

THE YOUTH DORMITORY SYSTEM AMONG THE TIWA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGES

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ABSTRACT

The youth dormitory system among the Tiwa tribe of North East India is an important social institution. So far very limited studies have been undertaken solely devoted to this system. The Tiwa youth dormitory is known as the *Chamadi*. It is not only a meeting place for all the male members of a Tiwa village but also an institution of non formal education. It is a seat of learning for the younger generations. They learn music, dance, handicraft and other essential facts of life at the *Chamadi*. However with the progress of time and emergence of modern education system the significance of the *Chamadi* has drastically reduced. This paper is an attempt to highlight the various aspect of the Chamadi system among the Tiwa tribe and to understand its continuity and changes.

KEYWORDS: Chamadi, Dormitory, Tiwa

INTRODUCTION

Ethnographers and the British colonial officers studied about many ethnic tribes of North East India. In their studies the youth dormitory system occupied a significant place. The English word 'dormitory' is derived from the Latin word *dormitorium* signifies a communal or collective sleeping quarter. This word is inappropriate for the communal sleeping quarter, which is like a preparatory school for the tribal children. During the colonial period Shakespear¹ studied about the Mizo youth dormitory. Gurdon² talked about the dormitory system among the war clan of the Khasi tribe. He observed that the bachelor dormitory system is Tibeto-Burman trait.³ Endle⁴ write about once the bachelor dormitory system was obtained among the Kachari in the past but all traces have disappeared. Hutton⁵ also opined that this system was prevalent among the Kacharis in Assam but discontinued due to cultural change. Similarly Haimendorf⁶ and Hutton⁷ studied the dormitory system of various Naga tribes of North East India. In the post independence period some scholars carried out studies on this system while dealing with other aspects of particular tribes. There were some works on the Tiwa which also dealt with the dormitory system. However so far no systematic studies solely dedicated to this system is yet to be made. Hence this paper examines the youth dormitory system of the Tiwa and discusses about its continuity and change. It gives a brief descriptive account of the traditional youth dormitory system of the *Chamadi*. This paper is primarily based on colonial and contemporary writings and filed studies.

The Tiwa Tribe

The Tiwa are one of the many tribal groups in North-East India. They are one of the early settlers of North east India. Ancient scriptures mentioned the earliest inhabitants of Assam as *Kirata*. In the puranas Kirata are designated as foresters, barbarians, mountaineers. The Mahabharata mentioned these early inhabitants of Assam as *Mlechhas*. According to B.K. Baruah⁸ these *Kirata* and *Mlechhas* are the Mongolians belongs to the Tibeto-Buraman family of the Indo-Chinese group and their representatives of the present day are the Kacharis, Koches Rabhas, Lalungs(Tiwa), Garos. Therefore the

Tiwa are also part of the *Kirata* group mentioned in the scriptures of ancient Assam. Settled in Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya, they have long been referred to as “Lalung” by other neighboring groups (Khasi-Jaintia, Karbi). They are also referred as Lalungs in the Assamese chronicles or the *Buranjis* and in colonial records. However the *Buranjis* used different words to mean the Lalung people in different context. Sometime they are referred as Garo and sometime as *Dantiyalias*⁹. The Ambiguity regarding the people by the nomenclature Tiwa will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. The people in question however refer to themselves as Tiwa. They are divided into two cultural and social divisions- those settled in the plains, speak Assamese, follow a patrilineal descent system and bear Assamese patronyms, and those residing in the hills, who speak a Tibeto-Burmese language of the Bodo-Garo group, are primarily matrilineal and divided into clearly identified clans from which they trace their descent. Thus the Tiwa follow a bilineal descent system or more specifically an ambilineal descent. This system recognizes that a person is descended from both parents, but allows for choice in determining which descent group to be more affiliated to and is therefore characterized by bilocal residence, in which choice is available between living near or with the family of the bride or groom.¹⁰ In most cases, the husband goes to live in his wife's family settlement (matrilocality), and their children are included in their mother's clan. However, when the woman goes to live with her husband (patrilocality), the children take the name of their father. While the ‘hill Tiwa’ profess their ‘traditional’ religion, the ‘plains Tiwa’ are by and large, Hindu. The Tiwa religion is based on the worship of natural forces. However since the 1950s there has been a growing number of converts to Christianity. Despite the differences between the hill and plains Tiwa cited above, both groups claim a common ancestry. They both claim a close association with the principality of Gobha¹¹ which is mentioned in the *Buranjis*¹² since the early 18th century, as an important market center of trade between the Ahom and the Jaintia kingdom. They further claim that the Gobha *raja* belonged to a Tiwa clan and that his territory covers more or less the Tiwa dominated areas. However there is very little information about this principality. The attachment of the Tiwa to the legendary Gobha *Raja*¹³ depicted as a sacred figure is significant and continues to exert significant socio-religious influence among the Tiwa.

The Chamadi

Like other tribes of North East India the Tiwa have also their youth dormitory. the Tiwa call it as the *Chamadi*. It is the most important system still prevalent among the Tiwa especially the hill Tiwa. . It may be called a kind of social tribal commune where village youth are trained in their traditional way of life. The *Chamadi* system provide an opportunity for the Tiwa youths to acquire a spirit of cooperation, responsibility and certain amount of skill essential for a traditional way of life. However the bad news is that the *Chamadi* is fast disappearing among the Tiwa. The village which has still poses this system is only for ceremonial purpose. The *Chamadi* is an indispensable part of social and religious life of the hill Tiwa. It is a seat of learning for the younger generations. They learn music, dance, handicraft and other essential facts of life at the *Chamadi*. The youth joins the *Chamadi* when they attain ten to twelve years old and remains as members until sixteen to nineteen years, that is, till they get married. It is a huge hall of around 40/50 fit long and 20/25 fit wide. It is constructed on wooden posts raised a few feet above the ground. The *Chamadi* is built in the middle of a village so that every person in the village can be easily access to it. The hall has no walls on either sides and covers floor with bamboo mats. Unmarried youth of the villages are generally spent the night at the *Chamadi*. There is no restriction on the married youths sleeping in the dormitory. However, entry of women is restricted in the *Chamadi*. A managing committee is formed to look after the affairs of the Chamadi which is known as “*Panthai Khel*”. The three main post of the *Chamadi* is named after the three main officials of the Panthai Khel. They are Changdoloi, Changmaji , and Suruma. These three posts are

called as *Thamkhunda*. The entire *Chamadi* is divided into four undemarcated parts, each with a specific purpose. The area in front of the main post Changdoloi is known as *Nomaji*. It is used for observation of different ceremonies. The portion behind *Nomaji* is called *Nukthi*. It is used for meeting purposes. Besides there are two fire-places, the front one is meant for the village elders and guests and the rear one is for the officials of the dormitory (*Panthai khel*). There are definite assign places for the officials of the dormitory according to the portfolio in the fire-place around which large wooden planks are placed for setting. All members of the dormitory are expected to follow the protocol for the smooth functioning of the *Chamadi*. The firewood is stored under the raised platform in large quantity so that it can be used sufficiently during the winter and rainy session. The cross beams of the *Chamadi* is decorated with carvings of developed female breast or *Chujhu*. In addition, geometrical designs, forms of animals and birds are incited on the posts.

The Origin

The exact origin of the *Chamadi* among the Tiwa is not known. However according to the traditional beliefs it is the place where the Lampha Raja resides. Among the hill Tiwa Lampha Raja is considered to be as one of the benevolent deity. Hence the *Chamadi* is no less than a holy shrine for the Tiwa. The mantra/ hymens chanted at the ceremony, held before going to the jungle to procure the main post for the *Chamadi* is noted below.

oi' pha deuri hatari

ta' etha porlena

tao konong oi charibhai charikora

lampha rajane pale chinge etha

jella lanina ta' porlena porbena

oi deu charibhai charikora....

Translation

Oh father deuri hatari! Today we all pray for charibhai charikora! We request permission from our deity charibhai charikora to construct the *Chamadi*: the residence Lampha Raja and to select village elders.

In this hymens we find that the villagers asking permission from their high god Charibhai Charikora to construct the house of Lampha Raja where village elders will be selected. It is worthwhile to mention that the council of elders or *pisai*¹⁴ of a Tiwa village selected and installed at the *Chamadi*. It indicates the importance of the *Chamadi* in the socio-religious matters. Hence the *Chamadi* system can be attributed to the society formation and religious beliefs of the Tiwa. This system may be as old as the Tiwa society itself.

Shyamchoudhuri¹⁵ opined that the avoidance of incest could be a cause of the origin of the *Chamadi* system. He referred to Sinha's suggestion about the Garos tribe where the main aim of the dormitory system is to safeguard against the probable incest, as in their cultural development the unconscious oedipus and incest feeling are comparatively strong.¹⁶ But it is not possible to say that the avoidance of incest or keeping down the unconscious oedipus by separating the boy from the night stay at his home is the main motivation behind the dormitory organization among the Tiwa. As avoidance of incest is not a peculiar psychological phenomenon of the tribal society. It is a common social trait in all societies. The carvings of developed female breast on the crossbeams of the dormitory perhaps emanate from sex repression. But it

may also be argued that frank and bold displays of sexual parts of female body in these carvings are intended to free the inmates from inhibition. Hence the theory of incest cannot be approved altogether.

If we look at the main aim and objective of the *Chamadi* system we observed that the *Chamadi* is a place where all boys get training and motivation essential for a traditional way of life at an important age. The dormitory life makes them understand and acquire the knowledge about the community life of the village. It enables them to take part in the social activities thereby exposing themselves for improving personality and leadership quality. The *Chamadi* also provide security to the village. The presence of the youths in the middle of the village provides a sense of security to the villagers. Moreover the *Chamadi* is a common meeting place for the village where important decisions regarding socio-religious aspects are taken. Hence, the above discussion indicates that the *Chamadi* system among the Tiwa emerged to maintain spirit of community life and to prepare and train the youths for their future life.

Construction

There are general similarities in the pattern of construction and size of the dormitory between the Lalungs and the other tribes of Assam.¹⁷ However at present it is very hard to find any bachelor dormitory in any of the tribes of Northeast India. To procure the three main posts for the *Chamadi* specific rituals are observed. Before the tree is cut from the jungle the member of the *Panthai Khel* identifies the tree and along with the *Pisai* they offer sacrifice under the tree. They pour rice beer (*Chulaw*) on the five pieces of bamboo leaf. It is done in order to please the tree god, so that no harm is inflicted upon the members of the village. After the ritual the three main officials Changdolo, Changmaji and Huruma initiate the cutting of the tree by an axe. After one shot they wait for a moment to listen any kind of noise inside the tree. If any sound is heard then the official is advised to consult with a priest for the danger they may occur to *Changdolo*. After that the other members of the village cuts the tree and brings to the construction site. The three main posts are beautifully decorated by the experts and it is established formally on the construction site on Wednesday. After 6 years on the occasion of *Khelchawa* Festival the villagers dismantle the old *Chamadi* and a new one is constructed.

Inauguration

A special programme called *Changtuwa* is organized after one week from completion of the *Chamadi*. On that day the *Chamadi* is decorated with branches and leaves of mango tree. Gravy of rice powder is sprinkled inside the *Chamadi*. One cock and a bowl of rice powder is collected from the Changdolo, Changmaji, and Suruma's house. These are offered to "Lampharaja" (deity) under the *Thamkhunda*. At the moment of offerings everyone is asked to maintain complete silence. They believe that the deity comes to accept the offerings. After that the people starts *Takhrapala*, *Peraypala* (frog dance) *Mothalpala* (Squirrel dance) to express their happiness.

Membership

Membership of the village *Chamadi* was compulsory for every boy of the village. A Tiwa boy enters into the dormitory at an age of ten and remains there for twelve years. During the *khelchawa* festival the leader of the *Panthai Khel* goes to the house of every eligible boy and informs about the new recruitment to the *Chamadi*. Later in the evening the mother of the boy goes to the village chief (*Loro*) house where all the *Pisais* gathers. She presents her son to the assembly and sings "Oh respected village elders in compliance with your order which is the code of conduct of our tribe and that of the *Chamadi* should continue, I have come to present you one of your helpers, whom you will give the necessary training and understanding in upholding our glory. I pray that you will always run the *Chamadi* in strict discipline and keep high

its cause, do justice to all and extend help to the villagers, so that we may live and prosper in peace". This procedure is repeated by the mothers of every boy and may take a long time to complete the recruitment process. It shows the commitment of the boys' family towards the dormitory organization and significance of the community life of the Tiwa society. The newly enrolled members are placed under the junior group known as *Korkhiya-panthai*. He has to stay in this group for at least six years. During this period he works under the strict supervision of the senior group known as the *Khra-panthai*. He needs to bring water, firewood and take care of the requirements of the *Chamadi*. The boy sometime arranges the beds for the seniors and do odd works that may required of him in the *Chamadi*. The senior makes sure that the junior boy strictly follows the rigid decorum towards their seniors. Three most important leader of the *Panthai khel* of the *Chamadi*, Changdoloi, Changmaji and Huruma is selected is selected from among the senior group. The Main function of the *Panthai Khel* or the leaders of the *Chamadi* is to maintain discipline among the boys. As the head of the *Chamadi*, the Changdoloi is responsible for the overall supervision of the institution. He always takes the lead in every community work. The Changdoloi is assisted by a deputy called Changmaji. He is the in charge of the dresses and musical instruments required for the boys on various festive occasions. The next most important official of the *Chamadi* is the Huruma. He is responsible for the maintenance and cleanliness of village paths. He also needs to look after the water sources from where drinking water is obtained. Moreover the Huruma has to keeps watch of the entire village during the festive occasions. He is assisted by Hurumaphali in discharging various duties.

Among the Tiwa the boys must not sleep outside the dormitory. One may stay at home on account of illness, but must return to the *Chamadi* as soon one recovers. In case a boys refuse to come to the *Chamadi* without any sickness or valid reason, the leaders of the *Panthai khel* goe to the boy's house. If he disobeys the leaders of the *Panthai khel*, the case is forwarded to the *Pisai* of the village. Generally the parents of the boy is fined even after the boy agrees to go to the *Chamadi*. However if they refuses to send the boy to the dormitory, the whole family is ostracized and forced to leave the village.

After spending six years in the junior group a boy becomes eligible to enter into the senior group. This promotion is an important event in the *Chamadi* system as it is also the time of retirement of the senior group and selection of the new *Panthai khel*. It is the time to demolish the old *Chamadi* and construction of a new one. A Tiwa can marry only when they are in senior group. In case a senior boy continues to remain unmarried, he merely sleeps as usual in the *Chamadi* but lives a retired life keeping him aloof from the other boys. He also does not receive any respect and services from the junior boys.

Effect of Christianity, Western Education and Modernization

With spread of colonial rule Christianity and western education was introduced in the North eastern part of India. It has a profound and far reaching impact on the society of all the tribes of, including the Tiwa. The Christian missionaries are never in favour of an institution which may hinder towards spreading the Christian faith. The Tiwa Christian village does not have the *Chamadi* as it is considered to be a symbol of indigenous faith. Here the Church has taken over the functions of the *Chamadi*. Even in the traditional villages the function of the *Chamadi* has changed considerably. The *Chamadi* was an institution for non formal education for the bachelors and young children's of the villages in the past as there was no formal educational institution in the pre literate Tiwa society. Hence the *Chamadi* acted as a learning place for the children and youth. They learn how to gather firewood from the jungle, make bamboo mats, making and playing of musical instruments. Besides they learn ways of cultivation while working in the community land. It enables them to live a cooperative life. However, with the emergence of formal education and modernization and consequent changes in habits

and tastes many of the Tiwa consider the *Chamadi* as impractical institution. With the passage of time in many traditional Tiwa villages the *Pisai* and *Panthal Khel* loss the command and control of the village. It resulted in lack of discipline among the village boys who are more interested in using modern gadgets like television and cell phones etc. Moreover the parents are also insist their children being at home and study to cope with the modern day challenges. Hence the boys could get little time to visit the dormitory or even if he goes he does not sleeps there at night.

The Chamadi Today

Today in Tiwa Christian villages the *Chamadi* is not in existence. However it still exists in non Christian villages but it lacks the activeness and vigour of the past. Traditional cultural education has taken a back seat. It is only during festivals or socio-religious events that the people gathers in the dormitory and works together. Moreover due to disappearance of forest and restriction on cutting of trees made it very difficult to procure large trees required for the construction of *Chamadi*. Consequently the *Chamadis* are made out of brick and cement which has completely change its original shape and design.¹⁸ These *Chamadis* are just for showcasing the Tiwa culture but not for practical use. Inactiveness of the *Chamadi* has resulted in lack of discipline and sense of cooperative life among the youths of new generation. Though the function of the *Chamadi* has considerably changed but still Tiwa people considers it to be institution of reverence and love. In some of the villages the *Panthal khel* is actively involved in organizing trainings on traditional dances and musical instruments etc. they also conducts various community works in the village.

CONCLUSIONS

For the hill Tiwa *Chamadi* is an institution by itself. It can be taken as the integrating symbol in which lies the inherent strength and individuality of the village life. It is the meeting place of the village elders to discuss important matters. On such occasions, the young boys learn their social norms and customs which enable them to continue their age old tradition. At present, academic institutions like schools and colleges have taken over the educating and socializing role of the *Chamadi*. As such traditional songs, music and folklores hardly taught and learned by the younger generation. as a result, this gradually leads to the loss of traditions and cultures as these are confined to a handful of people. the point to make here is that efforts should be made to preserve the *Chamadi* institution for the greater benefit of the Tiwa people and preservation of culture.

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9. The *Deodhai Asam Buranji* included a separate chapter by the name *Dantiyalia Buranji* where it talks about the people of margins/borders adjacent to the Ahom territory. The Ahom chroniclers referred to the Lalung and Mikir as the *Datiyalias*.
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11. Presently Gobha is a revenue village under Morigaon district of Assam on the foothills bordering the Karbi Anglong district of Assam and the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya.
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13. The Tiwa people believe that the first Gobha *raja* was born in a sacred mountain called Tinimawflang situated between the present borders of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam and the East Khasi hills district of Meghalaya. He is closely associated with the *Junbill* fair organized every year in the month of January near Jagiroad, where the Tiwa, Khasi, Jaintia and Karbi people exchange their commodities with the plains people on the first day of the fair. Many Tiwa consider the Gobha *raja* as a sacred figure and believe that he can purify their sin with the holy water "*Ti-khumur*".
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18. Important Tiwa villages like Bormarjong, Amsai, Natral etc. the Chamadi is made of cement concrete.

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