

Synopsis of the Proposal
Tracing and Documenting the *Rongkhli* of the War-Jaintias Of Meghalaya

a) Introduction

Khasi is a nomenclature used to refer to the sub-tribes of the *Hynniew Trep*¹ community living in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The sub-tribes consist of the *Khynriam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*² and the *Lyngngam*. The War-Jaintias lives on the slopes of the west Jaintia hills district bordering Bangladesh. Like all other sub-tribes of the Khasis, the War-Jaintias too believe that they came to this earth from the sky through a golden ladder that was located once upon a time at the top of *Sohpetbneng*³ mountain in the northern part of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Today, the War-Jaintias are also found in the Barak valley of Assam as well as the Sylhet district of Bangladesh.

Rongkhli

The War-Jaintias have a very rich repository of intangible cultural heritage and this heritage are passed on from one generation to another orally. Many genres of their oral tradition have been totally forgotten or are on the verge of being forgotten altogether. Nongtalang village host the *Rongkhli*⁴ or ‘Tiger Festival’ from time to time, and the most recent one was in the year 2012. No one truly knows when or how it started. The tradition has it that whenever any person from the village catches a tiger or its feline like, rituals has to be performed. The Dorbar⁵ is then summoned by the Chief of the village and a date is decided for the Festival. A month prior to the festival the village drummers starts drumming in preparation of the festival. The most important aspect of this festival is the combination of belief, tale, ritual and performance which is significant in many ways.

When a tiger or its feline like is killed, the cadaver is kept on the outskirts of the village till necessary rituals are carried performed. The ushering in of the tiger’s cadaver to the village is the beginning of the festival. The villagers marched to where the tiger’s cadaver is kept and brings it to the village dancing to the tune of drums and *tangmuri*⁶ sound. On the first night, the man dances till dawn to keep the tiger company. On the second evening, the ladies of the village dances to the sound of the drums and tangmuri till the next morning. The third and the last day of the festival is a great show of performance as well as rituals. Men of the village dressed in warrior attire gathers in their respective localities. They then move to the Rymmusan ground with beating of drums and tangmuri. Here they dance to the beats of the drums and tangmuri sound. The dancers give the finality of the ceremony by performing the warrior dance. Thereafter the multitude moves to the westernmost part of the village for the final ritual of the festival where the head of the tiger’s head is decapitated and the severed head is spiked and erected at the

¹ Meaning the seven huts, in the local language

² Refers to the War- Jaintias

³ Meaning the ‘Sky’s navel’

⁴ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning ‘tiger festival’.

⁵ The village council

⁶ A musical instrument

place to ward off evil spirit. If the day belongs to the male dancers, the night belongs to the female dancers. The festival concludes with the dancing by the woman folk well into the night.

b) Objective

Documentation of folklore today in the form of writing, photography, films and others play a crucial role in preserving folk knowledge especially those that are on the verge of extinction. The War-Jaintias have the Rongkhli festival which have not been documented. This intangible heritage is slowly facing extinction. Therefore the objectives of this proposal are;

1. To document the *Rongkhli* tradition in print and digital medium
2. To showcase the rich intangible cultural heritage through visual

c) Implementation

The research is carried out in my individual capacity

d) Timeframe

The timeframe for carrying out the project for duration of 12 months

e) Specific Area of the state where art(s) is practice; geographical, typological etc.

The project is located at Nongtalang village, West Jaintia Hills district, Meghalaya

f) Photos (Preliminary Level)

Photos will accompany the final write-up report of the project

g) Conclusion of the Project as you have envisioned

The project could not take off as planned. There is certain fear and uncomfortability to speak about the festival amongst the local populace for some unknown reason. Refinement to the write-up will be done subsequently. The project will see its end to the benefit of the locals as envisioned by the researcher.



Scheme for “Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”

Form for National Inventory Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India

A. Name of the State
MEGHALAYA

B. Name of the Element/Cultural Tradition (in English)
TRACING AND DOCUMENTING THE *RONGKHLI* OF THE WAR-JAINTIAS OF MEGHALAYA

B.1. Name of the element in the language and script of the community
Concerned, if applicable
RONG KHLI / ROMAN SCRIPT

C. Name of the communities, groups or, if applicable, individuals concerned
(Identify clearly either of these concerned with the practice of the said element/cultural tradition)
THE WAR-JAINTIAS

D. Geographical location and range of the element/cultural tradition (Please write about the other states in which the said element/tradition is present)
WEST JAINTIA HILLS DISTRICT OF MEGHALAYA - NONE

E. Identification and definition of the element/cultural tradition of the India

(Write “Yes” in one or more boxes to identify the domain(s) of intangible cultural heritage manifested by the element. If you tick ‘others’, specify the domain(s) in brackets.)

- i. (YES) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- ii. (YES) performing arts
- iii. (YES) social practices, rituals and festive events
- iv. (YES) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- v. () traditional craftsmanship
- vi. other(s) ()

- F. Provide a brief summary description of the element that can introduce it to readers who have never seen or experienced it

NONGTALANG VILLAGE HOST THE *RONGKHLI*¹ OR 'TIGER FESTIVAL' FROM TIME TO TIME, AND THE MOST RECENT ONE WAS IN THE YEAR 2012. NO ONE TRULY KNOWS WHEN OR HOW IT STARTED. THE TRADITION HAS IT THAT WHENEVER ANY PERSON FROM THE VILLAGE CATCHES A TIGER OR ITS FELINE LIKE, RITUALS HAS TO BE PERFORMED. THE DORBAR² IS THEN SUMMONED BY THE CHIEF OF THE VILLAGE AND A DATE IS DECIDED FOR THE FESTIVAL. A MONTH PRIOR TO THE FESTIVAL THE VILLAGE DRUMMERS STARTS DRUMMING IN PREPARATION OF THE FESTIVAL. THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THIS FESTIVAL IS THE COMBINATION OF BELIEF, TALE, RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE WHICH IS SIGNIFICANT IN MANY WAYS.

- G. Who are the bearers and practitioners of the element/Cultural Traditions? Are there any specific roles or categories of persons with special responsibilities for the practice and transmission of it? If yes, who are they and what are their responsibilities?

THE VILLAGE. THE CLANS THAT KILLS THE TIGER OR ITS FELINE LIKE. THE LYNGDOH – THE CHIEF OF THE VILLAGE CONVENS THE MEETING FOR THE CELEBRATION WHEN INFORMED OF THE KILL.

- H. How are the knowledge and skills related to the element transmitted today?

THROUGH ORAL TRADITION. IT IS A BELIEF THE PEOPLE HAVE WHICH IS CONNECTED TO THEIR INDIGENOUS FAITH

¹ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning 'tiger festival'.

² The village council

- I. What social functions and cultural meanings do the element/cultural tradition have today for its community?

IN ITS CELEBRATION AND OBSERVANCE IT UNIFIES THE PEOPLE OF THE VILLAGE. THE AGE OLD BELIEF AND CULTURAL PRACTICE IS REVIVED

- J. Is there any part of the element that is not compatible with existing international human rights instruments or with the requirement of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, or with sustainable development? I.e. describe any aspect of the element/cultural tradition that may be unacceptable to Law of the country or may be in opposition to practicing community's harmony with others.

IT MAY BE UNACCEPTABLE TO LAW OF THE COUNTRY AS TIGER IS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES; AT THE SAMETIME ONE HAS TO CONSIDER THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF THE FESTIVAL.

- K. Your Project's contribution to ensuring visibility, awareness and encouraging dialogue related to the element/cultural tradition

THE DOCUMENTATION WILL ALLOW VISIBILITY AND THE RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE'S BELIEF. CREATE AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ANIMAL CONCERN.

- L. Information about the safeguarding measures that may protect or promote the element/cultural tradition

THERE ARE NO SAFEGUARDING MEASURES UNDERTAKEN AS OF NOW. AND ON THE CONTRARY A COURT CASE WAS FILED AGAINST THE VILLAGE FOR OBSERVING THIS RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL.

- a. (Write "Yes" in one or more boxes to identify the safeguarding measures that have been and are currently being taken by the communities, groups or individuals concerned)

NONE

- i. () transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education
- ii. () identification, documentation, research
- iii. () preservation, protection
- iv. () promotion, enhancement
- v. () revitalization

- b. Write about the measures taken at local, state and national level by the Authorities to safeguard the element/cultural tradition?

NONE

- M. Write about the threats, if any, to the element/cultural tradition related to its practice, visibility and future longevity. Give facts and relevant reasons based on the current scenario.

THE COURT CASE IS A THREAT OR DETERRENT TO THE CULTURAL PRACTICE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OF THE PEOPLE

- N. Safeguarding measures proposed

(This section should identify and describe safeguarding measures to protect and promote the element/cultural tradition. Such measures should be concrete and can be implemented to formulate future cultural policy for safeguarding and promoting the element/cultural tradition in the state)

EXPOSITION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICE OF THE RONGKHLI INTO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN COULD CREATE BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE FESTIVAL. AWARENESS CAMPAIGN BOTH FOR THE FESTIVAL AND THE ANIMAL CONCERN WOULD GO A LONG WAY IN PRESERVING BOTH.

- O. Community Participation

(Write about the participation of communities, groups and individuals related to the element/cultural tradition in formulation of your project)

INDIVIDUAL EFFORT

- P. Concerned community organization(s) or representative(s)

(Provide detailed contact information for each community organization or representative or other non-governmental organization that is concerned with the element such as associations, organizations, clubs, guilds, steering committees, etc.)

NONE, [THERE IS CERTAIN FEAR AND UNCOMFORTABILITY IN THE PEOPLE (FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASONS) TO SPEAK ON THIS PARTICULAR SUBJECT AND NO ONE IS FORTH COMING]

- i. Name of the entity
- ii. Name and title of the contact person
- iii. Address
- iv. Telephone number
- v. E-mail
- vi. Other relevant information

Q. Give information of any Inventory, database or data creation centre (local/state/national) that you may be aware of or of any office, agency, organisation or body involved in the maintenance of the said inventory etc.
NONE

R. Principal published references or documentation available on the element/cultural tradition
(Books, articles, audio-visual materials, names and addresses of reference libraries, museums, private endeavours of artistes/individuals for preservation of the said element, publications or websites)

A FEW WRITE-UPS, A FEW ACCADEMIC WORK IN NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG MEGHALAYA AND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Signature:

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Tracing the Rongkhli

Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage accounting and evidence of past events becomes part of the lore of the folks and they are genres like myths, legends, tales, folksongs and other knowledgeable trades and knowhow. These genres are passed down from generation to generation over time by word of mouth. The genres of Intangible Cultural Heritage and artistic expression of the folk is never static but keeps on changing with the passage of time. Oral traditions embedded with cultural traits of the society are handed down from one generation to generation and this process still goes on in the present time. Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social and religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of the contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

The War Jaintias

Khasi is a nomenclature used to refer to the sub-tribes of the *Hynniew Trep*¹ community living in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The sub-tribes consist of the *Khyntiam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*² and the *Lynggam*. To them festivals and dances are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivity. During these occasions, ceremonies, rites and rituals are performed which shows that the people are deeply religious. They pray to God for general well being, blessings, peace, and prosperity and thank him for the blessings he has showered upon them. It is also during these festivals that they meet friends and relatives alike from far and near.

The War-Jaintias lives on the slopes of the west Jaintia hills district bordering Bangladesh. Like all other sub-tribes of the Khasis, the War-Jaintias too believe that they came to this earth from the sky through a golden ladder that was located at one point of time at *Sohpetbneng*³ mountain top in the northern part of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Today, the War-Jaintias are found in the Barak valley of Assam as well as the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The War-Jaintias apart from being a sub tribe of Khasi have a distinct dialect⁴ that is neither intelligible to the Pnars or the Khasis.

Nongtalang Village

Nongtalang is the biggest village amongst the War-Jaintias. Nongtalang means the village of Talang', a female named Iawbei who may be the ancestral mother of the Talang clan who were the earliest settlers. Legend has it that the First Settlers of Nongtalang village was Shitang Rymbai and his wife, a lady from the Talang clan. Before the people settled in the present village of Nongtalang, the people originally lived at a village named Amtapoh. They left Amtapoh due to many reasons and one was the inadequate and infertile agricultural lands. The first clan that came and settled at Nongtalang village was the Lyngdoh clan and the

¹ Meaning the seven huts, in the local language

² Refers to the War- Jaintias

³ Meaning the 'Sky's navel'

⁴ Called War-dialect

Talang clan. The present village of Nongtalang derived its name from the Talang. It was also believed that religion and administrative system of the village started under the Talang. Those who came to settle at Nongtalang along with the Rymbai clan of Shitang and the Talang were the Pohsnem (Lamin in Nongtalang), Myrchiang, Bareh and Pohti. They were the earliest settlers of the village and were known as the *San Thwui Hynriew kur*.

Nongtalang Village, which has a population of not less than 10000 according to the 2001 census, is predominantly Niamtynrai or Niamchnong (traditional religion) population. The Niamtynrai cremate the dead at a sacred place in the forest, and then the ash and bones are collected and kept in pots and sealed tightly. The pot is then kept in an ossuary or locally known as *Mawbah*. There are as many ossuaries as there are clans and each clan has to keep the ash and bone of the dead in their respective ossuary. If the dead person is a male then a white cloth is tied around the ossuary and the items used by the dead are kept on the side of the ossuary. However if it is a female, then umbrellas are kept opened and tied on top of the ossuary, along with some kitchen wares that are kept at the side. A plate of food, a glass of water and betel nut and betel leaves is kept on the side of the ossuary.

The Village

The village administration is run by a *Dorbar* or an assembly, which is quite different from other village *Dorbars* of the *Khasi*. The village *Dorbar* in Nongtalang is known as *ka Dorbar Manniew* where *Manniew* means uncle. Hence *ka Dorbar Manniew* means the *Dorbar* of the uncles. The *Dorbar* consists of the elderly uncles from the twelve *kur* or clans and these clans are *Lyngdoh*, *Pohsnem*, *Pohrmen*, *Padu*, *Myrchiang*, *Pohlynniar*, *pohchen*, *Bareh*, *Pna-Lamare*, *Mohrmen*, *Pohlong* and *Pohti*. The three important persons in the *Dorbar Manniew* are *u Lyngdoh* for religious priest; he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan, and performs religious rites and ceremonies and also has religious functions. *U Lyngdoh Korbar* or secular priest is yet another important person wherein he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan. His function is related to administrative matters and he has to convene and preside over the village *Dorbar*. Another important person is the village Secretary and he must be a literate person to keep pace with the need and change of time and to document everything into writing. The village secretary can be chosen from the other clans and holds a respectable position. Besides these important people, there is a *Maji* or secretary *u Sangot* or an announcer and other elders. Besides the *Dorbar Manniew*, there is also a *Dorbar Chnong* or village council, who runs the whole administration of the village. Adult male members are allowed to participate in this *Dorbar* and it is the *Lyngdoh Korbar*, who presides over the *Dorbar*. The *Lyngdoh's* and *Doloi's* position is passed down within the family members since generation. The people of Nongtalang have many festivals, *Rongkhli*, *Rong Beh Lyngkan*, *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Phur* but some of these festivals are not observed regularly, due to some social change.

Rongkhli / Tiger Festival

The War-Jaintias have a very rich repository of intangible cultural heritage and these heritages are orally passed on from one generation to another. Many genres of their oral tradition have been totally forgotten or are on the verge of being forgotten altogether. One

important festival is the *Rongkhli* which is the subject of our research. It is observed at Nongtalang village when a tiger or its feline like is killed by the residents of the village. In whatever manner the tiger is killed, the goddess of the village is to be worshipped and the festival to be observed. It is believed that if the goddess is not worshipped, calamities and misfortunes like epidemic diseases, starvation, and blindness will befall on the people. The festival is usually held between the months of January - March after the harvesting work is over. Nongtalang village host the *Rongkhli*⁵ or 'Tiger Festival' from time to time, and the most recent one was in the year 2012. How the festival started is the question that answer is inadequate or vague wherever the answer is. The tradition has it that whenever any person from the village catches a tiger or its feline like, rituals has to be performed. The Dorbar⁶ is then summoned by the Chief of the village and a date is decided for the Festival. A month prior to the festival the village drummers starts drumming in preparation of the festival. The most important aspect of this festival is the combination of belief, tale, ritual and performance which is significant in many ways.

Rongkhli is a religious festival celebrated by the people of Nongtalang village in the War-Jaintia region of Meghalaya. According to the oral tradition, the people of Nongtalang worship two goddesses namely; Ka *Pyrtuh* and Ka *Kapong*. Ka *Kapong* demanded from the people that they should offer to her sacrifices in the form of wild animals. But Ka *Pyrtuh* demanded sacrifices in the form of the tiger or any other of the feline family.

The two goddesses are believed to be the guardian goddesses of the people of Nongtalang. In every household of the people of Nongtalang who still follow the indigenous faith called Ka *Niam Chnong*, two wooden pillars are kept, one of which is kept as a symbol of Ka *Kpong*. In this pillar the horns of the wild animals killed by the members of the household is attached to the wooden pillar. Another pillar is kept inside the house; this pillar is for the goddess Ka *Pyrtuh*. At this pillar the family members offer their prayers to the goddess who is their guardian and who guard and protect them from all dangers, sickness and misfortunes.

The goddess, it is believed that whenever the goddess Ka *Pyrtuh* wants the people to offer her rituals and sacrifices, she would guide and help them get the feline. The festival is a very expensive and elaborate one so people always try to avoid killing the tiger and the like intentionally. When a tiger is killed by the member of the village, whether accidentally or intentionally, the clan to which the member who killed the feline have to organise the festival *Rongkhli*. But since the festival involves lots of expenses people cannot afford to organise the festival immediately. Sometimes it may take even years and even decades to for the clan to afford to organise this festival. In such cases they have to wait till they have enough resources to organise the festival in honour of the Ka *Pyrtuh*. So the clan has to pray and beg the goddess to let them hold the festival whenever they could afford. But if the clan members forget to host the festival the goddess would remind them about their promise in the form of sickness, especially eyesore which could at times lead to blindness if they do not pay heed to

⁵ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning 'tiger festival'.

⁶ The village council

the goddess's warnings. There are instances where the goddess reminded the particular clan about their duty to perform the Rongkhli festival in her honour even after many decades. One such incident happened in the year 2011-12 where one person from the Lyngdoh clan suddenly developed eyesore. He was taken to the doctors but they could not diagnose his problem, but when the clan performed a divination it was revealed that some decades back the clan members had killed a feline but since they could not afford to organise the festival in honour of the goddess Ka Pyrtuh, they promise to do so later. But they could not fulfill the promise, so in the year 2011-12 they whole clan decided to hold the Rongkhli festival in honour of Ka Pyrtuh. The next day after they decided to hold the festival, a feline was trapped just on the outskirts of the village. So the people believed that their goddess gave them the feline so that the people could offer their prayers and offer sacrifices to Ka Pyrtuh.

The covenant between the goddess Ka Pyrtuh and the people of Nongtalang was that when they offer the feline to her as a sacrifice they should do so by celebrating along with music and dance. So, this is how the Rongkhli or the Tiger festival came into existence.

**there are some rituals that are performed during the Rongkhli or the Tiger festival.

The Celebration

Once a tiger or its feline like is killed, the cadaver is kept on the outskirts of the village till necessary rituals are carried out. The ushering in of the tiger's cadaver to the village is the beginning of the festival. The villagers marched to where the tiger's cadaver is kept and bring it to the village dancing to the tune of drums and *tangmuri*⁷ sound. On the first night, the man dances till dawn to keep the tiger company. On the second evening of the festival, the ladies and damsels of the village dance to the accompaniment of the drums and tangmuri sound till the next morning. The third and the last day of the festival is a great show of performance as well as rituals. Men of the village dressed in fine traditional warrior attire gather at their respective localities. They then move to the *Rymmusan* ground amidst beating of drums and tangmuri sound. Here they dance to the beats of the drums and tangmuri sound. The dancers give the finality of the ceremony by performing the warrior dance once again. Thereafter the multitude moves to the westernmost part of the village for the final ritual of the festival where the head of the tiger's head is decapitated. Then the severed head is spiked and erected at the place to ward off evil spirit. If the day belongs to the male dancers, the night belongs to the female dancers. The festival concludes with the dancing by the woman folk well into the night.

Rongkhli is the most important festival which is performed in Nongtalang village of the War Jaintias. Rong means festival and Khli means tiger, in the local dialect, hence Rongkhli means Tiger Festival. Rongkhli festival is not a regular festival but held when a tiger is killed accidentally or otherwise on an organized hunting by the villagers. In whatever manner a tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped, or else certain calamities like epidemics, diseases ill luck will befall on the people. However if a tiger enters the village in search of a prey, the

⁷ A musical instrument

tiger is killed and a festival is performed with worshipping God. Certain rituals have to be performed to appease the *Kpong* the hunting deity, which in fact is the beginning of the Religious part of the Festival.

STAGES OF RONGKHLI FESTIVAL

When a particular clan goes hunting, other clans are also invited to join them. But in case a man who does not belong to that particular clan organizing the hunt, happened to kill the tiger, the man's clan will not perform the ceremony, mainly that the organizing clan has taken the responsibility of performing the festival. As a sign of good gestures one who kills the tiger will get one turban on the day of the festival. If someone from the particular clan killed the animal, it is considered to be a good omen for the clan. The clan who kills the tiger is given the right to hold the festival and perform the ceremony. For example if a man belonging to the *Bareh* clan kills the tiger, then the *Bareh* clan performs the needed ceremony and the festival is called as *ka Rong u Bareh* or the festival of the *Bareh* clan. But even when the particular clan performs the sacrifices the whole village participates and is involved in the festival.

The festival is mainly held in the month of January to March, mainly in the dry months. After the tiger is killed, it was kept in the outskirts of the village till the required rituals are completed. After killing is made by the particular clan, the *Lyngdoh* or religious priest is informed, and when the *Lyngdoh* and the *Dorbar Manniew* agreed, the clan can perform the festival, they also have to inform the day for holding the festival. Usually a two month time is given by the *Lyngdoh*, and if there is any delay then the clan has to pay a fine. If for some inevitable situation, the clan cannot perform the festival, are given the chance to perform it later but by any means they have to perform the sacrifice else the clan would suffer and go through certain calamities and hardships. The tradition is that one month before the festival begins, the village drummers as a part of preparation for the coming of the Festival beat their drums in the whole village for a month together. The expenditure of the festival is mainly incurred by the particular clan with some amount contributed by the *Dorbar*.

Before the festival start, the organizing clan performs certain rituals and sacrifices. The sacrificial rites are performed with a belief to inform God of the festival. The tiger's body is mainly kept outside the village in the "*Phlong*" or village gate with its intestine taken out and dried up. There are two village gates, in the east and west. Before the tiger is brought into the village, men dance about with the accompaniment of the drums and pipes. However on that day, the men are not in their traditional attire. The dance is performed in three areas *Mihngi* or the East, *sepmgi* or west and *Phytlaw u Lyngdoh* or the priests, area. The Rongkhli festival is a three day festival where it started with the entering of the tiger or clouded leopard in the village. Then it is followed with the dance which is mainly started by the men on the *sngi Pynrung Khla* or the day that the tiger is brought in the village, men and women carry a twig with leaves of any plant with them. They move in a procession mainly with the *Lyngdoh* and *Myntris* in their traditional attire, along with the uncle of the organizing clan lead the way followed by the people. However women were not allowed to walk in front or beside the

Lyngdoh and, *Myntris*. The girls are dressed mainly in their traditional attire. The animal is mainly brought in the evening but in the day time, dance is performed with the playing of drums and pipes when the tiger is brought, the people cheered with the beating of the drums. The people dance along the way swaying the twig or a plant or banana leaf and a bamboo stick which they hold. The tiger leopard is tied on bamboo sticks and brought to the priest's vicinity which serves as the dancing ground in Nongtalang *chnong*. The tiger is kept in a special place with fire burning underneath. The men then dance throughout the night with the beating of the drums and playing the pipes, and drinking of *kyiad lieh* or local liquor stored on bamboo poles which is passed from one dancer to another. The liquor is taken as it is part of the ritual.

On the first day and second day of the festival, the *shad Kylvum* or the dance where anyone could join is performed. But the "*Pastiah* or *shad Mastieh*, only the people belonging to the clan who are on the list could perform. The *Shad Mastieh* is performed on the last day of the festival. In the early morning, the people leave the dancing ground and go to the elder uncle's house of the organizing clan where certain rite and rituals are performed. The uncle then pour libations and the *Lyngdoh* along with the elders of the *Dorbar Manniew* pray for the well being of the people' good health, general prosperity, good harvest and protection from evil and they also prayed to their ancestors with the religious ceremonies completed, male dance is performed where they performed it in front of the elder uncle's house. *Ka Niam Chai Wat* is first performed which is followed by *Ka Mastieh*. In this dance, people from the organising clan would perform first and followed with the dance performed by the person who killed the tiger or the clouded leopard, with his elder uncle. The dance performed by the elder uncle with the *Lyngdoh* or anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan, then follows. *Mastieh jong Kur* or the dance of different clans is then performed wherein they dance two by two with dancers from different clan and not the same clan. The dance is performed by a *Rymbui* clan and *pohti*, *Pohsnem* and *Myrchiang*, *Bareh* and *Padu*, *Paduna* and *Pohrmen*, *Pohlynniar* and *Manar*, *Pohlong* and *Pna*, *Pohing* and anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan.

When the dance is completed, then they moved towards the *Lyngdoh*'s house, to show respect where certain rite and rituals are performed with due solemnity. After this, a dance is performed which is similar to the dance at the elder uncle's house. The *Lyngdoh* would dance first with someone from the organising clan. Then it is followed up by the dancers from the different clan.

In the evening, it is mainly performed by young girls and women as well. In the *Rongkhli* dance, there are no barriers which are prevalent in the other dances of the Khasi. A married woman can participate in the *Rongkhli* dance which makes it unique. Clad in their traditional attire, the men perform in the morning till evening whereas the women perform in the evening till early morning. The dancer's step show is quite amusing where instead of the slow movement; there is a fast movement of the body. The girls stand on their toes and move swiftly within the dancing ground which is in circle shape and turn sideways or moved about in circle. The musicians are seated on a made platform within the dancing ground. What seems more alluring is the tradition of clipping or pinning of money to a particular dancer,

mainly with the belief that they would perform better or keep performing or are best performers. When tired, the dancers rest for a while and perform again. Kids are either in traditional attire or in civil dress. A water boy is also present; who moves about the dancing round, whose duty is to provide drinking water for the dancers. The dance is performed accordingly to each clan as direction, wherein if a *Bareh* clan performs in the *Sepngi* or the West, then *Lyngdoh* have to perform in the *Mihngi* side or the East.

In the early morning of the third day, male dancers then perform in their traditional attire, moving about in a fast pace. Like the male dancers of *Nongkrern* dance and *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, the male dancers from Nongtalang employ the same body movement and moving about in circles but in a much fast movement. The male dancers do *kynhoi* or shout and also use phawar or use rhymes or couplet while dancing. The sword is mainly held in the right side which is not moved about while dancing. However in the left hand they carry the fly flab or whisk or *Symphiah* which is tremendously moved about. Like pinning of money by well wishers is done to the female dancers, pinning of money is also done to male dancers. The money is a token of love and affection and a sign of appreciation for a wonderful performance

In the afternoon, the people, the dancers, priests and minister, clan moved from the *Nongtalang Chnong* to *Amlariang*. The tiger is also taken to *Amlariang*, wherein the male dancers particularly the elderly men, performs. The rituals are then performed by the priest who chants and offers prayers. After this, the tiger's head is then cut off from its body and placed on a pole where it is erected on the edge of the *Mawphlong* in *Amlariang* but the carcass is kept beneath the monolith. However the tiger's meat which has been dried is cut into pieces is thrown by the priest while standing near the monolith. The meat is thrown to a throng of men waiting at the slightly lower part of the hill, and then they collect the pieces of the meat. In the same place, these men light up a small fire to roast the collected meat so that it is consumable. Meat is not allowed to be taken into the interior parts of the village and hence it is consumed as soon as they are collected. Although the women are also allowed to participate in consumption process yet the women folk have refrained from taking part as they do not want to compete against the men. However it has been noted that the organising clan is not allowed to consume the meat of the tiger. If during the last festival the tiger's body is placed in the east gate, in the next festival it will be placed in the west gate. Here the religious ceremonies come to an end and each leave for their respective houses.

DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

The attire is what grabs the attention of the spectators, besides its dance movement. Like the attire of the dancers of *Nongkrem* and *Laho* dance, the attire of Rongkhli dancers are equally rich and vibrant, though the attires are not alike. The female dancers wear a white or red long sleeve blouse or *sopti kti*, a skirt or *sopti poh*, and *dhara* is a silk cloth which is worn by pinning it on the left and right side of the shoulder and covering the leg. The *dhara* is a Khasi traditional material which is woven from costly silk raw materials. The *dhara* worn by the women are of different colours and varied motifs. A *Jaintawah* or small shawl is then pinned on the shoulders and tied at the back. Silk ribbons of countless colours are also tied on the

back of the dancers where it is symbolic of the colourful festival. The dancers wear their shoes or slippers while dancing because of the fast movement of the dance, while a few dance bare feet.

Gold and coral bead necklaces in different design and size are put on by the women to adorn themselves. *Khodu* or gold bracelets are worn on the wrist. *Sharyndang* is worn on the neck which is made from gold. However some of the dancers replace *Sharyndang* with a lace cloth of golden colour or white colour. Unlike the *Nongkrem* dancers, the women do not wear a crown on their head but instead stick a bunch of artificial flowers made from paper or present paper. The hair is mainly tied up in a bun. Money is generally pinned on the back side of the dancers while dancing. Pinning of money was not practiced in the past but introduced recently.

Men however do not wear a dhoti but is more like a long skirt which they call it as *Phrok*. The skirt is of white colour with borders which is present in many colours. A white long sleeve shirt is worn where a shawl and a ribbon is then worn on either side and is pinned at the waist. *Ka Waitlam* or sword is held on the right hand where a sword is symbolic of *beh ksuid beh khrei* or driving the devil and evil spirits away. *U Symphiah* or whisk and at times a handkerchief is hold on the left hand, *u Symphiah* mainly represent happiness. A *Spong* or a turban of different colour is worn as a head gear with the *Tdong Tyrlong* or tail feather of a forest bird, is stuck on the turban. However *tdong tyrlong* is also substituted with rooster's feathers as well. Gold and coral beads necklace is worn from the left side of the shoulder to the right side of the waist. The men like the women, also wear their shoes while dancing.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Music is food for the soul. For any festival and occasion music is part of it and the absence of music is the nonexistence of dance. Since time immemorial, Khasis have used the self made musical instrument, that with time the instruments have increased and played. In Rongkhli dance, *ka Ksing Thab* or drums is played along with the *Bhuri* or *Tangmuri* which is a pipe wind instrument. A *Padiah* or bamboo pole is another musical instrument where the sound is produced merely by beating the bamboo with two sticks. The drums and the pipe have *san sur* or five tunes. *Padiah* is played only on the first and second day of the festival. *Ka Ksing thab* is not beaten by drum sticks, but by the use of the hand. However for the *shad mastieh bom* is beaten by the drum sticks.

Ka ksing is made by hollowing out from a big tree and the rim is covered by an animal skin mainly cow's skin, and are in 'u' shape. The drums are played by beating with two sticks. Drums not only provide the beat for the festival, they are used to invite, people to the event-*Ksing Shak Kusi* is mainly beaten during the non-ritual dance. *Padiah* gives rhythmical accent in giving balanced accentuation to a tune played with other instruments. *Tangmuri* is made out of the *japung* reed. The *tangmuri* is considered as the queen of musical instruments. The tunes fluctuate from low to a high pitch, clear and distinct, as the fingers of the musician deftly shift along the seven holes of the bamboo pipe, attached at one end to a circular horn. *Tangmuri* has a coarse and penetrating effect and is played to the accompaniment of drum-

beats during the dance. The musicians are seated at the centre of the dancing ground on a man-made platform, where they play their instruments accordingly. The musicians have the ability to play the instruments mainly by observing the elder musicians and at the same time which is passed down through word of mouth and the skill that is imparted on them. After the permission was passed to hold the festival, the Lyngdoh hands over the drums which are used only during the festival. The dancers mainly depend on the music being played. The role of the musical instruments is demonstrative which leaves its natural and spontaneous effect.

CONCLUSION

Although the Tiger Festival is being organized by a particular clan, yet the people in the village as a whole take part. People from the neighboring villages also come to take part in the dance and Tangmuri competition. Competitors from the different villages come to compete and prizes which are always in terms of cash, are given to the winners and even the losers. The judges are selected from the elderly persons who are considered knowledgeable persons of the arts and their decision is final. The Tiger Festival is important because it is in this kind of festival that both religious and cultural activities are combined together. The last ceremony of the festival is the sacrifice, which is known as Rongchyndi-Rong Khli, which is held after the festival. It is a concluding ceremony where a goat, two hens, a dove and bananas are offered.

Rongkhli festival is an age old and yet a controversial tribal festival where the sacrifice of a leopard is for the well-being of the villagers. It is interesting to note that though the festival has to do with killing a tiger and that may not be music to the ears of the environmentalist and the Animals right protection group. However the Government of Meghalaya has banned the people from celebrating Rongkhli festival frequently but at the same time was given the right to celebrate it once in three years. Everson Lyngdoh is of the opinion that the festival is needed to be celebrated as it is a *Jingiateh Jutang* or bond between man and the tiger. Though the people realized the threat to the clouded Leopard, however the people are hesitant of replacing the tiger with domesticated animals or other wild animals. For some people, Rongkhli festival is much a barbaric ritual, and the sight of the festival can strike terror in the stoutest hearts. For others the Tiger festival is the so-called festival but yet is another example of not-so-humane ritual where the joy is going to be short lived. Some have resented the festival mainly that the tiger is an endangered animal and they suggested that replicas of the clouded Leopard can be used for the festival so that it can save this amazing species from extinction. The Department of wild Life Conservation should take note of this matter and find out a creative solution before one reach an ecological crisis. Illegal poaching in our state is widely prevalent even though the Government has passed many laws preventing the killing of wildlife species. Many villagers possess illegal, unlicensed guns used for killing and poaching animals. The implementation of these laws is dismal. The survival of an entire cultural group depends on it and its components.

It is to be noted that when the tiger was brought within the village, the people carried twigs of leaves and banana leaf and also made crowns out of the plant and wore it, it was purely a

magnificent sight where it seems that the jungle came out alive and was welcoming the mighty beast.

Note; A woman however cannot set foot on the *Mawphlong* where on the last day the tiger's head is erected at *Mawphlong* in *Amlariang*. A belief was that if a woman set foot she will never be able to conceive because the *Mawphlong* is a sanctified monolith.

Submission of the Report on the Scheme for
“Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and
Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”

Topic: “Tracing and Documenting the Rongkhli of
the War-Jaintias of Meghalaya”

Title: “Tracing the Rongkhli”

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TRACING THE RONGKHLI

Introduction: Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage accounting and evidence of past events becomes part of the lore of the folks and they are genres like myths, legends, tales, folksongs, traditional knowledge and other knowledgeable trades and knowhow. These genres are passed on from generation to generation over time by word of mouth. The genres of Intangible Cultural Heritage and artistic expression of the folk is never static but keeps on changing with the passage of time. Oral traditions embedded with cultural traits of the community are handed down from one generation to another generation and this process still goes on in the present time. Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social and religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of the contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

Demographic and Cultural Profile of the War-Jaintias

Meghalaya, also known as the abode of cloud is one of the seven sister states in North-East India. It was carved out of Assam in 1972. Its capital, Shillong, is known for its scenic beauty and labeled the name 'Scotland of the East' by the colonial powers since the pre Independence era. The state of Meghalaya is the homeland of the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos, the three dominant communities of the state. Khasi is a nomenclature used to refer to the sub-tribes of the *Hynniew Trep*¹ community living in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The sub-tribes consist of the *Khynriam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*² and the *Lynggam*.

Meghalaya is a hilly region and is well-known for its picturesque landscapes and natural beauty. Rivers like *Umiyam Mawphlang*, *Umngot*, *Kynshi*, *Lukha*, *Myntdu*, *Prang* and others from the Khasi and Jaintia hills flow into Bangladesh. The Jaintias inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya which is generally known as Khasi and Jaintia hills. Overall Jaintia hills experience a moderate climate except for the sub-montane region in the north and the foothills in the south that experiences hot and humid climate in the summer.

¹ Meaning the seven huts in the local language

² Refers to the War-Jaintias

The War-Jaintias

The War-Jaintias occupy the steep slopes in the southern parts of West Jaintia Hills district, where the hills are steep, precipitous and marked by deep gorges and the valleys are deep and beautiful. The narrow strip of land at the foot of these slopes formed the natural boundary with the plain of Bangladesh. The land of the War-Jaintias consists largely of rolling uplands that are dissected by river valleys and abounds in streams, rivers and waterfalls.

The War-Jaintias are a subgroup of the Khasi community who inhabits the southern slope of West Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh. The War-Jaintia community stands apart in their language³, dress, culture and physical features in the midst of other ethnic communities in Northeast India. The origin of the War-Jaintia is shrouded in mystery. Their folklore relates about their divine origin and backed by their popular myth in which the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* (seven huts) came down to earth from the sky through a golden ladder that was located at *Sohpetbneng*⁴ mountain top in the northern part of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

Modern day researchers comment that the ancestors of the War-Jaintias are believed to be probably amongst the earlier group of communities who have emigrated from somewhere in South-East Asia to the Brahmaputra valley where they settled, before finally coming to their present homeland. But in the absence of any credible codified material, it is difficult to ascertain their actual place of origin. Today, the War-Jaintias are concentrated in the East and West Jaintia Hill districts of Meghalaya, in the Barak valley of Assam and in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Today, the War-Jaintias consists of several clans who since time immemorial have migrated from different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills to their present homeland. The oral history of these clans and how they came to settle to their present space is recounted in their oral tradition known as *Chohnya*.

Traditional Administration

Before the arrival of the British, a Jaintia hill was under a single chieftainship known as *Ka Hima Sutnga*, which was again divided into twelve administrative units known as *Eleka* (traditional state) for administrative convenience. The head of the traditional state

³ War-Jaintias have a distinct dialect known as the War dialect that is not intelligible to the Pnars or the Khasis

⁴ Meaning the 'Sky's navel'

Eleka is *U Doloji* (the administrative head). The *Doloji* have limited authority as per the prevalent custom, they cannot perform any important act without first consulting and the approval of their respective *Durbar* (traditional council). After the *Durbar* is consulted and the approval granted the *Doloji* is free to exercise any administrative power within the *Eleka*.

Matrilineal System

The unique institution among the War-Jaintias is the matrilineal system. Mother kinship is dominant. Due to the matrilineal character of the War-Jaintias, the children adopt the surname of the mother's clan. As the children adopt the mother's clan they belong to the mother, and as such there are no illegitimate child in the community. Whether the woman had bore a child from a man with whom she had gone through a formal marriage or not is not of much consequence. Women enjoy a dignified and respectable position in the War-Jaintia community. They are the custodians of the family's property. A War-Jaintia woman is accorded due respect as she is the one through whom the clan's lineage is propagated and the continuity of the name of the family thereafter.

Kinship

The War-Jaintias consist of several clans who traced their lineage from the ancestral mother (*ka Iawbei*), the founder of the clan. Therefore the kinship system of the War-Jaintias, is different from other Indian communities. The system of kinship amongst the War-Jaintias is based on *Ka tipkur-tipkha* (to know one's maternal and paternal relatives). It is clan exogamy. Relatives belonging to the father's side young or old alike are respected. As the War-Jaintias system of kinship is exogamous, so inter marriage within clans who claim to originate from a common ancestry is prohibited. Intra-clan sexual relationship is the greatest sin and couples who commit such acts are ostracized from the community.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage among the War-Jaintias has both religious and social aspects. It is a big social institution among them. Love marriages are prevalent but arrange marriages also do take place. Amongst the War-Jaintias, the offer for marriage is always initiated by the man. He may court anyone he likes to be his wife. But marriage within the clan or sub-clan is strictly prohibited. When the girl agrees to the boy's proposal, the matter is discussed by his and her family members including the maternal uncle(s). Engagement is the prerequisite of the marriage. The maternal uncles fix the date of marriage. The marriage usually takes place

after dusk. During the marriage ceremony the priest invokes the goddess *Ka Blai Synchar* and the exchange of marriage contract and pouring of alcohol libation take place thereon.

One of the most remarkable features of the War-Jaintias' marriage is that it is customary for the husband to go and live with his wife in his mother-in-law's place, and not take his bride home as in the case of other communities. This is mandatory if the wife is the youngest daughter of the family, whereas those who marry the elder daughters may take their wife and live separately after they have one or two children and when they can afford to make their own home.

Divorce cases are known and there are no rigid conditions for divorce, it is the concern of the individual couples that leads to divorce. Divorce therefore is by mutual consent. When the couple wishes for divorce, a witness is called and a simple ritual known as *ai khap*⁵ is performed in the presence of the witness. After the ritual is done, the village crier makes the announcement. Remarriage is prevalent among both men and women.

Religion

The indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is known as *Ka Niam Chong* and is based on the ethics of right living and conduct. The religion is based on three tenets; a) to earn righteousness b) to know man and to know God c) to know one's paternal and maternal relations. These tenets are inculcated into the consciousness of the people and thus regulate their thought, words and actions.

The War-Jaintias believed in God the Creator. He is represented by a Goddess known as '*Ka Prae Shynshor*'. According to the popular origin myth, the War-Jaintias believed that in the beginning there were sixteen huts (*Khadhynnriew Trep*) that were living about with the Supreme God. These sixteen huts use to come down to earth by means of a golden ladder located at the top of *U Sohpetbneng* peak. However the golden ladder was severed because of the jealousy and sinful ways of man. Seven huts got stranded on earth in consequence of their sin. The Seven Huts could no longer communicate with God as before. Thereafter the sun too refused to shine and darkness prevailed over the face of the earth. When this happened, the seven huts looked up to God and pleaded for his mercy. *U Syi* (a rooster) was sent to

⁵ The act of paying the witness (any amount) by the couple for his service to be the witness of their divorce

intercede with God as the mediator between God and man and the connection was restored, though not like before anymore. Thus, from then on *U Syi* was address as the mediator and liberator of mankind. *U Syi* also became the sacrificial element for man and stands as the symbol of the indigenous faith of the War-Jaintias today.

Ka Liahniam Iip (death ceremony) is one important constituent of *Ka Niam Chong*. The War-Jaintias honour their death with respect and love. They believe that after death the dead become supernatural beings and are ordained to bless the living. All religious performances such as *ai ji phor* (offering of food to the dead) sacrifices, prayers and invocation are strictly observed. At the deceased of a person a cock is sacrificed as per the covenant with God and the cock acts as a guide of the soul of the deceased and lead the soul into the courtyard of God. It is said that if a cock is not sacrificed, the deceased will not reach the abode of God, the Creator. The other important ceremony related to death is the 'Bone Deposition' ceremony. After the deceased is cremated, the bones are collected and kept in the family ossuary. But those who die a tragic death, their bones are kept apart. The bone deposition ceremony can be carried out on the same day after the cremation or later on as per the convenience of the deceased family.

The War-Jaintias also worship other gods and goddesses that are subordinates of God the creator. The War-Jaintias always considers the rivers and streams the dwelling place of the gods and goddesses. These deities are the guardians of villages, clans, family etc. These gods and goddesses are in the form of deities who guard the village, rivers and hills or clan deities. Thanksgiving ceremony is performed annually and sacrifices and offerings of animals and fowls are made to propitiate the deities.

Another interesting characteristic of the indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is divination. Egg breaking divination (*Thmat*) is very popular among the followers of the indigenous religion. In this ritual eggs are broken on a sacred wooden board and the signs and omens are interpreted according to the position of the broken egg shell on the board. Another method of divination is by examining the signs and omens through the entrails of the fowls. These divinations are widely practiced by the War-Jaintias.

Festival

To the War-Jaintias festivals and dances are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivity. During these occasions, ceremonies, rites and rituals are performed which show that the people are deeply religious. They pray to God for the general well being, blessings, peace, and prosperity and thank him for the blessings he has showered upon them. During the festival they also get to meet friends and relatives from far and near.

Ka Rong Kusi

The War-Jaintias have festivals which is both religious and festive. The most popular festivals are the *Ka Rong Kusi* and the *Ka Rongkhli* (Tiger Festival). *Rong Kusi* is a festival of folk dance where anybody interested in the dance irrespective of gender can participate. During the festival, the male dancers perform during the day from morning till evening. A war dance form call '*Ka Pastiah*' is performed by the skillful male dancers during the festival. And the female dancers perform during the night, from dusk till dawn. According to the oral narratives of the community it is said that female dancers perform at night as all males have to stand guard the village against the enemy during the night. Folk dancers from neighbouring villages in the region too come and participate in the festival. Before the start of the *Rong Kusi* festival the priest of the village along with the elders invoke God by pouring libation to bless the people of the village. This festival is usually held during the spring season. Today, since the advent of foreign religion most of the villages had stopped organizing this festival. Only three or four villages in the entire War-Jaintia area still organize this festival annually.

Ka Rongkhli

The other festival known as the *Rongkhli* is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village. The beauty or the uniqueness about this festival is it does not feature on a regular or annual basis but organized only if and when circumstances prevail. The festival *Rongkhli* literally translated as 'Tiger festival' is the subject of our research. Therefore let us continue to discover this unique festival which is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village.

Nongtalang Village

Nongtalang is the biggest village in the War-Jaintia area. Nongtalang means the village of *Talang*. A female named *Iawbei* who might have been the ancestral mother of the *Talang* clan was amongst the earliest settlers of the present Nongtalang village. The oral narrative of the inhabitant of this village relates that the First Settlers of Nongtalang village

was Shitang Rymbai and his wife, a lady from the Talang clan. Before the people settled in the present village of Nongtalang, the people originally lived at a village named Amtapoh. They left Amtapoh due to many reasons and one was the inadequate and infertile agricultural land. The first clan that came and settled at Nongtalang village was the Lyngdoh clan and the Talang clan. The present village of Nongtalang thus derived its name from the 'Talang'. It was also believed that religion and administrative system of the village started under the Talang. Those who came to settle at Nongtalang along with the Rymbai clan of Shitang and the Talang were the Pohsnem (Lamin in Nongtalang), Myrchiang, Bareh and Pohti. They were the earliest settlers of the village and were known as the *Ran Twui Threw kur* which the equivalent translation is 'Five Hearth and Six Clans'.

Today the village Nongtalang, has a population of not less than 10000 people (2001 census, GOI) who are predominantly *Niamtyndrai* or *Niamchnong* (traditional religion) population. The *Niamtyndrai* cremate their dead at a sacred place in the forest, and then the ash and bones are collected and kept in pots and sealed tightly. The pot is then kept in an ossuary or locally known as *Mawbah*. There are as many ossuaries as there are clans and each clan has to keep the ash and bone of the dead in their respective ossuary. If the dead person is a male then a white cloth is tied around the ossuary and the items used by the dead are kept on the side of the ossuary. However if it is a female, then umbrellas are kept opened and tied on top of the ossuary, along with some kitchen wares that are kept at the side. A plate of food, a glass of water and areca nut and betel leave is kept on the side of the ossuary.

The Village

The village administration is run by the *Dorbar* or an assembly. The village *Dorbar* in Nongtalang is known as *ka Dorbar Manniew* where *Manniew* means uncle. Hence *ka Dorbar Manniew* means the *Dorbar* of the uncles. The *Dorbar* consists of the elderly uncles from the twelve *Kur* or clans of the village and these clans are *Lyngdoh*, *Pohsnem*, *Pohrmen*, *Padu*, *Myrchiang*, *Pohlynniar*, *pohchen*, *Bareh*, *Pna-Lamare*, *Mohrmen*, *Pohlong* and *Pohti*. The three important persons in the *Dorbar Manniew* are *U Lyngdoh* or religious priest; he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan, and performs religious rites and ceremonies and also has religious functions. *U Lyngdoh Korbar* or secular priest is yet another important person wherein he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan as well. His function is related to administrative matters and he has to convene and preside over the village *Dorbar*. Another important person is the village Secretary and he must be a literate person to keep pace with the need and

change of time and to document everything into writing. The village secretary can be chosen from the other clans and the post holds a respectable position in the village. Besides these important people, there is a *Maji* or secretary *U Sangot* or an announcer and other elders. Besides the *Dorbar Manniew*, there is also a *Dorbar Chnong* or village council, who runs the whole administration of the village. Adult male members are allowed to participate in this *Dorbar* and it is the *Lyngdoh Korbar*, who presides over the *Dorbar*. The *Lyngdoh's* and *Doloi's* position is passed down within the family members since generations. The people of Nongtalang have many festivals, *Rongkhli*, *Rong Beh Lyngkan*, *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Phur* but some of these festivals are not observed regularly, due to some social change.

Rongkhli: The Tiger Festival

The War-Jaintias have a very rich repository of intangible cultural heritage and these heritages are orally passed on from one generation to another. Many genres of their oral tradition have been totally forgotten or are on the verge of being forgotten altogether. One important festival is the *Rongkhli* which is the subject of our research. It is observed at Nongtalang village when a tiger or its feline like is killed by the residents of the village. In whatever manner the tiger is killed, the goddess of the village is to be worshipped and the festival to be observed. It is believed that if the goddess is not worshipped, calamities and misfortunes like epidemic diseases, starvation, and blindness will befall on the people. The festival is usually held between the months of January - March after the harvesting work is over. Nongtalang village host the *Rongkhli*⁶ or 'Tiger Festival' from time to time, and the most recent one was in the year 2012. How the festival started is the question to which answers are inadequate or vague whatever the answer is. The tradition has it that whenever any person from the village kill a tiger or its feline like, rituals has to be performed. The *Dorbar*⁷ is then summoned by the Chief of the village and a date is decided for the Festival. A month prior to the festival the village drummers starts drumming in preparation of the festival. The most important aspect of this festival is the combination of belief, tale, ritual and performance which is significant in many ways.

Rongkhli: What the people says:

Rongkhli is a religious festival celebrated by the people of Nongtalang village in the War-Jaintia region of Meghalaya. According to the oral tradition, the people of Nongtalang

⁶ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning 'tiger festival'.

⁷ The village council

worship two goddesses namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kapong*. *Ka Kapong* demanded from the people that they should offer to her sacrifices in the form of wild animals. But *Ka Pyrtuh* demanded sacrifices in the form of the tiger or any other of the feline family.

The two goddesses are believed to be the guardian goddesses of the people of Nongtalang. In every household of the people of Nongtalang who still follow the indigenous faith called *Ka Niam Chnong*, two wooden pillars are kept, one of which is kept as a symbol of *Ka Kpong*. In this pillar the horns of the wild animals killed by the members of the household is attached to the wooden pillar. Another pillar is kept inside the house; this pillar is for the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*. At this pillar the family members offer their prayers to the goddess who is their guardian and who guard and protect them from all dangers, sickness and misfortunes.

The goddess, it is believed that whenever the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* wants the people to offer her rituals and sacrifices, she would guide and help them get the feline. The festival is a very expensive and elaborate one so people always try to avoid killing the tiger and the like intentionally. When a tiger is killed by the member of the village, whether accidentally or intentionally, the clan to which the member who killed the feline have to organise the festival Rongkhli. But since the festival involves lots of expenses people cannot afford to organise the festival immediately. Sometimes it may take even years and even decades to for the clan to afford to organise this festival. In such cases they have to wait till they have enough resources to organise the festival in honour of the *Ka Pyrtuh*. So the clan has to pray and beg the goddess to let them hold the festival whenever they could afford. But if the clan members forget to host the festival the goddess would remind them about their promise in the form of sickness, especially eyesore which could at times lead to blindness if they do not pay heed to the goddess's warnings. There are instances where the goddess reminded the particular clan about their duty to perform the Rongkhli festival in her honour even after many decades. One such incident happened in the year 2011-12 where one person from the Lyngdoh clan suddenly developed eyesore. He was taken to the doctors but they could not diagnose his problem, but when the clan performed a divination it was revealed that some decades back the clan members had killed a feline but since they could not afford to organise the festival in honour of the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*, they promise to do so later. But they could not fulfill the promise, so in the year 2011-12 they whole clan decided to hold the Rongkhli festival in honour of *Ka Pyrtuh*. The next day after they decided to hold the festival, a feline was

trapped just on the outskirts of the village. So the people believed that the goddess gave them the feline so that the people could offer their prayers and offer sacrifices to *Ka Pyrtuh*.

The covenant between the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* and the people of Nongtalang was that when they offer the feline to her as a sacrifice they should do so by celebrating along with music and dance. So, this is how the *Rongkhli* or the Tiger festival came into existence.

The Celebration

Once a tiger or its feline like is killed, the cadaver is kept on the outskirts of the village till necessary rituals are carried out. The ushering in of the tiger's cadaver to the village is the beginning of the festival. The villagers marched to where the tiger's cadaver is kept and brings it to the village dancing to the tune of drums and *tangmuri*⁸ sound. On the first night, the man dances till dawn to keep the tiger company. On the second evening of the festival, the ladies and damsels of the village dances to the accompaniment of the drums and *tangmuri* sound till the next morning. The third and the last day of the festival is a great show of performance as well as rituals. Men of the village dressed in fine traditional warrior attire gathers at their respective localities. They then move to the *Rymmusan* ground amidst beating of drums and *tangmuri* sound. Here they dance to the beats of the drums and *tangmuri* sound. The dancers give the finality of the ceremony by performing the warrior dance once again. Thereafter the multitude moves to the westernmost part of the village for the final ritual of the festival where the head of the tiger's head is decapitated. Then the severed head is spiked and erected at the place to ward off evil spirit. If the day belongs to the male dancers, the night belongs to the female dancers. The festival concludes with the dancing by the woman folk well into the night.

Rongkhli is the most important festival which is performed in Nongtalang village of the War-Jaintias. *Rong* means festival and *Khli* means tiger, in the local dialect, hence *Rongkhli* means Tiger Festival. *Rongkhli* festival is not a regular festival but held when a tiger is killed accidentally or on an organized hunt by the villagers mainly by a particular clan. In whatever manner a tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped, or else certain calamities like epidemics, diseases ill luck will befall on the people. However if a tiger enters the village in search of a prey, the tiger is killed and a festival is performed with worshipping God.

⁸ A musical instrument

Certain rituals have to be performed to appease the '*Kpong*' the hunting deity, which in fact is the beginning of the Religious part of the Festival.

Stages of Rongkhli Festival

When a particular clan goes hunting, other clans are also invited to join them. But in case a man who does not belong to that particular clan organizing the hunt, happened to kill the tiger, the man's clan will not perform the ceremony, mainly that the organizing clan has taken the responsibility of performing the festival. As a sign of good gestures one who kills the tiger will get one turban on the day of the festival. If someone from the particular clan killed the animal, it is considered to be a good omen for the clan. The clan who kills the tiger is given the right to hold the festival and perform the ceremony. For example if a man belonging to the *Bareh* clan kills the tiger, then the *Bareh* clan performs the needed ceremony and the festival is called as *ka Rong u Bareh* or the festival of the *Bareh* clan. But even when the particular clan performs the sacrifices the whole village participates and is involved in the festival.

The festival is mainly held in the month of January to March, mainly in the dry months. After the tiger is killed, it was kept in the outskirts of the village till the required rituals are completed. After killing is made by the particular clan, the *Lyngdoh* or religious priest is informed, and when the *Lyngdoh* and the *Dorbar Manniew* agreed, the clan can perform the festival, they also have to inform the day for holding the festival. Usually a two month time is given by the *Lyngdoh*, and if there is any delay then the clan has to pay a fine. If for some inevitable situation, the clan cannot perform the festival, are given the chance to perform it later but by any means they have to perform the sacrifice else the clan would suffer and go through certain calamities and hardships. The tradition is that one month before the festival begins, the village drummers as a part of preparation for the coming of the Festival beat their drums in the whole village for a month together. The expenditure of the festival is mainly incurred by the particular clan with some amount contributed by the *Dorbar*.

Before the festival start, the organizing clan performs certain rituals and sacrifices. The sacrificial rites are performed with a belief to inform God of the festival. The tiger's body is mainly kept outside the village in the "*Phlong*" or village gate with its intestine taken out and dried up. There are two village gates, in the east and west. Before the tiger is brought into the village, men dance about with the accompaniment of the drums and pipes. However on

that day, the men are not in their traditional attire. The dance is performed in three areas *Mihngi* or the East, *sepngi* or west and *Phytlaw u Lyngdoh* or the priests, area. The *Rongkhli* festival is a three day festival where it started with the entering of the tiger or clouded leopard in the village. Then it is followed with the dance which is mainly started by the men on the *sngi Pynrung Khla* or the day that the tiger is brought in the village, men and women carry a twig with leaves of any plant with them. They move in a procession mainly with the *Lyngdoh* and *Myntris* in their traditional attire, along with the uncle of the organizing clan lead the way followed by the people. However women were not allowed to walk in front or beside the *Lyngdoh* and, *Myntris*. The girls are dressed mainly in their traditional attire. The animal is mainly brought in the evening but in the day time, dance is performed with the playing of drums and pipes when the tiger is brought, the people cheered with the beating of the drums. The people dance along the way swaying the twig or a plant or banana leaf and a bamboo stick which they hold. The tiger leopard is tied on bamboo sticks and brought to the priest's vicinity which serves as the dancing ground in Nongtalang *chnong*. The tiger is kept in a special place with fire burning underneath. The men then dance throughout the night with the beating of the drums and playing the pipes, and drinking of *kyiad lieh* or local liquor stored on bamboo poles which is passed from one dancer to another. The liquor is taken as it is part of the ritual.

On the first day and second day of the festival, the *shad Kylvum* or the dance where anyone could join is performed. But the "*Pastiah* or *shad Mastieh*, only the people belonging to the clan who are on the list could perform. The *Shad Mastieh* is performed on the last day of the festival. In the early morning, the people leave the dancing ground and go to the elder uncle's house of the organizing clan where certain rite and rituals are performed. The uncle then pour libations and the *Lyngdoh* along with the elders of the *Dorbar Manniew* pray for the well being of the people' good health, general prosperity, good harvest and protection from evil and they also prayed to their ancestors with the religious ceremonies completed, male dance is performed where they performed it in front of the elder uncle's house. *Ka Niam Chai Wat* is first performed which is followed by *Ka Mastieh*. In this dance, people from the organising clan would perform first and followed with the dance performed by the person who killed the tiger or the clouded leopard, with his elder uncle. The dance performed by the elder uncle with the *Lyngdoh* or anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan, then follows. *Mastieh jong Kur* or the dance of different clans is then performed wherein they dance two by two with dancers from different clan and not the same clan. The dance is performed by a *Rymbui* clan

and *pohti*, *Pohsnem* and *Myrchiang*, *Bareh* and *Padu*, *Paduna* and *Pohrmen*, *Pohlynniar* and *Manar*, *Pohlong* and *Pna*, *Pohing* and anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan.

When the dance is completed, then they moved towards the *Lyngdoh*'s house, to show respect where certain rite and rituals are performed with due solemnity. After this, a dance is performed which is similar to the dance at the elder uncle's house. The *Lyngdoh* would dance first with someone from the organising clan. Then it is followed up by the dancers from the different clans.

In the evening, it is mainly performed by young girls and women as well. In the *Rongkhli* dance, there are no barriers which are prevalent in the other dances of the Khasi. A married woman can participate in the *Rongkhli* dance which makes it unique. Clad in their traditional attire, the men perform in the morning till evening whereas the women perform in the evening till early morning. The dancer's step show is quite amusing where instead of the slow movement, there is a fast movement of the body. The girls stand on their toes and move swiftly within the dancing ground which is in circle shape and turn sideways or moved about in circle. The musicians are seated on a made platform within the dancing ground. What seems more alluring is the tradition of clipping or pinning of money to a particular dancer, mainly with the belief that they would perform better or keep performing or are best performers. When tired, the dancers rest for a while and perform again. Kids are either in traditional attire or in civil dress. A water boy is also present; who moves about the dancing round, whose duty is to provide drinking water for the dancers. The dance is performed accordingly to each clan as direction, wherein if a *Bareh* clan performs in the *Sepngi* or the West, then *Lyngdoh* have to perform in the *Mihngi* side or the East.

In the early morning of the third day, male dancers then perform in their traditional attire, moving about in a fast pace. Like the male dancers of *Nongkrern* dance and *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, the male dancers from Nongtalang employ the same body movement and moving about in circles but in a much fast movement. The male dancers do *kynhoi* or shout and also use *phawar* or use rhymes or couplet while dancing. The sword is mainly held in the right side which is not moved about while dancing. However in the left hand they carry the fly flab or whisk or *Symphiah* which is tremendously moved about. Like pinning of money by well wishers is done to the female dancers, pinning of money is also done to male dancers. The

money is a token of love and affection and also a sign of appreciating for their splendid performance

In the afternoon, the people, the dancers, priests and minister, clan moved from the *Nongtalang Chnong* to *Amlariang*. The tiger is also taken to *Amlariang*, wherein the male dancers particularly the elderly men, performs. The rituals are then performed by the priest who chants and offers prayers. After this, the tiger's head is then cut off from its body and placed on a pole where it is erected on the edge of the *Mawphlong* in *Amlariang* but the carcass is kept beneath the monolith. However the tiger's meat which has been dried is cut into pieces is thrown by the priest while standing near the monolith. The meat is thrown to a throng of men waiting at the slightly lower part of the hill, and then they collect the pieces of the meat. In the same place, these men light up a small fire to roast the collected meat so that it is consumable. Meat is not allowed to be taken into the interior parts of the village and hence it is consumed as soon as they are collected. Although the women are also allowed to participate in consumption process yet the women folk have refrained from taking part as they do not want to compete against the men. However it has been noted that the organising clan is not allowed to consume the meat of the tiger. If during the last festival the tiger's body is placed in the east gate, in the next festival it will be placed in the west gate. Here the religious ceremonies come to an end and each leave for their respective houses.

Dress and Ornaments

The attire is what grabs the attention of the spectators, besides its dance movement. Like the attire of the dancers of *Nongkrem* and *Laho* dance, the attire of Rongkhli dancers are equally rich and vibrant, though the attires are not alike.

The female dancers wear a white or red long sleeve blouse or *sopti kti*, a skirt or *sopti poh*, and *dhara* is a silk cloth which is worn by pinning it on the left and right side of the shoulder and covering the leg. The *dhara* is a Khasi traditional material which is woven from costly silk raw materials. The *dhara* worn by the women are of different colours and varied motifs. A *Jaintawah* or small shawl is then pinned on the shoulders and tied at the back. Silk ribbons of countless colours are also tied on the back of the dancers where it is symbolic of the colourful festival. The dancers wear their shoes or slippers while dancing because of the fast movement of the dance, while a few dance bare feet.

Gold and coral bead necklaces in different design and size are put on by the women to adorn themselves. *Khodu* or gold bracelets are worn on the wrist. *Sharyndang* is worn on the neck which is made from gold. However some of the dancers replace *Sharyndang* with a lace cloth of golden colour or white colour. The women dancers do stick a bunch of artificial flowers made from paper or present paper into their hair bun. Money is generally pinned on the back side of the dancers while dancing. Pinning of money was not practiced in the past but introduced in the recent times.

Men however do wear a long skirt like which they call it as *Phrok*. The skirt is of white colour with borders which is present in many colours. A white long sleeve shirt is worn where a shawl and a ribbon is then worn on either side and is pinned at the waist. *Ka Waitlam* or sword is held on the right hand where a sword is symbolic of *beh ksuid beh khrei* or driving the devil and evil spirits away. *U Symphiah* or whisk and at times a handkerchief is hold on the left hand, *u Symphiah* mainly represent happiness. A *Spong* or a turban of different colour is worn as a head gear with the *Tdong Tyrlong* or tail feather of a forest bird, is stuck on the turban. However *tdong tyrlong* is also substituted with rooster's feathers as well. Gold and coral beads necklace is worn from the left side of the shoulder to the right side of the waist. The men like the women, also wear their shoes while dancing.

Musical Instruments

Music is food for the soul. For any festival and occasion music is part of it and the absence of music is the nonexistence of dance. Since time immemorial, Khasis have used the self made musical instrument, that with time the instruments have increased and played. In *Rongkhli* dance, *ka Ksing Thab* or drums is played along with the *Bhuri* or *Tangmuri* which is a pipe wind instrument. A *Padiah* or bamboo pole is another musical instrument where the sound is produced merely by beating the bamboo with two sticks. The drums and the pipe have *san sur* or five tunes. *Padiah* is played only on the first and second day of the festival. *Ka Ksing thab* is not beaten by drum sticks, but by the use of the hand. However for the *shad mastieh bom* is beaten by the drum sticks.

Ka ksing is made by hollowing out from a big tree and the rim is covered by an animal skin mainly cow's skin, and are in 'u' shape. The drums are played by beating with two sticks. Drums not only provide the beat for the festival, they are used to invite, people to the event- *Ksing Shak Kusi* is mainly beaten during the non-ritual dance. *Padiah* gives rhythmical

accent in giving balanced accentuation to a tune played with other instruments. *Tangmuri* is made out of the *japung* reed. The *tangmuri* is considered as the queen of musical instruments. The tunes fluctuate from low to a high pitch, clear and distinct, as the fingers of the musician deftly shift along the seven holes of the bamboo pipe, attached at one end to a circular horn. *Tangmuri* has a coarse and penetrating effect and is played to the accompaniment of drum-beats during the dance. The musicians are seated at the centre of the dancing ground on a man-made platform, where they play their instruments accordingly. The musicians have the ability to play the instruments mainly by observing the elder musicians and at the same time which is passed down through word of mouth and the skill that is imparted on them. After the permission was passed to hold the festival, the Lyngdoh hands over the drums which are used only during the festival. The dancers mainly depend on the music being played. The role of the musical instruments is demonstrative which leaves its natural and spontaneous effect.

Conclusion

Although the 'Tiger Festival' is organized by a particular clan, yet the people of the village as a whole take equal part. Even people from the neighbouring villages also come to take part in the dance and *Tangmuri* competition. Competitors from several villages come to compete and cash prizes are rewarded to the winners as well as the losers. The judges are deputed from amongst elders who are knowledgeable of the art and their decision is final. The *Rongkhli* is important because this unique festival congregate together social, religious and cultural aspects of the community. The last ceremony of the festival is the sacrifice, which is known as *Rongchyndi-Rong Khli*, which is held after the festival. It is a concluding ceremony where a goat, two hens, a dove and bananas are offered.

Rongkhli festival is an age old festival and it is interesting to note that the festival has to do with the killing of a tiger or a feline. The festival is celebrated with no regularity in duration and the last time it was celebrated was in the year 2012. And the clouded leopard in this case was killed a few years before this celebration took place. And to be specific it is not always a tiger that is killed and celebrated over it, but any feline. One may view this festival from different perspective; endangerment of the feline species, well being of the populace, economic prospect, religious concern, social bonding and in many ways the cultural revival. So looking at the larger picture that the festival accords for the overall welfare of the people this festival should be given its due importance. Looking ahead Legal concern of tiger endangerment and its killing should be addressed but not at the cost of this traditional

festival. Anyways prohibition of the celebration should be looked upon in a more humane ways, because the bigger question is; should tradition be put in a back burner and allow tradition to die out? Here we need to clearly understand that this festival which is a tradition is part of the bigger picture 'Identity'. Today our identity is being polarized, our cultural attributes are diluted, and our social practices are coming at a price. So the best catalyst through which we can identify ourselves in this era is through the practices that our ancestors have handed down to the present generation. Therefore, for the greater good I am sure a single feline hunted in over 05 – 10 years for organizing this festival is not going to lead to the extinction of the feline family as there is no random killing or hunt. This conclusion is again drawn from the people's profound understanding of the ways of nature. The fact of the matter is creating awareness of tiger endangerment could lead to increase in the population of the feline family and not by banning the Tiger festival.

On a brighter note, it is to be noted that when the feline was brought into the vicinity of the village, the people carrying twigs of leaves and banana leaf and crowns twisted out of plants were worn. It was a magnificent sight where the jungle came alive and was welcoming the mighty beast. It is wholesomely clear that this festival brings about for the congregation of the Spiritual world (the two goddesses) namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kaping*; the Human world (the people of Nongtalang village) and the Animal world (the Tiger or its feline kinds). This amply shows the truly uniqueness of the Rongkhli or Tiger festival.

**Submission of the 2nd Appraisal on the Scheme for
“Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and
Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”**

**Topic: “Tracing and Documenting the Rongkhli of
the War-Jaintias of Meghalaya”**

Title: “Tracing the Rongkhli”

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TRACING THE RONGKHLI

Introduction: Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage accounting and evidence of past events becomes part of the lore of the folks and they are genres like myths, legends, tales, folksongs, traditional knowledge and other knowledgeable trades and knowhow. These genres are passed on from generation to generation over time by word of mouth. The genres of Intangible Cultural Heritage and artistic expression of the folk is never static but keeps on changing with the passage of time. Oral traditions embedded with cultural traits of the community are handed down from one generation to another generation and this process still goes on in the present time. Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social and religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of the contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

Demographic and Cultural Profile of the War-Jaintias

Meghalaya, also known as the abode of cloud is one of the seven sister states in North-East India. It was carved out of Assam in 1972. Its capital, Shillong, is known for its scenic beauty and labeled the name 'Scotland of the East' by the colonial powers since the pre Independence era. The state of Meghalaya is the homeland of the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos, the three dominant communities of the state. Khasi is a nomenclature used to refer to the sub-tribes of the *Hynniew Trep*¹ community living in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The sub-tribes consist of the *Khyntiam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*² and the *Lynggam*.

Meghalaya is a hilly region and is well-known for its picturesque landscapes and natural beauty. Rivers like *Umiyam Mawphlang*, *Umngot*, *Kynshi*, *Lukha*, *Myntdu*, *Prang* and others from the Khasi and Jaintia hills flow into Bangladesh. The Jaintias inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya which is generally known as Khasi and Jaintia hills. Overall Jaintia hills experience a moderate climate except for the sub-montane region in the north and the foothills in the south that experiences hot and humid climate in the summer.

¹ Meaning the seven huts in the local language

² Refers to the War-Jaintias

The War-Jaintias

The War-Jaintias occupy the steep slopes in the southern parts of West Jaintia Hills district, where the hills are steep, precipitous and marked by deep gorges and the valleys are deep and beautiful. The narrow strip of land at the foot of these slopes formed the natural boundary with the plain of Bangladesh. The land of the War-Jaintias consists largely of rolling uplands that are dissected by river valleys and abounds in streams, rivers and waterfalls.

The War-Jaintias are a subgroup of the Khasi community who inhabits the southern slope of West Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh. The War-Jaintia community stands apart in their language³, dress, culture and physical features in the midst of other ethnic communities in Northeast India. The origin of the War-Jaintia is shrouded in mystery. Their folklore relates about their divine origin and backed by their popular myth in which the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* (seven huts) came down to earth from the sky through a golden ladder that was located at *Sohpetbneng*⁴ mountain top in the northern part of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

Modern day researchers comment that the ancestors of the War-Jaintias are believed to be probably amongst the earlier group of communities who have emigrated from somewhere in South-East Asia to the Brahmaputra valley where they settled, before finally coming to their present homeland. But in the absence of any credible codified material, it is difficult to ascertain their actual place of origin. Today, the War-Jaintias are concentrated in the East and West Jaintia Hill districts of Meghalaya, in the Barak valley of Assam and in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Today, the War-Jaintias consists of several clans who since time immemorial have migrated from different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills to their present homeland. The oral history of these clans and how they came to settle to their present space is recounted in their oral tradition known as *Chohnya*.

Traditional Administration

Before the arrival of the British, a Jaintia hill was under a chieftainship known as *Ka Hima Sutnga*, which was again divided into twelve administrative units known as *Eleka* (traditional state) for administrative convenience. The head of the traditional state *Eleka* is *U*

³ War-Jaintias have a distinct dialect known as the War dialect that is not intelligible to the Pnars or the Khasis

⁴ Meaning the 'Sky's navel'

Doloi (the administrative head). The *Doloi* have limited authority as per the prevalent custom, they cannot perform any important act without first consulting and the approval of their respective *Durbar* (traditional council). After the *Durbar* is consulted and the approval granted the *Doloi* is free to exercise any administrative power within the *Eleka*.

Matrilineal System

The unique institution among the War-Jaintia is the matrilineal system. Mother kinship is dominant. Due to the matrilineal character of the War-Jaintias, the children adopt the surname of the mother's clan. As the children adopt the mother's clan they belong to the mother, and as such there are no illegitimate child in the community. Whether the woman had bore a child from a man with whom she had gone through a formal marriage or not is not of much consequence. Women enjoy a dignified and respectable position in the War-Jaintia community. They are the custodians of the family's property. A War-Jaintia woman is accorded due respect as she is the one through whom the clan's lineage is propagated and the continuity of the name of the family thereafter.

Kinship

The War-Jaintias consist of several clans who traced their lineage from the ancestral mother (*Ka Iawbei*), the founder of the clan. Therefore the kinship system of the War-Jaintias, is different from other Indian communities. The system of kinship amongst the War-Jaintias is based on *Ka Tipkur-tipkha* (to know one's maternal and paternal relatives). It is clan exogamy. Relatives belonging to the father's side young or old alike are respected. As the War-Jaintias' system of kinship is exogamous, so inter marriage within clans who claim to originate from a common ancestry is prohibited. Intra-clan sexual relationship is the greatest sin and couples who commit such acts are ostracized from the community.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage among the War-Jaintias has both religious and social aspects. It is a big social institution among them. Love marriages are prevalent but arrange marriages also do take place. Amongst the War-Jaintias, the offer for marriage is always initiated by the man. He may court anyone he likes to be his wife. But marriage within the clan or sub-clan is strictly prohibited. When the girl agrees to the boy's proposal, the matter is discussed by their respective family members including the maternal uncle(s). Engagement is the prerequisite of the marriage. The maternal uncles fix the date of marriage. The marriage usually takes place

after dusk. During the marriage ceremony the priest invokes the goddess *Ka Blai Synchar* and the exchange of marriage contract and pouring of alcohol libation take place thereon.

One of the most remarkable features of the War-Jaintias' marriage is that it is customary for the husband to go and live with his wife in his mother-in-law's place, and not take his bride home as in the case of other communities. This is mandatory if the wife is the youngest daughter of the family, whereas those who marry the elder daughters may take their wife and live separately after they have one or two children and when they can afford to make their own home.

Divorce cases are known and there are no rigid conditions for divorce, it is the concern of the individual couples that leads to divorce. Divorce therefore is by mutual consent. When the couple wishes for divorce, a witness is called and a simple ritual known as *ai khap*⁵ is performed in the presence of the witness. After the ritual is done, the village crier makes the announcement. Remarriage is prevalent among both men and women.

Religion

The indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is known as *Ka Niam Chong* and is based on the ethics of right living and conduct. The religion is based on three tenets; a) to earn righteousness b) to know man and to know God c) to know one's paternal and maternal relations. These tenets are inculcated into the consciousness of the people and thus regulate their thought, words and actions.

The War-Jaintias believed in God the Creator. He is represented by a goddess known as '*Ka Prae Shynshor*'. According to the popular origin myth, the War-Jaintias believed that in the beginning there were sixteen huts (*Khadhynnriew Trep*) that were living about with the Supreme God. These sixteen huts use to come down to earth by means of a golden ladder located at the top of *U Sohpetbneng* peak. However the golden ladder was severed because of the jealousy and sinful ways of man. Seven huts got stranded on earth in consequence of their sin. The Seven Huts could no longer communicate with God as before. Thereafter the sun too refused to shine and darkness prevailed over the face of the earth. When this happened, the seven huts looked up to God and pleaded for his mercy. *U Syi* (a rooster) was sent to

⁵ The act of paying the witness (any amount) by the couple for his service to be the witness of their divorce

intercede with God as the mediator between God and man and the connection was restored, though not like before anymore. Thus, from then on *U Syi* was address as the mediator and liberator of mankind. *U Syi* also became the sacrificial element for man and stands as the symbol of the indigenous faith of the War-Jaintias today.

Ka Liahniam Iip (death ceremony) is one important constituent of *Ka Niam Chong*. The War-Jaintias honour their death with respect and love. They believe that after death the dead become supernatural beings and are ordained to bless the living. All religious performances such as *ai ji phor* (offering of food to the dead) sacrifices, prayers and invocation are strictly observed. At the deceased of a person a cock is sacrificed as per the covenant with God and the cock acts as a guide of the soul of the deceased and lead the soul into the courtyard of God. It is said that if a cock is not sacrificed, the deceased will not reach the abode of God, the Creator. The other important ceremony related to death is the 'Bone Deposition' ceremony. After the deceased is cremated, the bones are collected and kept in the family ossuary. But those who die a tragic death, their bones are kept apart. The bone deposition ceremony can be carried out on the same day after the cremation or later on as per the convenience of the deceased family.

The War-Jaintias also worship other gods and goddesses that are subordinates of God the creator. The War-Jaintias always considers the rivers and streams the dwelling place of the gods and goddesses. These deities are the guardians of villages, clans, family etc. These gods and goddesses are in the form of deities who guard the village, rivers and hills or clan deities. Thanksgiving ceremony is performed annually and sacrifices and offerings of animals and fowls are made to propitiate the deities.

Another interesting characteristic of the indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is divination. Egg breaking divination (*Thmat*) is very popular among the followers of the indigenous religion. In this ritual eggs are broken on a sacred wooden board and the signs and omens are interpreted according to the position of the broken egg shell on the board. Another method of divination is by examining the signs and omens through the entrails of the fowls. These divinations are widely practiced by the War-Jaintias.

Festival

To the War-Jaintias festivals and dances are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivity. During these occasions, ceremonies, rites and rituals are performed which show that the people are deeply religious. They pray to God for the general well being, blessings, peace, and prosperity and thank him for the blessings he has showered upon them. During the festival they also get to meet friends and relatives from far and near.

The War-Jaintias have festivals which is both religious and festive. The most popular festivals are the *Ka Rong Kusi* and the *Ka Rongkhli* (Tiger Festival). *Rong Kusi* is a festival of folk dance where anybody interested in the dance irrespective of gender can participate. During the festival, the male dancers perform during the day from morning till evening. A war dance form call '*Ka Pastiah*' is performed by the skillful male dancers during the festival. And the female dancers perform during the night, from dusk till dawn. According to the oral narratives of the community it is said that female dancers perform at night as all males have to stand guard the village against the enemy during the night. Folk dancers from neighbouring villages in the region too come and participate in the festival. Before the start of the *Rong Kusi* festival the priest of the village along with the elders invoke God by pouring libation to bless the people of the village. This festival is usually held during the spring season. Today, since the advent of foreign religion most of the villages had stopped organizing this festival. Only three or four villages in the entire War-Jaintia area still organize this festival annually.

Ka Rongkhli

The other festival known as the *Rongkhli* is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village. The beauty or the uniqueness about this festival is it does not feature on a regular or annual basis but organized only if and when circumstances prevail. The festival *Rongkhli* is literally translated as 'Tiger festival' is the subject of our research. Therefore let us continue to discover this unique festival which is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village.

Nongtalang Village

Nongtalang is the biggest village in the War-Jaintia area. Nongtalang means the village of *Talang*. A female named *Iawbei* who might have been the ancestral mother of the *Talang* clan was amongst the earliest settlers of the present Nongtalang village. The oral narrative of the inhabitant of this village relates that the First Settlers of Nongtalang village was Shitang Rymbai and his wife, a lady from the Talang clan. Before the people settled in

the present village of Nongtalang, the people originally lived at a village named Amtapoh. They left Amtapoh due to many reasons and one was the inadequate and infertile agricultural land. The first clan that came and settled at Nongtalang village was the Lyngdoh clan and the Talang clan. The present village of Nongtalang thus derived its name from the 'Talang'. It was also believed that religion and administrative system of the village started under the Talang. Those who came to settle at Nongtalang along with the Rymbai clan of Shitang and the Talang were the Pohsnem (Lamin in Nongtalang), Myrchiang, Bareh and Pohti. They were the earliest settlers of the village and were known as the *Ran Twui Threw kur* which the equivalent translation is 'Five Hearth and Six Clans'.

Today the village Nongtalang, has a population of not less than 10000 people (2001 census, GOI) who are predominantly *Niamtynrai* or *Niamchnong* (traditional religion) population. The *Niamtynrai* cremate their dead at a sacred place in the forest, and then the ash and bones are collected and kept in pots and sealed tightly. The pot is then kept in an ossuary or locally known as *Mawbah*. There are as many ossuaries as there are clans and each clan has to keep the ash and bone of their dead in their respective ossuary. If the dead person is a male then a white cloth is tied around the ossuary and the items used by the dead are kept on the side of the ossuary. However if it is a female, then an umbrella is kept opened and tied on top of the ossuary, along with some kitchen wares that are kept at the side. A plate of food, a glass of water and areca nut and betel leave are kept on the side of the ossuary.

The Village

The village administration is run by the *Dorbar* or an assembly. The village *Dorbar* in Nongtalang is known as *ka Dorbar Manniew* where *Manniew* means uncle. Hence *ka Dorbar Manniew* means the *Dorbar* of the uncles. The *Dorbar* consists of the elderly uncles from the twelve *Kur* or clans of the village and these clans are *Lyngdoh*, *Pohsnem*, *Pohrmen*, *Padu*, *Myrchiang*, *Pohlynniar*, *pohchen*, *Bareh*, *Pna-Lamare*, *Mohrmen*, *Pohlong* and *Pohti*. The three important persons in the *Dorbar Manniew* are *U Lyngdoh* or religious priest; he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan, and performs religious rites and ceremonies and also has religious functions. *U Lyngdoh Korbar* or secular priest is yet another important person wherein he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan as well. His function is related to administrative matters and he has to convene and preside over the village *Dorbar*. Another important person is the village Secretary and he must be a literate person to keep pace with the need and change of time and to document everything into writing. The village secretary can be chosen

from the other clans and the post holds a respectable position in the village. Besides these important people, there is a *Maji* or secretary *U Sangot* or an announcer and other elders. Besides the *Dorbar Manniew*, there is also a *Dorbar Chnong* or village council, who runs the whole administration of the village. Adult male members are allowed to participate in this *Dorbar* and it is the *Lyngdoh Korbar*, who presides over the *Dorbar*. The *Lyngdoh's* and *Doloi's* position is passed down within the family members since generations. The people of Nongtalang have many festivals, *Rongkhli*, *Rong Beh Lyngkan*, *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Phur* but some of these festivals are not observed regularly, due to some social change.

Rongkhli: The Tiger Festival

The War-Jaintias have a very rich repository of intangible cultural heritage and these heritages are orally passed on from one generation to another. Many genres of their oral tradition have been totally forgotten or are on the verge of being forgotten altogether. One important festival is the *Rongkhli* which is the subject of our research. It is observed at Nongtalang village when a tiger or its feline like is killed by the residents of the village. In whatever manner the tiger is killed, the goddess of the village is to be worshipped and the festival to be observed. It is believed that if the goddess is not worshipped, calamities and misfortunes like epidemic diseases, starvation, and blindness will befall on the people. The festival is usually held between the months of January - March after the harvesting work is over. Nongtalang village host the *Rongkhli*⁶ or 'Tiger Festival' from time to time, and the most recent one was in the year 2012. How the festival started is the question to which answers are inadequate or vague whatever the answer is. The tradition has it that whenever any person from the village kill a tiger or its feline like, rituals has to be performed. The *Dorbar*⁷ is then summoned by the Chief of the village and a date is decided for the Festival. A month prior to the festival the village drummers starts drumming in preparation of the festival. The most important aspect of this festival is the combination of belief, tale, ritual and performance which is significant in many ways.

Rongkhli: What the people says:

Rongkhli is a religious festival celebrated by the people of Nongtalang village in the War-Jaintia region of Meghalaya. According to the oral tradition, the people of Nongtalang worship two goddesses namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kapong*. *Ka Kapong* demanded from the

⁶ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning 'tiger festival'.

⁷ The village council

people that they should offer to her sacrifices in the form of wild animals. But *Ka Pyrtuh* demanded sacrifices in the form of the tiger or any other of the feline family.

The two goddesses are believed to be the guardian goddesses of the people of Nongtalang. In every household of the people of Nongtalang who still follow the indigenous faith called *Ka Niam Chnong*, two wooden pillars are kept, one of which is kept as a symbol of *Ka Kpong*. On this wooden pillar the horns of the wild animals killed by the members of the household is attached to. Another pillar is kept inside the house; this pillar is for the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*. At this pillar the family members offer their prayers to the goddess who is their guardian and who guard and protect them from all dangers, sickness and misfortunes.

The goddess, it is believed that whenever the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* wants the people to offer her rituals and sacrifices, she would guide and help them get the feline. The festival is a very expensive and elaborate one so people always try to avoid killing the tiger and the like intentionally. When a tiger or its feline like is killed by any member of the village, whether accidentally or intentionally, the clan to which the member belongs has to organise the festival *Rongkhli*. But since the festival involves lots of expenses people cannot afford to organise the festival immediately. Sometimes it may take even years and even decades for the clan to afford to organise this festival. In such cases they have to wait till they have enough resources to organise the festival in honour of *Ka Pyrtuh*. So the clan has to pray and beg the goddess to let them hold the festival only when they could afford. But if the clan members forget to host the festival the goddess would remind them about their promise in the form of sickness, especially eyesore which could at times lead to blindness if they do not pay heed to the goddess's warnings. There are instances where the goddess reminded the particular clan about their duty to perform the *Rongkhli* festival in her honour even after many decades. One such incident happened in the year 2012 where a person from the Lyngdoh clan suddenly developed eyesore. He was taken to the doctors but they could not diagnose his problem, but when the clan performed a divination it was revealed that some decades back the clan members had killed a feline but since they could not afford to organise the festival in honour of the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*, they promise to do so later. But they could not fulfill the promise, so in the year 2012 they whole clan decided to hold the *Rongkhli* festival in honour of the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*. The next day after they decided to hold the festival, a feline was trapped just on the outskirts of the village. So the people believed that they goddess gave them the feline so that the people could offer their prayers and offer sacrifices to *Ka Pyrtuh*.

It is believed that the covenant between the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* and the people of Nongtalang was that when they offer the feline to her as a sacrifice they should do so by celebrating along with music and dance. So, this is how the *Rongkhli* or the Tiger festival came into existence.

The Celebration

Once a tiger or its feline like is killed, the cadaver is kept on the outskirts of the village till necessary rituals are carried out. The ushering in of the tiger's cadaver to the village is the beginning of the festival. The villagers marched to where the tiger's cadaver is kept and bring it to the village dancing to the tune of drums and *tangmuri*⁸ sound. On the first night, the man dances till dawn to keep the tiger company. On the second evening of the festival, the ladies and damsels of the village dance to the accompaniment of the drums and *tangmuri* sound till the next morning. The third and the last day of the festival is a great show of performance as well as rituals. Men of the village dressed in fine traditional warrior attire gather at their respective localities. They then move to the *Rymmusan* ground amidst beating of drums and *tangmuri* sound. Here they dance to the beats of the drums and *tangmuri* sound. The dancers give the finality of the ceremony by performing the warrior dance once again. Thereafter the multitude moves to the easternmost part of the village for the final ritual of the festival where the head of the tiger's head is decapitated. Then the severed head is spiked and erected at the place to ward off evil spirit. If the day belongs to the male dancers, the night belongs to the female dancers. The festival concludes with the dancing by the woman folk well into the night.

Rongkhli is the most important festival which is performed in Nongtalang village by the War-Jaintias. *Rong* means festival and *Khli* means tiger, in the local dialect, hence *Rongkhli* means Tiger Festival. *Rongkhli* festival is not a regular festival but held when a tiger is killed accidentally or on an organized hunt by the villagers mainly by a particular clan. In whatever manner a tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped, or else certain calamities like epidemics, diseases ill luck will befall on the people. However if a tiger enters the village in search of a prey, the tiger is killed and a festival is performed with worshipping of God. Certain rituals have to be performed to appease the '*Kpong*' the hunting deity, which in fact is the beginning of the Religious part of the Festival.

⁸ A musical instrument

Stages of Rongkhli Festival

When a particular clan goes hunting, other clans are also invited to join them. In case a man who does not belong to the hunt organizing clan happen to kill the tiger, the man's clan will not perform the ceremony, but the hunt organizing clan will take the responsibility of organising the festival. As a sign of good gesture the person who kills the tiger will get a turban on the day of the festival. If someone from the hunt organizing clan kills the animal, it is considered a good omen for the clan. Otherwise as per the norm the clan who kills the animal holds the right to organise the festival and perform the ceremony. For instance if a clansman of *Bareh* kills the tiger, then the *Bareh* clan performs the needed ceremony and the festival is called *Ka Rong U Bareh* or the festival of the *Bareh* clan. Thus the particular clan performs the sacrifices and the whole village participates and is involved in the festival.

The festival is mainly held in the month of January to March that is in the dry months. After the tiger is killed, it is kept on the outskirts of the village till the required rituals are completed. After a feline is killed by any clan, the *Lyngdoh* (religious priest) is informed. And after the *Lyngdoh* and the *Dorbar Manniew* agrees, the clan can perform the festival. Usually a two months period is given by the *Lyngdoh* to hold the festival, and if there is any delay then the clan has to pay a fine. If for some inevitable situation the clan responsible cannot perform the festival, they are given the chance to perform it later but by any means they have to perform the sacrifice else the clan would suffer and go through certain calamities and hardships. The tradition is that one month before the festival begins, the village drummers as part of the preparation for the festival start beating their drums in the whole village for a month altogether. The expenditure of the festival is mainly incurred by the particular clan with some amount contributed by the *Dorbar*.

Before the festival start, the organizing clan performs certain rituals and sacrifices. The sacrificial rites are performed with a belief to inform God of the festival. The tiger's body is kept outside the village at the *Phlong* or village gate with its entrails removed and dried. There are two village gates, in the east and west. Before the tiger or its feline like is brought into the village, men dance about to the accompaniment of drums and pipes. However on that day, the men do not wear their traditional attire. The dance is performed in three areas *Mihngi* (East), *Sepngi* (West) and *Phytlaw U Lyngdoh* (The Priest's area). The *Rongkhli* festival is a three day festival where it starts with the bringing of the tiger or its feline like cadaver into

the village. Then followed with the dance which is started by the men on the day the tiger is brought into the village, men and women carry a twig with leaves of any plant with them. They move in a procession with the *Lyngdoh* and *Myntris* in their traditional attire, along with the uncle of the organizing clan leading the way followed by the people. The girls are dressed in their traditional attire. Dance is performed with the playing of drums and pipes as the tiger or its feline like is brought into the village, the people cheer with the beating of drums. The people dance along the way swaying the twig or a plant or banana leaf and a bamboo stick which they hold. The tiger or its feline like is tied on bamboo sticks and brought to the priest's vicinity which serves as the dancing ground. The tiger is kept at a special place with fire burning underneath. The men then dance throughout the night to the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes, and drinking local liquor stored in bamboo poles which is passed from one dancer to another. The liquor is consumed as part of the ritual.

On the first day and the second day of the festival, the *shad Kyltum* or the dance where anyone could join is performed. But the "*Pastiah* or *shad Mastieh* dance can only be participated and perform by the people belonging to the different clans from within the village itself. The *Shad Mastieh* is performed on the last day of the festival. In the early morning, the people leave the dancing ground and go to the elder uncle's house of the organizing clan where certain rite and rituals are performed. The uncle then pour libations and the *Lyngdoh* along with the elders of the *Dorbar Manniew* pray for the well being of the people, like good health, general prosperity, good harvest, protection from evil and they also pray to their ancestors. With the religious ceremonies completed, male dancers perform in front of the elder uncle's house. *Ka Niam Chai Wat* is first performed which is followed by *Ka Mastieh*. In this dance, people from the organising clan would perform first and followed with the dance performed by the person who killed the tiger or its feline like, with his elder uncle. The dance performed by the elder uncle with the *Lyngdoh* or anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan, then follows. The dance of different clans is then performed wherein they dance two by two with dancers from different clan and not the same clan. The dance is performed by a *Rymbui* clan and *Pohti*, *Pohsnem* and *Myrchiang*, *Bareh* and *Padu*, *Paduna* and *Pohrmen*, *Pohlynniar* and *Manar*, *Pohlong* and *Pna*, *Pohing* and anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan. When the dance is completed, then they moved towards the *Lyngdoh*'s house, to show respect where rite and rituals are performed with solemnity. After this, a dance is performed which is similar to the dance at the elder uncle's house. The *Lyngdoh* would dance first with someone from the organising clan. Then it is followed up by the dancers from the different clans.

In the evening, it is mainly performed by young girls and women as well. A married woman can as much participate in the *Rongkhli* dance which makes it unique. Clad in their traditional attire, the men perform in the morning till evening whereas the women perform in the evening till early morning. The dancers are quite amusing as there is fast movement of the body. The girls stand on their toes and move swiftly within the dancing ground which is in circle and turn sideways or moved about in circle. The musicians are seated on a made platform within the dancing ground. What seems more alluring is the tradition of clipping or pinning of money to the dancer's attire, to encourage the dancer as well as in the belief that they would perform better or keep performing. Kids are either in traditional attire or in civil dress. A water boy moves about the dancing ground and provides drinking water for the dancers. The dance is performed accordingly to each clan as directed, wherein if a *Bareh* clan performs in the *Sepngi*, then *Lyngdoh* performs in the *Mihngi*.

In the early morning of the third day, male dancers then perform in their traditional attire, moving about in a fast pace. The male dancers employ the same body movement and moving about in circles but in a much faster movement. The male dancers shout and use rhymes or couplet while dancing. The sword is mainly held in the right side which is not moved much while dancing but in the left hand they carry the fly flab or whisk which is prominently moved. The pinning of money by well wishers is prominent, and it a token of love and affection and also a sign of appreciation for their splendid performance.

In the afternoon, all the people, the dancers, priests and *Myntris* moved from the *Nongtalang Chnong* to *Amlariang*. The tiger is also taken to *Amlariang*, wherein the male dancers particularly the elderly men, performs. The rituals are then performed by the priest who chants and offer prayers. After this, the tiger's head is then decollated from its body and placed on a pole where it is erected on the edge of the *Mawphlong* in *Amlariang* and the carcass of the feline is kept beneath the monolith. However the feline's meat and entrails which has been dried is cut into pieces and thrown by the priest while standing near the monolith. The meat is thrown to a throng of men waiting at the slightly lower part of the hill. In the same place, these men light up a small fire to roast the collected meat and eat them. The meat is consumed in the belief that they will be protected from dangers and evil and luck will favour them. Meat is forbidden to be carried into the interior part of the village and hence it is consumed in the vicinity of the village itself. Women are allowed to eat the meat but they usually refrained from taking part as to not compete with the men. However it has been noted

that the organising clan is not allowed to eat the meat of the feline. If during the previous festival the feline's body is placed in the east gate, in the next festival it will be placed in the west gate and vice versa. Here the religious ceremonies come to an end for the day and each leave for their respective house.

Dress and Ornaments

The attire is what grabs the attention of the spectators, besides the dance movement. The attires of the dancers of *Rongkhli* are rich and vibrant. The female dancers wear a white or red long sleeve blouse, a skirt and a silk *dhara* cloth worn by pinning it on either side of the shoulder covering from neck till the ankle. The *dhara* worn by the women are of different colours and varied motifs. A small shawl is then pinned across the shoulder and tied at the back. Silk ribbons of countless colours are also tied on the back of the dancers where it is symbolic of the colourful festival. The dancers wear their shoes or slippers while dancing while a few dance bare foot.

Gold and coral bead necklaces in different design and size are adorn by the women, and gold bracelets are worn on the wrist. *Sharyndang* is worn on the neck which is made from gold. However some of the dancers replace *Sharyndang* with a lace cloth of golden colour or white colour. The women dancers do stick a bunch of artificial flowers made from paper or wrapping paper into their hair bun. Money is generally pinned on the back side of the dancers while dancing.

Men however do wear a long skirt like which they call it as *Phrok*. The skirt is of white colour with borders which is present in many colours. A white long sleeve shirt is worn and a shawl and a ribbon are worn on either side and are pinned at the waist. A sword is held on the right hand which is symbolic of driving out the evil spirits. A whisk or at times a handkerchief is held on the left hand. A turban of different colour is worn as a head gear with a feather tail of a forest bird, is stuck on the turban. Gold and coral beads necklace is worn from the left side of the shoulder to the right side of the waist. The men wear their shoes while dancing although some men are seen dancing barefoot.

Musical Instruments

Music is food for the soul. For any festival and occasion music is part of it and the absence of music is the nonexistence of dance. During the *Rongkhli* dance, *Ksing or bong*

drum is played along with the *Tangmuri* (a wind pipe) instrument. *Ka bong* is made by hollowing out from a big tree and the rim is covered by an animal's hide and it is in the shape of a 'U'. The drums are played by beating with two sticks. Drums not only provide the beat for the festival, they are used to invite, people to the event. *Tangmuri* is made out of the *japung* reed. The *tangmuri* is considered as the queen of musical instruments. The tunes fluctuate from low to a high pitch, clear and distinct, as the fingers of the musician deftly shift along the seven holes of the pipe, attached at one end to a circular horn. *Tangmuri* has a penetrating effect and is played to the accompaniment of drum-beats during the dance. The musicians are seated at the centre of the dancing ground on a man-made platform, where they play their instruments accordingly. The musicians have the ability to play the instruments mainly by observing the elder musicians and at the same time which is passed down through word of mouth and the skill that is imparted on them. After the permission was passed to hold the festival, the Lyngdoh hands over the drums which are used only during the festival. The dancers mainly depend on the music being played. The role of the musical instruments is demonstrative which leaves its natural and spontaneous effect.

Conclusion

Although the 'Tiger Festival' is organized by a particular clan, yet the people of the village as a whole take equal part. Even people from the neighbouring villages come to take part in the dance and *Tangmuri* competition. Competitors from several villages come to compete and cash prizes are awarded to the winners as well as the losers. The judges are deputed from amongst elders who are knowledgeable of the art and their decision is final. The *Rongkhli* is important because this unique festival congregates together social, religious and cultural aspects of the community. The last ceremony of the festival is the sacrifice, which is known as *Rongchyndi-Rong Khli*, which is held after the festival. It is a concluding ceremony where a goat, two hens, a dove and bananas are offered.

Rongkhli festival is an age old festival and it is interesting to note that the festival has to do with the killing of a tiger or a feline. The festival is celebrated with no regularity. And the last time it was celebrated was in the year 2012. And a clouded leopard in this case was killed a few years before this actual celebration took place. And to be specific it is not always a tiger that is killed and celebrated over it, but any feline. One may view this festival from different perspective; endangerment of the feline species, well being of the populace, economic prospect, religious concern, social bonding and in many ways the Cultural Revival.

So looking at the larger picture that the festival accords for the overall welfare of the people this festival should be given its due importance. Looking ahead legal concern of tiger endangerment (actual tiger is not found in the area) and its killing should be addressed but not at the cost of this traditional festival. Anyways prohibition of the celebration should be looked upon in a more humane ways, because the bigger question is should tradition be put in the back burner and allow Cultural tradition to die out? Here we need to clearly understand that this festival which is a tradition is part of the bigger picture of 'Identity'. Today our identity is being polarized, our cultural attributes are diluted, and our social practices are coming at a costly price. So the best catalyst through which we can identify ourselves in this era is through the practices that our ancestors have handed down to the present generation. Therefore, for the greater good I am sure a single feline hunted in over 05 – 10 years for organizing this festival is not going to lead to the extinction of the feline family as there is no random killing or hunt. This conclusion is again drawn from the people's profound understanding of the ways of nature. The fact of the matter is creating awareness of tiger endangerment could lead to increase in the population of the feline family and not by banning the Tiger festival.

On a brighter note, it is to be noted that when the feline was brought into the vicinity of the village, the people carrying twigs of leaves and banana leaf and crowns twisted out of plants were worn. A magnificent sight where the jungle seems to come alive and looks like welcoming the mighty beast. It is wholesomely clear that this festival brings about for the congregation of the Spiritual world (the goddesses) namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kapong*; the Human world (the people of Nongtalang village) and the Animal world (Tiger or a feline). This amply shows the truly uniqueness of the *Rongkhli* or Tiger festival.

Submission of the 3rd Appraisal on the Scheme for
“Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse
Cultural Traditions of India”

Topic: “Tracing and Documenting the Rongkhli of the War-
Jaintias of Meghalaya”

Title: “Tracing the Rongkhli”

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TRACING THE RONGKHLI

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TRACING THE RONGKHLI

Introduction: Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage accounting and evidence of past events becomes part of the lore of the folks and they are genres like myths, legends, tales, folksongs, traditional knowledge and other knowledgeable trades and knowhow. These genres are passed on from generation to generation over time by word of mouth. The genres of Intangible Cultural Heritage and artistic expression of the folk is never static but keeps on changing with the passage of time. Oral traditions embedded with cultural traits of the community are handed down from one generation to another generation and this process still goes on in the present time. Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social and religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of the contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

Demographic and Cultural Profile of the War-Jaintias

Meghalaya, also known as the abode of cloud is one of the seven sister states in North-East India. It was carved out of Assam in 1972. Its capital, Shillong, is known for its scenic beauty and labeled the name 'Scotland of the East' by the colonial powers since the pre Independence era. The state of Meghalaya is the homeland of the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos, the three dominant communities of the state. Khasi is a nomenclature used to refer to the sub-tribes of the *Hynniew Trep*¹ community living in the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The sub-tribes consist of the *Khyntiam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*² and the *Lyngngam*.

Meghalaya is a hilly region and is well-known for its picturesque landscapes and natural beauty. Rivers like *Umiam Mawphlang*, *Umngot*, *Kynshi*, *Lukha*, *Myntdu*, *Prang* and others from the Khasi and Jaintia hills flow into Bangladesh. The Jaintias inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya which is generally known as Khasi and Jaintia

¹ Meaning the seven huts in the local language

² Refers to the War-Jaintias

hills. Overall Jaintia hills experience a moderate climate except for the sub-montane region in the north and the foothills in the south that experiences hot and humid climate in the summer.

The War-Jaintias

The War-Jaintias occupy the steep slopes in the southern parts of West Jaintia Hills district, where the hills are steep, precipitous and marked by deep gorges and the valleys are deep and beautiful. The narrow strip of land at the foot of these slopes formed the natural boundary with the plain of Bangladesh. The land of the War-Jaintias consists largely of rolling uplands that are dissected by river valleys and abounds in streams, rivers and waterfalls.

The War-Jaintias are a subgroup of the Khasi community who inhabits the southern slope of West Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh. The War-Jaintia community stands apart in their language³, dress, culture and physical features in the midst of other ethnic communities in Northeast India. The origin of the War-Jaintia is shrouded in mystery. Their folklore relates about their divine origin and backed by their popular myth in which the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* (seven huts) came down to earth from the sky through a golden ladder that was located at *Sohpetbneng*⁴ mountain top in the northern part of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

Modern day researchers comment that the ancestors of the War-Jaintias are believed to be probably amongst the earlier group of communities who have emigrated from somewhere in South-East Asia to the Brahmaputra valley where they settled, before finally coming to their present homeland. But in the absence of any credible codified material, it is difficult to ascertain their actual place of origin. Today, the War-Jaintias are concentrated in the East and West Jaintia Hill districts of Meghalaya, in the Barak valley of Assam and in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Today, the War-Jaintias consists of several clans who since time immemorial have migrated from different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills to their present homeland.

³ War-Jaintias have a distinct dialect known as the War dialect that is not intelligible to the Pnars or the Khasis

⁴ Meaning the 'Sky's navel'

The oral history of these clans and how they came to settle to their present space is recounted in their oral tradition known as *Chohnya*.

Traditional Administration

Before the arrival of the British, a Jaintia hill was under a chieftainship known as *Ka Hima Sutnga*, which was again divided into twelve administrative units known as *Eleka* (traditional state) for administrative convenience. The head of the traditional state *Eleka* is *U Doloji* (the administrative head). The *Doloji* have limited authority as per the prevalent custom, they cannot perform any important act without first consulting and the approval of their respective *Durbar* (traditional council). After the *Durbar* is consulted and the approval granted the *Doloji* is free to exercise any administrative power within the *Eleka*.

Matrilineal System

The unique institution among the War-Jaintia is the matrilineal system. Mother kinship is dominant. Due to the matrilineal character of the War-Jaintias, the children adopt the surname of the mother's clan. As the children adopt the mother's clan they belong to the mother, and as such there are no illegitimate child in the community. Whether the woman had bore a child from a man with whom she had gone through a formal marriage or not is not of much consequence. Women enjoy a dignified and respectable position in the War-Jaintia community. They are the custodians of the family's property. A War-Jaintia woman is accorded due respect as she is the one through whom the clan's lineage is propagated and the continuity of the name of the family thereafter.

Kinship

The War-Jaintias consist of several clans who traced their lineage from the ancestral mother (*Ka lawbei*), the founder of the clan. Therefore the kinship system of the War-Jaintias, is different from other Indian communities. The system of kinship amongst the War-Jaintias is based on *Ka Tipkur-tipkha* (to know one's maternal and paternal relatives). It is clan exogamy. Relatives belonging to the father's side young

or old alike are respected. As the War-Jaintias' system of kinship is exogamous, so intermarriage within clans who claim to originate from a common ancestry is prohibited. Intra-clan sexual relationship is the greatest sin and couples who commit such acts are ostracized from the community.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage among the War-Jaintias has both religious and social aspects. It is a big social institution among them. Love marriages are prevalent but arrange marriages also do take place. Amongst the War-Jaintias, the offer for marriage is always initiated by the man. He may court anyone he likes to be his wife. But marriage within the clan or sub-clan is strictly prohibited. When the girl agrees to the boy's proposal, the matter is discussed by their respective family members including the maternal uncle(s). Engagement is the prerequisite of the marriage. The maternal uncles fix the date of marriage. The marriage usually takes place after dusk. During the marriage ceremony the priest invokes the goddess *Ka Blai Synchar* and the exchange of marriage contract and pouring of alcohol libation take place thereon.

One of the most remarkable features of the War-Jaintias' marriage is that it is customary for the husband to go and live with his wife in his mother-in-law's place, and not take his bride home as in the case of other communities. This is mandatory if the wife is the youngest daughter of the family, whereas those who marry the elder daughters may take their wife and live separately after they have one or two children and when they can afford to make their own home.

Divorce cases are known and there are no rigid conditions for divorce, it is the concern of the individual couples that leads to divorce. Divorce therefore is by mutual consent. When the couple wishes for divorce, a witness is called and a simple ritual known as *ai khap*⁵ is performed in the presence of the witness. After the ritual is done, the village crier makes the announcement. Remarriage is prevalent among both men and women.

⁵ The act of paying the witness (any amount) by the couple for his service to be the witness of their divorce

Religion

The indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is known as *Ka Niam Chong* and is based on the ethics of right living and conduct. The religion is based on three tenets; a) to earn righteousness b) to know man and to know God c) to know one's paternal and paternal relations. These tenets are inculcated into the consciousness of the people and thus regulate their thought, words and actions. The War-Jaintias believed in God the Creator. He is represented by a goddess known as '*Ka Prae Shynshor*'. According to the popular origin myth, the War-Jaintias believed that in the beginning there were sixteen huts (*Khadhynnriew Trep*) that were living about with the Supreme God. These sixteen huts use to come down to earth by means of a golden ladder located at the top of *U Sohpetbneng* peak. However the golden ladder was severed because of the jealousy and sinful ways of man. Seven huts got stranded on earth in consequence of their sin. The Seven Huts could no longer communicate with God as before. Thereafter the sun too refused to shine and darkness prevailed over the face of the earth. When this happened, the seven huts looked up to God and pleaded for his mercy. *U Syi* (a rooster) was sent to intercede with God as the mediator between God and man and the connection was restored, though not like before anymore. Thus, from then on *U Syi* was address as the mediator and liberator of mankind. *U Syi* also became the sacrificial element for man and stands as the symbol of the indigenous faith of the War-Jaintias today.

Ka Liahniam lip (death ceremony) is one important constituent of *Ka Niam Chong*. The War-Jaintias honour their death with respect and love. They believe that after death the dead become supernatural beings and are ordained to bless the living. All religious performances such as *ai ji phor* (offering of food to the dead) sacrifices, prayers and invocation are strictly observed. At the deceased of a person a cock is sacrificed as per the covenant with God and the cock acts as a guide of the soul of the deceased and lead the soul into the courtyard of God. It is said that if a cock is not sacrificed, the deceased will not reach the abode of God, the Creator. The other important ceremony related to death is the 'Bone Deposition' ceremony. After the deceased is cremated, the bones are collected and kept in the family ossuary. But those who die a tragic death, their bones are kept apart. The bone

deposition ceremony can be carried out on the same day after the cremation or later on as per the convenience of the deceased family.

The War-Jaintias also worship other gods and goddesses that are subordinates of God the creator. The War-Jaintias always considers the rivers and streams the dwelling place of the gods and goddesses. These deities are the guardians of villages, clans, family etc. These gods and goddesses are in the form of deities who guard the village, rivers and hills or clan deities. Thanksgiving ceremony is performed annually and sacrifices and offerings of animals and fowls are made to propitiate the deities. Another interesting characteristic of the indigenous religion of the War-Jaintias is divination. Egg breaking divination (*Thmat*) is very popular among the followers of the indigenous religion. In this ritual eggs are broken on a sacred wooden board and the signs and omens are interpreted according to the position of the broken egg shell on the board. Another method of divination is by examining the signs and omens through the entrails of the fowls. These divinations are widely practiced by the War-Jaintias.

Festival

To the War-Jaintias festivals and dances are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivity. During these occasions, ceremonies, rites and rituals are performed which show that the people are deeply religious. They pray to God for the general well being, blessings, peace, and prosperity and thank him for the blessings he has showered upon them. During the festival they also get to meet friends and relatives from far and near. The War-Jaintias have festivals which is both religious and festive. The most popular festivals are the *Ka Rong Kusi* and the *Ka Rongkhli* (Tiger Festival). *Rong Kusi* is a festival of folk dance where anybody interested in the dance irrespective of gender can participate. During the festival, the male dancers perform during the day from morning till evening. A war dance form call '*Ka Pastiah*' is performed by the skillful male dancers during the festival. And the female dancers perform during the night, from dusk till dawn. According to the oral narratives of the community it is said that female dancers perform at night as all males have to stand guard the village against the enemy during the night. Folk dancers from neighbouring villages in the region too come and participate in the festival. Before the start of the

Rong Kusi festival the priest of the village along with the elders invoke God by pouring libation to bless the people of the village. This festival is usually held during the spring season. Today, since the advent of foreign religion most of the villages had stopped organizing this festival. Only three or four villages in the entire War-Jaintia area still organize this festival annually.

Ka Rongkhli

The other festival known as the *Rongkhli* is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village. The beauty or the uniqueness about this festival is it does not feature on a regular or annual basis but organized only if and when circumstances prevail. The festival *Rongkhli* is literally translated as 'Tiger festival' is the subject of our research. Therefore let us continue to discover this unique festival which is hosted by the people of Nongtalang village.

Nongtalang Village

Nongtalang is the biggest village in the War-Jaintia area. Nongtalang means the village of *Talang*. A female named *lawbei* who might have been the ancestral mother of the *Talang* clan was amongst the earliest settlers of the present Nongtalang village. The oral narrative of the inhabitant of this village relates that the First Settlers of Nongtalang village was Shitang Rymbai and his wife, a lady from the Talang clan. Before the people settled in the present village of Nongtalang, the people originally lived at a village named Amtapoh. They left Amtapoh due to many reasons and one was the inadequate and infertile agricultural land. The first clan that came and settled at Nongtalang village was the Lyngdoh clan and the Talang clan. The present village of Nongtalang thus derived its name from the 'Talang'. It was also believed that religion and administrative system of the village started under the Talang. Those who came to settle at Nongtalang along with the Rymbai clan of Shitang and the Talang were the Pohsnem (Lamin in Nongtalang), Myrchiang, Bareh and Pohti. They were the earliest settlers of the village and were known as the *Ran Twui Threw kur* which the equivalent translation is 'Five Hearth and Six Clans'.

Today the village Nongtalang, has a population of not less than 10000 people (2001 census, GOI) who are predominantly *Niamtynrai* or *Niamchnong* (traditional religion) population. The *Niamtynrai* cremate their dead at a sacred place in the forest, and then the ash and bones are collected and kept in pots and sealed tightly. The pot is then kept in an ossuary or locally known as *Mawbah*. There are as many ossuaries as there are clans and each clan has to keep the ash and bone of their dead in their respective ossuary. If the dead person is a male then a white cloth is tied around the ossuary and the items used by the dead are kept on the side of the ossuary. However if it is a female, then an umbrella is kept opened and tied on top of the ossuary, along with some kitchen wares that are kept at the side. A plate of food, a glass of water and areca nut and betel leave are kept on the side of the ossuary.

The village administration is run by the *Dorbar* or an assembly. The village *Dorbar* in Nongtalang is known as *ka Dorbar Manniew* where *Manniew* means uncle. Hence *ka Dorbar Manniew* means the *Dorbar* of the uncles. The *Dorbar* consists of the elderly uncles from the twelve *Kur* or clans of the village and these clans are *Lyngdoh*, *Pohsnem*, *Pohrmen*, *Padu*, *Myrchiang*, *Pohlynniar*, *pohchen*, *Bareh*, *Pna-Lamare*, *Mohrmen*, *Pohlong* and *Pohti*. The three important persons in the *Dorbar Manniew* are *U Lyngdoh* or religious priest; he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan, and performs religious rites and ceremonies and also has religious functions. *U Lyngdoh Korbar* or secular priest is yet another important person wherein he is selected from the *Lyngdoh* clan as well. His function is related to administrative matters and he has to convene and preside over the village *Dorbar*. Another important person is the village Secretary and he must be a literate person to keep pace with the need and change of time and to document everything into writing. The village secretary can be chosen from the other clans and the post holds a respectable position in the village. Besides these important people, there is a *Maji* or secretary *U Sangot* or an announcer and other elders. Besides the *Dorbar Manniew*, there is also a *Dorbar Chnong* or village council, who runs the whole administration of the village. Adult male members are allowed to participate in this *Dorbar* and it is the *Lyngdoh Korbar*, who presides over the *Dorbar*. The *Lyngdoh's* and *Doloi's* position is passed down within the family members since generations. The people of Nongtalang have many festivals, *Rongkhli*, *Rong Beh Lyngkan*, *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Phur* but some of these festivals are not observed regularly, due to social change.

Rongkhli: The Tiger Festival

The War-Jaintias have a very rich repository of intangible cultural heritage and these heritages are orally passed on from one generation to another. Many genres of their oral tradition have been totally forgotten or are on the verge of being forgotten altogether. One important festival is the *Rongkhli* which is the subject of our research. It is observed at Nongtalang village when a tiger or its feline like is killed by the residents of the village. In whatever manner the tiger is killed, the goddess of the village is to be worshipped and the festival to be observed. It is believed that if the goddess is not worshipped, calamities and misfortunes like epidemic diseases, starvation, and blindness will befall on the people. The festival is usually held between the months of January - March after the harvesting work is over. Nongtalang village host the *Rongkhli*⁶ or 'Tiger Festival' from time to time, and the most recent one was in the year 2012. How the festival started is the question to which answers are inadequate or vague whatever the answer is. The tradition has it that whenever any person from the village kill a tiger or its feline like, rituals has to be performed. The *Dorbar*⁷ is then summoned by the village Chief and a date is set for the Festival. A month prior to the festival the village drummers starts drumming in preparation of the festival. The most important aspect of this festival is the combination of belief, tale, ritual and performance which is significant in many ways.

Rongkhli: The Versions

Version 1.

During war, there is a practice of chopping enemy's head and spiking them on a pole in ancient days. And this is celebrated by the people in the form of a war dance to the accompaniment of drum and the people shouting for joy for their victory. If this practice is the origin of the tiger festival no one knows. Yet the folklore of the people relates that in the beginning there were sixteen families who stay with God up in the sky. They go and come to earth as they please through a golden ladder. It was so, till seven families known as *U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum*, or the seven huts decided to remain on earth and thereafter the golden ladder was severed.

⁶ *Rong* means festival and *khli* means tiger, literally meaning 'tiger festival'.

⁷ The village council

Then a tree call *Diengiei* grew to be so big, that the earth got overshadowed and became dark. The people tried to cut this tree so that there would be light on earth. They began chopping the tree in the morning till late evening, yet they could not felt it to the ground and so they left for their homes in the evening. They came the following morning and found that the tree was heal and no cut mark of the previous day was found. They were surprised and everyday it was the same but they didn't give up and came back the next morning to cut all over again. They wondered how this happened, then a small bird known as *phreid* (in the local language) felt pity for the people and so disclosed what was happening with the tree. The bird disclosed that it was a tiger who came every night and licked the part of the tree that was cut during the day and then the tree healed. After learning the truth the folks did not take their axes and knives home, but placed them on the parts of the tree that was cut during the day. In the night the tiger appeared and began to lick the tree, but the sharp edges of the axes and the knives cut his tongue. From that night the tiger dare not go and lick the tree anymore. Thereafter the people manage to chop down the mighty tree and light was restored on earth. Since then the tiger looked upon man as enemy and so he asked the goddess to allow him to wage a war against man. The goddess agreed but warns the tiger that if it lost the war its head would be decapitated and spiked on a pole and put at the village gate. Eventually the tiger lost the war and man decollated the tiger's head and spiked and put at the gate to the village as the goddess has warned it. Thus the tiger festival originated.

Version 2.

Another version contents that during the rule of a powerful *Jaintiapur* Chief he wanted a tree which grew in Nongtalang village. Some people from the villages of Pamchedong and Padu went to cut the tree for the chief. But when the people of Nongtalang heard this they prepared their best warriors *U Khew* and *U Ktah* to resist the man from the neighbouring villages. They two warriors were able to overcome the enemies and manage to get some heads of the enemies. On their way home the people of Nongbareh joined the people of Nongtalang in the war dance as a sign of good will. The people of Pamchedong and Padu planned to follow but could not trace them, and heard only the beating of drums. Thus the belief is that after taking the head of the enemy the victors celebrated amidst the beating of drums and playing of

the pipes which showed the way into the origin of the tiger festival where man getting the better of the tiger or a feline continued by its celebration likewise.

Version 3.

Another tale relates that in the earlier days some people kept watch to safeguard the village for the fear of enemy's attack. If enemies come the watchmen head-hunt them and thereafter ran to the village and start beating the drums to alert the villagers of impending danger. This is how the enemies are thwarted of their intention. The drumming continues till the morning hour and keeping the enemies at bay and thus safeguarding the village. On sunrise the people dress up and start dancing. They people thus belief that the Tiger festival of Nongtalang must have originated from this kind of performance by their ancestors.

Rongkhli: What the Custodians say

Rongkhli is a religious festival celebrated by the people of Nongtalang village in the War-Jaintia region of Meghalaya. According to the oral tradition, the people of Nongtalang worship two goddesses namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kapong*. *Ka Kapong* demanded from the people that they should offer to her sacrifices in the form of wild animals. But *Ka Pyrtuh* demanded sacrifices in the form of the tiger or any other of the feline family.

The two goddesses are believed to be the guardian goddesses of the people of Nongtalang. In every household of the people of Nongtalang who still follow the indigenous faith called *Ka Niam Chnong*, two wooden pillars are kept, one of which is kept as a symbol of *Ka Kpong*. On this wooden pillar the horns of the wild animals killed by the members of the household is attached to. Another pillar is kept inside the house; this pillar is for the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*. At this pillar the family members offer their prayers to the goddess who is their guardian and who guard and protect them from all dangers, sickness and misfortunes.

The goddess, it is believed that whenever the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* wants the people to offer her rituals and sacrifices, she would guide and help them get the

feline. The festival is a very expensive and elaborate one so people always try to avoid killing the tiger and the like intentionally. When a tiger or its feline like is killed by any member of the village, whether accidentally or intentionally, the clan to which the member belongs has to organise the festival *Rongkhli*. But since the festival involves lots of expenses people cannot afford to organise the festival immediately. Sometimes it may take even years and even decades for the clan to afford to organise this festival. In such cases they have to wait till they have enough resources to organise the festival in honour of *Ka Pyrtuh*. So the clan has to pray and beg the goddess to let them hold the festival only when they could afford. But if the clan members forget to host the festival the goddess would remind them about their promise in the form of sickness, especially eyesore which could at times lead to blindness if they do not pay heed to the goddess's warnings. There are instances where the goddess reminded the particular clan about their duty to perform the *Rongkhli* festival in her honour even after many decades. One such incident happened in the year 2012 where a person from the Lyngdoh clan suddenly developed eyesore. He was taken to the doctors but they could not diagnose his problem, but when the clan performed a divination it was revealed that some decades back the clan members had killed a feline but since they could not afford to organise the festival in honour of the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*, they promise to do so later. But they could not fulfill the promise, so in the year 2012 they whole clan decided to hold the *Rongkhli* festival in honour of the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh*. The next day after they decided to hold the festival, a feline was trapped just on the outskirts of the village. So the people believed that they goddess gave them the feline so that the people could offer their prayers and offer sacrifices to *Ka Pyrtuh*.

It is believed that the covenant between the goddess *Ka Pyrtuh* and the people of Nongtalang was that when they offer the feline to her as a sacrifice they should do so by celebrating along with music and dance. So, this is how the *Rongkhli* or the Tiger festival came into existence.

The Celebration

Once a tiger or its feline like is killed, the cadaver is kept on the outskirts of the village till necessary rituals are carried out. The ushering in of the tiger's cadaver to

the village is the beginning of the festival. The villagers marched to where the tiger's cadaver is kept and brings it to the village dancing to the tune of drums and *tangmur*⁸ sound. On the first night, the man dances till dawn to keep the tiger company. On the second evening of the festival, the ladies and damsels of the village dances to the accompaniment of the drums and *tangmuri* sound till the next morning. The third and the last day of the festival is a great show of performance as well as rituals. Man of the village dressed in fine traditional warrior attire gathers at their respective localities. They then move to the *Rymmusan* ground amidst beating of drums and *tangmuri* sound. Here they dance to the beats of the drums and *tangmuri* sound. The dancers give the finality of the ceremony by performing the warrior dance once again. Thereafter the multitude moves to the easternmost part of the village for the final ritual of the festival where the head of the tiger's head is decapitated. Then the severed head is spiked and erected at the place to ward off evil spirit. If the day belongs to the male dancers, the night belongs to the female dancers. The festival concludes with the dancing by the woman folk well into the early morning of the following day.

Rongkhli is the most important festival which is performed in Nongtalang village. *Rong* means festival and *Khli* means tiger hence *Rongkhli* meaning 'Tiger Festival'. *Rongkhli* festival is not a regular festival but held when a feline is killed accidentally or on an organized hunt by the villagers or by a particular clan. In whatever manner a feline is killed, God is to be worshipped, or calamities like epidemics, diseases ill luck will befall on the people. However if a tiger enters the village in search of a prey, the tiger is killed and a festival is organised. Certain rituals have to be performed to appease the '*Kpong*' the hunting deity, which in fact is the beginning of the Religious part of the Festival.

Stages of *Rongkhli* Festival

When a particular clan goes hunting, other clans are also invited to join them. In case a man who does not belong to the hunt organizing clan happen to kill the tiger, the man's clan will not perform the ceremony, but the hunt organizing clan will

⁸ A musical instrument

take the responsibility of organising the festival. As a sign of good gesture the person who kills the tiger will get a turban on the day of the festival. If someone from the hunt organizing clan kills the animal, it is considered a good omen for the clan. Otherwise as per the norm the clan who kills the animal holds the right to organise the festival and perform the ceremony. For instance if a clansman of *Bareh* kills the tiger, then the *Bareh* clan performs the needed ceremony and the festival is called *Ka Rong U Bareh* or the festival of the *Bareh* clan. Thus the particular clan performs the sacrifices and the whole village participates and is involved in the festival.

The festival is mainly held in the month of January to March that is in the dry months. After the tiger is killed, it is kept on the outskirts of the village till the required rituals are completed. After a feline is killed by any clan, the *Lyngdoh* (religious priest) is informed. And after the *Lyngdoh* and the *Dorbar Manniew* agrees, the clan can perform the festival. Usually a two months period is given by the *Lyngdoh* to hold the festival, and if there is any delay then the clan has to pay a fine. If for some inevitable situation the clan responsible cannot perform the festival, they are given the chance to perform it later but by any means they have to perform the sacrifice else the clan would suffer and go through certain calamities and hardships. The tradition is that one month before the festival begins, the village drummers as part of the preparation for the festival start beating their drums in the whole village for a month altogether. The expenditure of the festival is mainly incurred by the particular clan with some amount contributed by the *Dorbar*.

Before the festival start, the organizing clan performs certain rituals and sacrifices. The sacrificial rites are performed with a belief to inform God of the festival. The tiger's body is kept outside the village at the *Phlong* or village gate with its entrails removed and dried. There are two village gates, in the east and west. Before the tiger or its feline like is brought into the village, men dance about to the accompaniment of drums and pipes. However on that day, the men do not wear their traditional attire. The dance is performed in three areas *Mihngi* (East), *Sepngi* (West) and *Phytlaw U Lyngdoh* (The Priest's area). The *Rongkhli* festival is a three day festival where it starts with the bringing of the tiger or its feline like cadaver into the village. Then followed with the dance which is started by the men on the day the tiger is brought into the village, men and women carry a twig with leaves of any plant with

them. They move in a procession with the *Lyngdoh* and *Myntris* in their traditional attire, along with the uncle of the organizing clan leading the way followed by the people. The girls are dressed in their traditional attire. Dance is performed with the playing of drums and pipes as the tiger or its feline like is brought into the village, the people cheer with the beating of drums. The people dance along the way swaying the twig or a plant or banana leaf and a bamboo stick which they hold. The tiger or its feline like is tied on bamboo sticks and brought to the priest's vicinity which serves as the dancing ground. The tiger is kept at a special place with fire burning underneath. The men then dance throughout the night to the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes, and drinking local liquor stored in bamboo poles which is passed from one dancer to another. The liquor is consumed as part of the ritual.

On the first day and the second day of the festival, the *shad Kylvum* or the dance where anyone could join is performed. But the "*Pastiah* or *shad Mastieh* dance can only be participated and perform by the people belonging to the different clans from within the village itself. The *Shad Mastieh* is performed on the last day of the festival. In the early morning, the people leave the dancing ground and go to the elder uncle's house of the organizing clan where certain rite and rituals are performed. The uncle then pour libations and the *Lyngdoh* along with the elders of the *Dorbar Manniew* pray for the well being of the people, like good health, general prosperity, good harvest, protection from evil and they also pray to their ancestors. With the religious ceremonies completed, male dancers perform in front of the elder uncle's house. *Ka Niam Chai Wat* is first performed which is followed by *Ka Mastieh*. In this dance, people from the organising clan would perform first and followed with the dance performed by the person who killed the tiger or its feline like, with his elder uncle. The dance performed by the elder uncle with the *Lyngdoh* or anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan, then follows. The dance of different clans is then performed wherein they dance two by two with dancers from different clan and not the same clan. The dance is performed by a *Rymbui* clan and *Pohti*, *Pohsnem* and *Myrchiang*, *Bareh* and *Padu*, *Paduna* and *Pohrmen*, *Pohlynniar* and *Manar*, *Pohlong* and *Pna*, *Pohing* and anyone from the *Lyngdoh* clan. When the dance is completed, then they moved towards the *Lyngdoh*'s house, to show respect where rite and rituals are performed with solemnity. After this, a dance is performed which is similar to the dance at the

elder uncle's house. The *Lyngdoh* would dance first with someone from the organising clan. Then it is followed up by the dancers from the different clans.

In the evening, it is mainly performed by young girls and women as well. A married woman can as much participate in the *Rongkhli* dance which makes it unique. Clad in their traditional attire, the men perform in the morning till evening whereas the women perform in the evening till early morning. The dancers are quite amusing as there is fast movement of the body. The girls stand on their toes and move swiftly within the dancing ground which is in circle and turn sideways or moved about in circle. The musicians are seated on a made platform within the dancing ground. What seems more alluring is the tradition of clipping or pinning of money to the dancer's attire, to encourage the dancer as well as in the belief that they would perform better or keep performing. Kids are either in traditional attire or in civil dress. A water boy moves about the dancing ground and provides drinking water for the dancers. The dance is performed accordingly to each clan as directed, wherein if a *Bareh* clan performs in the *Sepngi*, then *Lyngdoh* performs in the *Mihngi*.

In the early morning of the third day, male dancers then perform in their traditional attire, moving about in a fast pace. The male dancers employ the same body movement and moving about in circles but in a much faster movement. The male dancers shout and use rhymes or couplet while dancing. The sword is mainly held in the right side which is not moved much while dancing but in the left hand they carry the fly flab or whisk which is prominently moved. The pinning of money by well wishers is prominent, and it a token of love and affection and also a sign of appreciation for their splendid performance.

In the afternoon, all the people, the dancers, priests and *Myntris* moved from the *Nongtalang Chnong* to *Amlariang*. The tiger is also taken to *Amlariang*, wherein the male dancers particularly the elderly men, performs. The rituals are then performed by the priest who chants and offer prayers. After this, the tiger's head is then decollated from its body and placed on a pole where it is erected on the edge of the *Mawphlong* in *Amlariang* and the carcass of the feline is kept beneath the monolith. However the feline's meat and entrails which has been dried is cut into pieces and thrown by the priest while standing near the monolith. The meat is thrown

to a throng of men waiting at the slightly lower part of the hill. In the same place, these men light up a small fire to roast the collected meat and eat them. The meat is consumed in the belief that they will be protected from dangers and evil and luck will favour them. Meat is forbidden to be carried into the interior part of the village and hence it is consumed in the vicinity of the village itself. Women are allowed to eat the meat but they usually refrained from taking part as to not compete with the men. However it has been noted that the organising clan is not allowed to eat the meat of the feline. If during the previous festival the feline's body is placed in the east gate, in the next festival it will be placed in the west gate and vice versa. Here the religious ceremonies come to an end for the day and each leave for their respective house.

Dress and Ornaments

The attire is what grabs the attention of the spectators, besides the dance movement. The attires of the dancers of *Rongkhli* are rich and vibrant. The female dancers wear a white or red long sleeve blouse, a skirt and a silk *dhara* cloth worn by pinning it on either side of the shoulder covering from neck till the ankle. The *dhara* worn by the women are of different colours and varied motifs. A small shawl is then pinned across the shoulder and tied at the back. Silk ribbons of countless colours are also tied on the back of the dancers where it is symbolic of the colourful festival. The dancers wear their shoes or slippers while dancing while a few dance bare foot.

Gold and coral bead necklaces in different design and size are adorn by the women, and gold bracelets are worn on the wrist. *Sharyndang* is worn on the neck which is made from gold. However some of the dancers replace *Sharyndang* with a lace cloth of golden colour or white colour. The women dancers do stick a bunch of artificial flowers made from paper or wrapping paper into their hair bun. Money is generally pinned on the back side of the dancers while dancing.

Men however do wear a long skirt like which they call it as *Phrok*. The skirt is of white colour with borders which is present in many colours. A white long sleeve shirt is worn and a shawl and a ribbon are worn on either side and are pinned at the waist. A sword is held on the right hand which is symbolic of driving out the evil

spirits. A whisk or at times a handkerchief is held in the left hand. A turban of different colour is worn as a head gear with a feather tail of a forest bird, is stuck on the turban. Gold and coral beads necklace is worn from the left side of the shoulder to the right side of the waist. The men wear their shoes while dancing although some men are seen dancing barefoot.

Musical Instruments

Music is food for the soul. For any festival and occasion music is part of it and the absence of music is the nonexistence of dance. During the *Rongkhli* dance, *Ksing or bong* drum is played along with the *Tangmuri* (a wind pipe) instrument. *Ka bong* is made by hollowing out from a big tree and the rim is covered by an animal's hide and it is in the shape of a 'U'. The drums are played by beating with two sticks. Drums not only provide the beat for the festival, they are used to invite, people to the event. *Tangmuri* is made out of the *japung* reed. The *tangmuri* is considered as the queen of musical instruments. The tunes fluctuate from low to a high pitch, clear and distinct, as the fingers of the musician deftly shift along the seven holes of the pipe, attached at one end to a circular horn. *Tangmuri* has a penetrating effect and is played to the accompaniment of drum-beats during the dance. The musicians are seated at the centre of the dancing ground on a man-made platform, where they play their instruments accordingly. The musicians have the ability to play the instruments mainly by observing the elder musicians and at the same time which is passed down through word of mouth and the skill that is imparted on them. After the permission was passed to hold the festival, the Lyngdoh hands over the drums which are used only during the festival. The dancers mainly depend on the music being played. The role of the musical instruments is demonstrative which leaves its natural and spontaneous effect.

Conclusion

Although the 'Tiger Festival' is organized by a particular clan, yet the people of the village as a whole take equal part. Even people from the neighbouring villages come to take part in the dance and *Tangmuri* competition. Competitors from several villages come to compete and cash prizes are awarded to the winners as well as the

losers. The judges are deputed from amongst elders who are knowledgeable of the art and their decision is final. The *Rongkhli* is important because this unique festival congregates together social, religious and cultural aspects of the community. The last ceremony of the festival is the sacrifice, which is known as *Rongchyndi-Rong Khli*, which is held after the festival. It is a concluding ceremony where a goat, two hens, a dove and bananas are offered.

Rongkhli festival is an age old festival and it is interesting to note that the festival has to do with the killing of a tiger or a feline. The festival is celebrated with no regularity. And the last time it was celebrated was in the year 2012. And a clouded leopard in this case was killed a few years before this actual celebration took place. And to be specific it is not always a tiger that is killed and celebrated over it, but any feline. One may view this festival from different perspectives; endangerment of the feline species, well being of the populace, economic prospect, religious concern, social bonding and in many ways the Cultural Revival. So looking at the larger picture that the festival accords for the overall welfare of the people this festival should be given its due importance. Looking ahead legal concern of tiger endangerment (actual tiger is not found in the area) and its killing should be addressed but not at the cost of this traditional festival. Anyways prohibition of the celebration should be looked upon in a more humane way, because the bigger question is should tradition be put in the back burner and allow Cultural tradition to die out? Here we need to clearly understand that this festival which is a tradition is part of the bigger picture of 'Identity'. Today our identity is being polarized, our cultural attributes are diluted, and our social practices are coming at a costly price. So the best catalyst through which we can identify ourselves in this era is through the practices that our ancestors have handed down to the present generation. Therefore, for the greater good I am sure a single feline hunted in over 05 – 10 years for organizing this festival is not going to lead to the extinction of the feline family as there is no random killing or hunt. This conclusion is again drawn from the people's profound understanding of the ways of nature. The fact of the matter is creating awareness of tiger endangerment could lead to increase in the population of the feline family and not by banning the Tiger festival.

On a brighter note, it is to be noted that when the feline was brought into the vicinity of the village, the people carrying twigs of leaves and banana leaf and crowns twisted out of plants were worn. A magnificent sight where the jungle seems to come alive and looks like welcoming the mighty beast. It is wholesomely clear that this festival brings about for the congregation of the Spiritual world (the goddesses) namely; *Ka Pyrtuh* and *Ka Kapong*; the Human world (the people of Nongtalang village) and the Animal world (Tiger or a feline). This amply shows the truly uniqueness of the *Rongkhli* or Tiger festival.



Fig. 1. Young male participants



Fig. 2. Young female participants



Fig. 3. A Young Dancers



Fig 4. Dancers



Fig. 5. The Feline



Fig. 6. The Drummers



Fig. 7. The Duel



Fig. 8. The final journey



Fig. 9. Invocation



Fig.10. Libation



Fig. 11. Decollate



Fig.12. Spiking the head



Fig. 13. Dancing damsels of the night



Fig. 14. The Night Queens
