and conch shells as well as sculptures in wood and clay modeling. Among the personal ornamentation, mention may be made of the *Korbet* (ear ornament), the *Korhai* and the *Raalngam Raka* (neck chains - the first one is smaller than the latter. They are made of semi-precious stones and carnelian beads), the *Kutsabi* and the *Raka* (finger rings), the *Jakser murluk* (armlet for female) and the *Ban real* (armlet for male). The art of wood carving found among the Kharams, are deserved to mention. It starts from the manufacturing of household utensils to the musical instruments and the decoration of the house. So it plays an important role among the crafts of the Kharams. For instance, the craft master carves out the nice bowls, dish, dish-on-stand, large and small mortars and pestles (for pounding rice and for grinding chillies and spices in the kitchen), water collecting and storing containers, shuttle, beating sword, ginning machine, reeling machine, spinning machine, spindle whorls, carved out dwarf benches, statues like the *Porolser* and the *Sepangrang* (representing mithun), the *Takser* (human figure) and the *Maarlaangyor* (human figurine) etc. Moreover, basketry works also play an important role in the Kharam crafts. The skilled craftsman manufactures different types of baskets for different uses. Some baskets are nicely woven and coated with glue so as they can collect and alone any form of liquid (water, rice-beer etc.). Some of the basketry works which deserves especial mention are: transporting baskets (with eye or without eye), dining table of cane and bamboo, *moorah* (stool made out of cane and bamboo), cane chair, basket for keeping clothes, covered baskets for keeping fishes or meat (dry or roasted), large storing baskets, measuring baskets etc.

Conclusion

To conclude, the graphic and plastic art, found among the Kharam culture make them distinct from the other tribes of Manipur. The art of carvings, paintings, decorative pieces, song, dance, and music etc., reflect the customs, economy, religious peculiarity as well as the life style of the Kharam. Such carvings and paintings are found on the household utensils, personal ornamentations and memorial stones. With the coming of Christianity in the Kharam society, they have given up the traditional way of life and adopted the western culture. It is right time for all of us to protect and preserve the rich cultural heritage of our forefathers

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