

FOLK-MUSIC OF THE KHASIS OF ASSAM

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THE beautiful hills of Assam are well worth the trouble it takes to reach them, for the traveller will be repaid by every variety of scenery from the paddy-fields of the lowlands, to the grass-covered moors that gradually merge into the richly-wooded mountains. After a long journey by train, one takes a ferry and crosses the Brahmaputra River to Gauhati, from whence the remainder of the journey must be made by motor. During the sixty-mile ascent one rises four thousand and nine hundred feet, traversing precarious roads, hair-pinned curves, and narrow turns that crowd the edge; of deep precipices. The road, however, is a marvel of engineering, and made safer for the motorist by the fact that it is a one-way road and one is spared the dangers of passing cars on narrow mountain ways.

Once in Shillong, the summer capitol of the Assamese Government, one is happily surrounded by beautiful scenery, fine air and a variety of interesting drives among ever-changing and ever charming pictures of richly-timbered hills, streams, and waterfalls. The general type of the flora reminds one of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, or of the Scottish Highlands.

Our chief interest, however, centers around the unique tribe of the Khasis people who inhabit this quite different part of India. Having become accustomed to the Hindus and Mohammedans of Bengal, one finds that the Khasis are a distinctly separate race, in history as well as religion, customs and manners. While most of the tribes of Assam are of Tibeto-Burman origin, so far anthropologists have been unable to come to any decision regarding the genesis of the Khasis, who, as an isolated remnant of some ancient race, have preserved their own laws, customs and independence, unchanged through the centuries.

The Khasis are chiefly remarkable for the fact that they represent one of the few Matriarchal systems extant today, and their

religion is a mixture of animism, pantheism and ancestor-worship. Some authorities state that the Khasis are probably of Mon-Anam descent, a pre-Aryan off-shoot of Turanian origin, who perhaps came from Burma through the Patkoi mountains. As they have neither inscriptive records, systems of writing or recorded history of any kind, one's investigations are balked at the outset, and one ends with speculative theories. Their language shows linguistic affinities with the Burmese, the Nagas and the Palaungs; and the sacredness of the snake in their religion shows them to have retained some of the ancient forms of Sun-worship. They are also believers in divination and magic and retain many evidences of Animism in their present-day religion. If their origin is shrouded in mystery, at least in their customs and manners of today, one may find extremely interesting subjects for study.

The women are the real rulers of the tribe, and the Khasi ancestry is traced through the mother and grandmother. She is the official head of the Clan, rules the family purse and the family lands which the male may till, but not own. In spite of these strange matriarchal customs, the Khasis seem to be a cheerful, industrious, and contented people. The country which they occupy has the appearance of a huge grave-yard as the custom of erecting monoliths, and memorial stones has existed for unknown years. One may come across these great slabs of granite in the most out-of-the-way places; in the market-place, on high-roads and by-roads and hidden among the thick foliage on the mountain side as on the grass plateaux which crown the higher hill tops.

They are a musical people and have a number of very interesting festivals on which occasions the tribe takes part in folk-dances at various times of the year. Music, with them, as with most primitive or aboriginal folk, is closely related to their religious as well as their secular and daily life. It is a recognized part of all ceremonials: of weddings, funerals, births, and all of the incidents of their life.

One of their chief festivals, called the Goat-Killing Festival, includes a great ceremonial dance in which the Siam, or ruler of the fifteen Khasis states, takes part dressed for the occasion in the national dance costume. In these dances, both men and women participate and the effect is brilliant in the fine natural setting of the hills, to which they add splashes of color in their vivid garments and jewelry.

The musical instruments used by the Khasis include a number with which we are familiar in Bengal and in other sections of India. They are partial to drums, gongs, cymbals, flutes, and the ever-important conch-shell horn. There are various varieties of the drums in use by the Khasis; the long cylindrical drum, the hour-glass or "monkey-drum," the tom-tom, and other drums of clay, or wood, which emit a hollow, flat tone.

Among the stringed instruments, there is a sort of guitar with silk strings and played with a wooden key; a one-stringed guitar which is picked with the finger and a kind of violin played with a bow.

The reed instruments include a wooden pipe, or flageolet, a bamboo flute, or Pan's-pipe and various clarionets. These flutes are in more common use than the strings for every-day occasions, and one often meets some strolling Khasia along the hill paths playing a weird and plaintive tune on a little reed flute that gives a quaint and pastoral atmosphere to the picture.

Instruments of percussion are in great favor in all festivals, or ceremonial dancing. There are gongs, cymbals, and bells, made of metal and especially popular with the priests and priestesses in their religious rites. The chief wind instruments are the conch-shell horn, and the brass horn, used largely in ceremonial dances and not so much as a solo instrument. Lastly, there is the "Jew's harp!" No one knows how their queer instrument got into Assam, unless the "Wandering Jew" introduced it there. But it is nevertheless a popular instrument. According to authority "their use has been forbidden by the missionary, who considers their strain too seductive!" While we have never thought of calling a Jew's harp "seductive," we admit that the instrument is of great antiquity and interesting for that reason if no other.

What the instruments in use among the Khasis lack in quality, they make up in quantity of tone, for they are very partial to the brass and drums, especially on Festival occasions when the hills echo and re-echo to raucous blasts on brass horns and the boom of big drums.

Some of the most important religious ceremonies, which include music and dancing, take place on the top of Shillong Peak, the highest mountain in the district, and which is said to be the dwelling place of the mountain deity to whom they do honor. When the clan priest or Lyngdoh dies, and a new one is installed, all the people attend the ceremonies of inauguration on the mountain top, where

a goat and a cock are sacrificed under the sacred *Ka'la phiah* tree. The victims are offered to the God of the mountain and there are tribal songs and dances at which occasions the people wear the distinctive costumes peculiar to these festivities.

Another ceremony of interest is the Pujah (worship) ceremony performed in honor of the *U'lei lnygdoh*, or village tutelary deity. At this time, both the priests and the people take part in a tribal dance, armed with swords and shields, with a quiver of arrows, and decorated with cock's feathers and goat hair. Their dance is in the nature of a pantomime, in which the performers go through dignified measures of advance and retreat to the rhythmic music. This dance is said to be a survival of the old war dance of the Khasis, when it was customary to celebrate a victory by a dance in which both men and women joined. It was said that at these war dances it was customary to pile the decapitated heads of their enemies together and dance around them with yells and songs describing their fight. In pre-British days, these dances of the Clan, before and after battle, were considered very important. *U Syngkai Bamon*, the God of War, was propitiated with cock-sacrifices and offerings, and the dance took place around the altar upon which the warriors' weapons had been placed. This ancient dance still takes place yearly among the Khasis, the only difference being the absence of the enemies' heads.

The ceremonies incidental to death are also of great importance among this tribe. They continue according to old customs, and after the elaborate services to the dead have been performed, the funeral cortege starts on its way, accompanied by the wailing music of the Sharati (flutes) and slow beat of drums. The bodies are usually burned and the bones stored in mortuary urns and buried in stone cairns.

When anyone as important as a Siem dies, his body is pickled in lime juice and spirits and kept until the natives can accumulate enough money to afford the extravagant funeral rites demanded by their Tribal customs. The body is finally burned and the last obsequies celebrated by a great Pujah of sacrifices, offerings, dances and songs.

The Pujah-dance is performed by Khasi girls who dance at intervals during the day and night given to the occasion. The last ceremony takes place at the funeral pyre when both men and girls join in dancing around the stone platform whereon the pickled body of the Siem is slowly consumed by flames as the people chant the

“Passing-song.” They have fireworks and fire a salute of arrows into the air. After the body is burned, the bones are collected and placed in a cairn when further ceremonies take place, this time dedicated to the spirit of the dead Siem.

Another great ceremonial dance is the “*Lympung*,” a Festival lasting nine days and nights which forms an important part of the Khasis ancestor-worship. This is called the third death ceremony, and follows on the funeral pyre dance and the burial of bones of the dead. This ceremonial is performed by women at night and is accompanied by flutes and drums. It is customary, at this time, to set up stone memorials to the dead, whether of Siem or less important folk, for all the death ceremonials are the same and vary only in the degree of elaborateness.

The “Bethmpew” is a special dance that takes place on the night before the bones of the dead are deposited in the family ossuary. It is intended to drive away evil spirits, so that they may not disturb the last resting place of the dead. This dance, performed by males with sword and shields, takes place before the sepulchre, where songs and chants are sung.

The various Death Dances which I have mentioned are especially significant to a people who, as ancestor-worshippers, regard all death ceremonies as of vast importance. No rite must be neglected that may assist the passage of the spirits of the departed to rest in peace, and none of the dead escape the conspicuous attentions in death, that they may have lacked in life.

But there are many dances that have to do with the living. The principal dance of this nature is the *Nougkrem Dance* which is held at the great Khasi Festival in the spring of the year, usually in May. It takes place at the same time as the Goat-killing Festival in which the Siem must take part. Several days of puja and religious ceremonies culminate in the sacrificial ceremony by the Siem. At this time twenty picked dancers perform a special dance at the Altar of *Ka Blei Synshar*, the presiding Deity of the crops and grain. She, as the Khasia Ceres, is importuned for luck in the coming season for the farmers.

The priests and priestesses have a special dance of their own, then men and women dance together, singing the chants dedicated to the Deity. In Khasi music, as in most Indian music, there is no harmony; the people sing in unison, accented by the instruments which follow the melody while the drums and cymbals emphasize the rhythm. All of these dances resemble the usual type of Folk-

dances where men and women join together in executing the old figures that have been handed down for generations.

The Khasis do their dancing in a leisurely manner; most of the steps are in slow time, and throughout the dances one is impressed by their dignity and seriousness. They have no conception of light and frivolous forms of dancing. Their own dances are important to them as part of their immemorial religious rites, and are entered into in a spirit of reverence and worship. They share the common qualities of the Tibetan Lama dances in their awkward, slow movements. They take one step at a time forward, or backward, jump or hop on one foot and gyrate with deliberation, their arms stretched out at angles, or moving in the strange cumbrous fashion of a diver in deep water. While to the stranger, they appear ungainly and weird, one is conscious that there is a certain charm about these dances, the charm that hangs about any ancient ceremonial which has so deep a hold on the hearts of the people who believe in them and who have kept their customs unchanged for centuries.

The drums, flutes, and brass produce a barbarous and strange sound; the gorgeous costumes of the dancing Khasis present a kaleidoscope of color, and in the outdoor day-time dances, the effect is increased by the natural scenery around them in some grassy dell surrounded by great hills and topped by blue skies. The Khasi girls wear long robes of silk or brocades of brilliant hues of peacock blues, rose, purple, yellow or green, and they are hung with heavy jewelry of gold and silver and coral beads. On their heads they wear elaborate ornaments of flowers and feathers in lighter shades, together with gold or silver crowns surmounted with tassels and chains.

The costumes of the men are no less ornate, and they add plumes and cock-feathers, goat-hair and fly-flaps to their head-dresses. They also wear swords and shields and execute mock combats with the instruments of war that are now relegated to peaceful dances. Like the Tibetan Devil Dancers, the Khasis sometimes wear fantastic masks, disguising themselves as tigers, monkeys, elephants, serpents or peacocks. The dances in which they use masks are supposed to be humorous and of a lighter character than the other dances, and the spectators seem to be highly delighted at the awkward motions of the dancers who strive to imitate the animals they represent.

Besides the ceremonial dances which are inevitably of a religious character, the Khasis have love-songs, hate-songs, songs of peace

and war and of everything pertaining to their daily life. Music plays an important part in their life whatever its nature. Their natural environment of pine-clad hills, lovely waterfalls, streams and wild flowers lend themselves to the poetic imagination, and encourage the traditions of fairy lore abounding in the hills of Assam.

Their music differs from that of the Hindus in that it has the elements of folk music and is used by both men and women. In India, except among the aboriginal tribes and the people of South India, most of the dancing is done by professional Nautch girls, or by the masked male dancers on the Festival of the Night of Shiva. Among those Hindus who follow the Carnatic school of music, and among the old Tamils, Madrasis and Telegus, some of the ancient festivals, such as the Harvest Festival in Madras, comprises both male and female dancers. But in Bengal especially, dancing is exclusively the office of Temple dancers and free-lance Nautch girls, while to the men falls the hereditary professions of musicians and minstrels. Among the Mohammedans and Buddhists there is a great deal of dancing done by the men, but they usually do it alone. The Devil-Dances and Lama-Dances of Tibet, such as are practiced in the Himalayas, are performed by men alone. At the Mohammedan Festival of the New Moon, men, and especially Afghans, have a number of interesting dances. But in Assam the men and women share equally in the old traditional folk-dances which celebrate special occasions important to their religious calendar.

The shadows of yesterday hang over the people of today in the Hills of Assam. They are largely under the dominion of the dead, in that they follow all the traditions of the dead, and adhere to ancient customs century after century, unmoved by all the change around them. Perhaps that is why they are so interesting and unique to the stranger who wanders among them looking for something new, and finding it in the old.

In the deep glens and among the high peaks of the Khasia Hills the sound of the drum throbs in the same way that it did unknown generations ago; the muted song of the flute comes to one's ears on moonlight nights and carries one far away in fancy. In their music we hear the natural leisurely songs of a natural primal people, singing to their old Gods, in the same unchangeable, unknowable way that they have always done. We are fascinated by its very mystery, for if in the Western world we are slaves to time and change, we can appreciate, and even envy, a people for whom time does not exist.