**Khasi Music: From the ‘Folk’ to the ‘Traditional’**

Lapynshai Syiem is Associate Professor of Music in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Dr. Syiem has done a documentary film on the compositions of her father, entitled *My father composer*. Her father, C. Khongwir, a folk musician and composer, has done extensive research on *Khasi* Folk Music and has many publications to his credit. Her mother, Dr. Helen Giri, a renowned Folk Singer was conferred the Padma Shree Award by Her Excellency, the President of India in New Delhi on 5th May, 2008 for her contribution towards *Khasi* Traditional Music. With such a firm background in *Khasi* Music, Lapynshai Syiem has published fifteen volumes of *Khasi* audio cassettes and CDs containing the songs composed by her father and has also brought out a CD of Rabindra Sangeet entitled *Amar Ey Poth*. Her book, *The Evolution of Khasi Music: A Study of the Classical Content*, which is also her PhD thesis, attempts to bring *Khasi* Music from the oral to the written notation form.

To study and analyse *Khasi* Music and its evolution is to go into the very structure of the native state formation process of the *Khasis* of Meghalaya, the reason being that *Khasi* Music has grown from the ‘Folk’ to the ‘Traditional’ and from the ‘Traditional Non Religious’ to the ‘Traditional Religious’. The *Khasis* express their music through tunes, beats and use of various musical instruments like the male drum (*Ksing Shynrang*), the female drum (*Ksing Kynthei*), the traditional windpipe (*Tangmuri*) etc. The growth of *Khasi* Music is considered to be as old and antique as the race itself.

The concept of the native state or the *Hima* forms an interesting part in the study of the growth of *Khasi* Music from the Folk to the Traditional. The *Hima* or native state is still in existence within the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Each *Hima* has its own native chief or native ruler called *Syiem*. The native states are composed of the administrative units called the *Raid*, which are either under the *Lyngdoh Raid* or the *Syiem Raid*. Each *Raid* is composed of several villages which are under local headmen called *Tymmen Shnong*. The *Hima* evolved with the *Syiem* (native ruler) acting as a guide and protector for his people. It is very clear that the evolution of *Syiemship* and the *Hima* began at the village level, nay, it goes further down, to the foundation of *Ka Kur* (clan) which is the nucleus of all traditional polity development. In brief, the clan, the family, and the hearth together form the foundation of a village, which in turn evolves as a *Raid* (administrative unit) and ultimately evolves as a *Hima* (native state). This can be illustrated as follows:

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Hima
(Native State with U Syiem)
↑
Ki Raid
(Administrative Units with the Lyngdoh Raid or the Syiem Raid)
↑
Ki Shnong
(Villages with Ki tymmen Shnong)
↑
Ka Kur
(clan)
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It is against this backdrop that the crux of *Khasi* Music, classified as Traditional Religious Music, has evolved. However, one may ask as to what then is *Khasi* Folk Music or how does a *Khasi* define Folk Music?

I remember that in a discussion I had with my father, a prominent *Khasi* Music Composer, he opined that for many years past, the *Khasis* themselves have looked upon their “folk tunes” as *ki sur nongkyndong* (village tunes). In my opinion, however, the scenario today has changed considerably. *Khasi* Folk Music is no longer looked upon merely as village music; rather it is a classified form of *Khasi* Music.

Indeed, *Khasi* Folk Music is considered to be the mother or the base of other forms of *Khasi* Music and provides the basic structure upon which the
Traditional Music (Religious and Non-Religious) and other forms of Khasi Music have evolved. Herein we shall have to refer to the folk drum beats which are used because when we actually speak of Khasi Music, Folk or Traditional, we refer to the beats and the rhythm, that are commonly referred to as Skit. Skit is a cycle of beats and one can understand a Khasi dance form, a ritual, a particular mood in music, and an event through ‘Ka Skit’.

There are Unorganized Folk Beats such as Ka Lymmuh and Organized Folk Beats such as Ka Ksing Shad Wait (Ksing means Drum, Shad means Dance and Wait denotes the Sword). Ka Lymmuh can be used as a single drum beat and also as a two pulse beat or two beats in each division. It contains only stresses and most of the time produces monotonous syllables. The organized folk beats have the scope of becoming ‘traditional’. Ka Ksing Shad Wait as an organized folk beat has however, developed from Ka Lymmuh and contains both the accented and the unaccented beats. It contains four beats within each division and begins with the first accented beat, indicated by the sign ‘Kk’ or ‘Kuk’. ‘Kuk’, as a playing technique implies “jabbing of the stick” on the male drum. The sign ‘Kk’ given for the first accented beat is taken from the playing technique ‘Kuk’. The word is significant because its playing technique implies a call that indicates the warmth, protection and embrace of U Syiem U Kmee (literally meaning the Syiem the Mother; the Syiem here is the native ruler).

Khask Traditional Music is highly systematic, disciplined and conventional. It is that type of music which is handed down from generation to generation through learning, repetitive practices and constant involvement of the performer with the music. Even gestures are significant in the development of this art form. Ka Khublei Arti (a traditional greeting where both the persons use both their hands in greeting one another) for example, is symbolic of good will and solidarity.

Khasi Traditional Music can be classified under two types:

(1) The Religious Music found at Hima Khyrim (Khyrim Syiemship) The Non-Religious Music found at Hima Syiem (Syiemship)

The two native states were formerly part of the Shyllong native state but were bifurcated during the colonial period and till date, in Khyrim Syiemship, the religious rites, ceremonies, and religious drum beats are retained. Mylliem Syiemship retains the non-religious drum beats in the form of socio-cultural dance beats. The non-religious drum beats are heartening to listen to whereas, the religious drum beats, known as Ki Shiphew King Bad Arphew Hynniew Skit (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven Beats) and performed at the Nongkrem Festival, an annual native state religious festival, are played with and for a specific purpose.

The Traditional Music is closely associated with the Theory of Mood as, interestingly enough, the mood of each drum beat depends on the stages of state formation process, alongside the ritualistic practices. Khasi Traditional Music has distinctive features of its own—its tenacity speaks of its long history, the tradition and specifically, the thought content that lies inherent in each drum beat. It is disciplined, systematic and has a rhythmic pattern. Indeed, it is the prevalence of a well-defined rhythmic pattern that has given the essence of classical content to the religious beats of Ki Shiphew King Bad Arphew Hynniew Skit (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven Beats). Speaking of rigidity, each unit of drums has to complete one cycle or ‘Ka Shi Pyllun’. The variations also come within ‘Ka Shi Pyllun’, in the sense that they have to remain within the framework, despite the fact that they work more like embellishments. It is interesting to observe this Theory of Mood and recall its’ prevalence in the folk songs of the Khasis, in the form of Ballads and Phawar (Couplets), that are sung rhythmically with stresses and lesser-stressed beats wherever necessary.

The first unit of drums called Ka Ksing Blei (Ksing means Drum and Blei means God) creates the pensive mood with the playing technique ‘Krud’, where the musician gently shakes the stick on the right side of the male drum, to invoke God’s presence and blessings. Another religious drum beat called Ka Ksing Khrop symbolizes the submission to the Creator with the use of the drum syllable ‘Khop’ which means “to be silent” or “to be quiet”. A point to be noted is that, these religious drum beats have developed over different stages, right from the village level till they attain the
stature of being called Ki Sur Hima (Music used at the level of the Native State). It is not surprising therefore to find that there is a classification of Khasi Musical Instruments; there are those that are used in the family and the hearth, those used at the village level and finally, at the level of the Hima (Native State).

Ka Ksing Lynti (Niam) is another religious drum beat taken from Ki Shipew Ksing bad Arphew Hynniew Skit (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven beats). The essence of Ka Ksing Lynti (Niam) lies in the meaning of the word Lynti. Lynti literally means the “path” or the “way”. This unit of drums is played as an invocation to God to pave the way and the path into his domain through music and rituals. It contains ‘Ka Krud Ksing’, a drum beat, that is both a symbolic gesture and a playing technique, signifying an appeal to God to clear the way.

In the native state formation process, music plays an important role and the Duhalias (Traditional Musicians) occupy an important place within the Hima (native state). The Rangbah (Head) Duhalia assumes this important status because his presence is significant from the beginning to the completion of any ritual and dance—be it Ka Shad Nohkjat (dance of the daughter of the Syiem father or Syiem Mother), or Ka Shad Tyngkoh (dance of the Syiem: native ruler or dance of the Bakhraw [Elder]), or Ka Knia Muhuri (ritual performed at midnight with the Tangmuri [Windpipe]).

It is here that the patronage of the Syiem (native ruler) is highly indispensable. However, the Syiem also has much to reciprocate in terms of the role and the status of the traditional musicians (Duhalia) in the Hima (native state). The patronage has found a place not only among a family of musicians but also amongst the craftsmen, which has given room to the growth of the Guru-Shishya Parampara in the local context. Khasi Folk Music, strictly speaking, is bound with the day-to-day life of the people, so much so that in the process of transmission, no teaching-learning is actually involved. Traditional Music on the other hand, is acquired through learning, repetitive practices and constant involvement of the performer with the art and the music.

At length, speaking of Khasi Music, it is obvious that the ‘traditional’ has grown from the ‘folk’ despite the fact that there are indeed, no water-tight distinctions between the terms ‘Folk’ and ‘Traditional’. However, in the context of Khasi Music (Folk and Traditional), the native state formation process vis-à-vis the evolution of music provides amazing scope for a critical study and analysis.