FESTIVAL AT BIRTH

The birth of a child is always a happy occasion. But the dread of disease and misfortune haunts the people. For this all precautions are taken. In order to avoid pain at delivery, to guard off evil influences, miscarriage or abortion a sacrifice of fowl of animal is offered.

There is a story among the Pnars that U Mon Rynkhlaw D'Khar was carried up by Lord Thunder. He used to play his flute and was loved by all unmarried girls. He may cause pain or miscarriage to the girls if he is not propitiated. He is appeased by sacrificing a white pigeon.

There is a traditional belief that a expectant mother should be given all what she desires especially with regard to food lest her desire may pass on to the unborn child.

The Pnars say that if a male child shows fondness to the expectant mother then the new baby will be a male.

1. Interview with Simon Pawa age 35 - teacher at Jowai Marian Hill School.
2. Interview with Donbok T. Laloo age 40 - a writer.
If two pregnant ladies sit together the babies in the womb will speak with one another\(^3\).

The pregnant lady from seven months onwards starts preparation for the delivery. She goes and buys some dry-fish and ginger. There is no fixed rule for the quantity of dry-fish. If the baby is born before twelve noon, the birth ceremony starts on that very day. If after mid-day, the ceremony is held on the following day. All the relatives are informed and invited. All the males present join in burning the dry-fish. The dry-fish is cut into pieces. Ginger is also cut into small pieces. They mix all these with salt, in a pot, to be eaten later on.

After the birth of the child the umbilical cord is severed by a bamboo knife. The placenta is kept in an earthen pot. The pot is carried by a lady escorted by the father of the child to a nearby jungle and the father marks the tree by removing some bark. This is to frighten wild animals from climbing the tree. The father climbs up the tree and hangs the earthen pot of placenta on a branch. Ginger is thrown at the root of the tree with a prayer that the placenta may be guarded from the evils, insects and animals\(^4\).

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3. Narrated by the people of Kuth.
4. Ginger is precious for ceremonies.
The use of ginger may be traced back to the story of the cock and the sun. The cock had no clothes. He prayed for clothes to wear so that he could go in search of the sun. God provided him with ginger-roots as wings and leaves of khasi-oaks as outer cover. Cock is considered as a sacred bird who can shower light and remove darkness. As such ginger might have got a place in the birth ceremony for its occult power.

The females and males assemble in two different rooms. Then fish, ginger and country-liquor are served separately. At times powdered turmeric mixed with rice flour and water are applied to the right foot of the father, mother and the child. The others receive on the left foot the same thing.

The naming ceremony is interesting. By means of auguries and divinations they choose a name. In some places they pour down liquor drop by drop, the others utter in succession the possible names. The name coinciding with the last drop should be given to the child. In some places they choose the name by breaking the egg. Another method is throwing the sticks by the eldest lady of the place. While the people shout names the old lady throws

5. Education brought laxity in this regard.
two sticks. If the sticks fall cross-wise the name is taken. If they fall separately the process is repeated. If faulty names are detected later on then gods are appeased and new names are selected.

The new generations are adding to the name part of their father's name or title e.g. Mr. R. Rymbai or Mrs. Y. Sumer. In all these the diviner has a strong hold. The diviner holds the key to social change in Pnar Hills⁷.

The ladies pray to God for the new-born child. They pray that the baby enjoy health, wealth and prosperity.

Similar prayers are said by the males present. Then they pour country liquor three times on the ground.

This is called liquor oblation to the ground. There is the belief that God can be reached through mother earth⁸. After this the dry fish, ginger and salt are offered to the uncle and then to the father and then to others. Brass plates are considered more respectable. After the country liquor is served. With this the function is over.

7. Opinion of Bah Shullai age 42 - Jowai
8. Ka Blai Bidorta.
When the baby discards the last portion of the naval string small children are sent with bamboo containers to fetch water from three sources. Different waters will be mixed up and boiled to give a bath to the baby. After this all present tie a ginger talisman\(^9\). With a white thread on the left wrist for the baby it is tied around the waist. The white thread is smeared with ginger paste. The idea is to protect him or her from evil influences. It was the custom after a month to bore the ears of both boys and girls to use ear-rings. It is called the ear-rings of the grandmother.

BEHDIENKHLAM: DRIVING AWAY EVIL SPIRITS

Behdienkhlam\(^{10}\) festival is observed annually in the month of June-July\(^{11}\). At this time crops are likely to be destroyed by insects and people suffer from many infections diseases like diarrhoea, blood dysentery etc. They decide the date of the festival in the village durbar. This festival is as old as the people\(^{12}\).

\(^{9}\) Ginger of pink and yellow colour mixed together.
\(^{10}\) Means to drive away evils by wooden stick.
\(^{11}\) Pnar moths U Jullieu and U Naitung
\(^{12}\) Roy Deb - A Tribe in Transition p. 110.
It is said that in ancient times there was a widespread epidemic in the locality. The people sought for the cause from the deity U Mukhai. He advised them to propitiate him and other spirits annually. Thenceforth Behdienkhlam has been celebrated. It is a community festival. It is performed by street-dancing by the males. They may even become drunk. The females do the offering of food to the departed souls. The Doloi supervises the feast. The Lingdoh sees to the religious side i.e. rites and sacrifices etc. Various duties of the feast are divided and shared.

One month before the feast two cocks are sacrificed to U Mukhai. One week before the god of thunder is also propitiated. The Pnars feel that the thunder can kill the crop-insects. In this case they sacrifice the biggest pig available in the locality or in the neighbourhood.

The actual festival lasts only three days. It is mainly a festival of sacrifice, food-offering, dancing and chasing away the evils by sticks.

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13. Protector deity
15. Eldest spirit
16. U Blai pyrthat
Each locality, seven in all, cuts one tree and removes it to the bazar. Pine trees are not used because it is too soft. The height of the tree is roughly twenty feet. The bark is taken out. There is a common tree the biggest of all is kept for the puja house.

All the seven trees are erected in their own respective localities.

If they wish each family can have their own tree hardly six or seven feet in height. The main tree is erected near the puja house. The main ceremony is on the last day. They all assemble on the last day at the Lingdoh's house. After prayers and oblations they all go out with wooden sticks to different localities to chase away the evil spirit.

Another thing we notice is the different raths. They are conical in shape. They are 14 to 16 ft in diameter and 30 to 50 ft in height. The rath is divided into three to five storeys. It is beautifully decorated in all possible ways. The inner frame is made of wood and bamboo. Each village takes also their rath in procession to the pool for immersion.

17. A kind of charriot
18. Roy Deb. The Tribe in Transition p. 117
Then the pools which have been newly cut are broken one by one. After all the poles have been broken, a large pole is fixed across the stream or pool. The people then divide themselves into two parties and contend for the possession of the tree. The party which wins will have prosperity in the coming year. There are seldom any fights. The people disguise as giants wild animals and all sorts possible to make others happy. Dancing is carried on with enthusiasm by the males and females, clad in their best attire.

Behdienkhlam is a feast of ancestor and spirit worship to drive away evil spirits of plague and fertility rites.

All the festivities and social gatherings of the Pnars indicate the idea that there is a God. Man has to depend on Him. God loves Man. He promotes the prosperity and happiness of man. Man approaches God by prayer and sacrifices. Sin is the greatest enemy of society. Man must do good and avoid evil. This world is temporary. But the next world of happiness is ever lasting. Therefore live a life that will merit you eternal happiness.

19. Roy Deb - The Tribe in Transition p. 120
TIGER FESTIVAL IN THE BORDER AREA

In the southern border area of the Pnar Hills, the biggest community festival is a bit different from the central or northern part of the district.

The original belief of the festival has passed into oblivion. What they tell is that whenever a tiger is killed, none should ignore worshipping the Deity. Otherwise, one or one's clans folk might suffer from blindness or from any other afflictions like epidemic, starvation and bad luck. Even to meet a tiger in the jungle is a bad omen and one is reminded of the worship of the Pnar deity.

Every place has its own colonising clans whose status is prominent in this affair. So also Nongtalang, the biggest Jaintia village has twelve original clans. They perform the festival every year. Also, in the case of accidental killing of a tiger, the tiger should not be taken inside the village unless proper puja is performed. The village has two openings, northern and southern side. In the southern side, there is the remnant of a beautiful gate made of stone slabs. Inside portion shows rows of

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21. Ibid p. 157
22. Interview with the people of Puriang.
stone and tomb stones. So a tiger when killed will be preserved outside the gate. The village durbar will be called and details are worked out. Otherwise, in every year the village council will decide which clan will have to perform the puja and organize the festival\textsuperscript{23}. If the selected clan folks do not find a tiger, the purifying rite is performed with due sacrifice and the deity is prayed for mercy for their inability.

This function is generally performed in the spring time or before the onset of monsoon i.e. from January to March. From May to January is a period for searching and killing the tiger. When a tiger is killed a puja is given to the god outside the village. This puja is predominantly a prayer, "Oh god we are lucky that we could kill a tiger. We will give the proper puja within the proper time\textsuperscript{24}.

After the killing of the tiger, the flesh and intestines are chopped out, only the skull, spine and some ribs along with the outer skin remain. On the puja or festival day, it is taken inside the village boundary and to the Lyngdoh's house. Every stage requires prayer with folded hands. This festival also coincides with the

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid
community or clan-wise bone collection and preservation, offering of food to the dead and other individual sacrifices to minor deities. On the festival day, they go from house to house for driving away epidemics and for ushering in good luck and fortune. The day is also marked with battle dancing. Only males in beautiful battle attire, turban on head with fly flaps, lungi-like something resembling Rajasthani gagra, in the upper portion, shirt or something like theatrical royal dress, sword in one hand and shield in another, assemble for dancing. They wear dhoti. The place is an open space before the Lyngdoh house. There is drum-beating and tuning of pipe. All dance together first. The dancing is a crude one of rhythmic forward and backward movements. People from the surrounding areas also come in their best dress and look. Nongtalang is the centre of border cultural activities. Girls come out with necklaces made of heavy gold-beads. After a gap, dancing is made by pairs. Before the introduction they pray with folded hands towards the Lyngdoh house, then they go for dancing one opposite the other. They dance with mock battle-array. They dance with the beating of the drum and in a mock show of fight, one charges the other. The process is repeated thrice. But none seem to

25. Interview with Bah Peter Sullai age 42 - Jowai
26. Ibid.
take a defeat. They come together before the Lyngdoh house and stand facing the entry door. They are conducted by an old man (may be Lyngdoh) for prayer. They pray God for peace, prosperity and wealth with folded hands. In this way all the dancers representing the clans are divided into pairs and drawn into the dance of mock-fighting. This lasts upto the evening.

Around 3.30 or 4 p.m. all the dancers along with the onlookers go down towards the southern gate in procession\textsuperscript{27}. Among them, some carry in the midst the carcass of the tiger suspended from a wooden stick. They stop inside the southern gate, the boundary line of the village. The tiger is kept on the earth, its head facing the gate. There in a group, the Lyngdoh again conducts prayer, the content of the prayers being solicitation to the deity. Then for some time they again dance in a group. The people are asked if they like to take home parts of the skin or remains of the tiger. Those who like may touch the tiger or may touch the remains by the mouth. It is considered that the tiger is now divinised and has capacity to cure diseases, to usher good luck, or it can save one like a talisman. But no one should take the head. It is left

\textsuperscript{27} Information collected from Jowai.
behind on the spot. The head is taken back to the northern side of the boundary. Then again the process of puja and prayer are repeated. After that the head is kept on a pole dug into the earth. The head is taken to the opposite boundary every year and kept like that till it is worn out and can be used no more.

Mock-fight was an all-male dance. There is also an all female dance. This dance starts at sunset, when the main puja and festival are over. People say that this dance has no connection with the main festival. Those who like can join the dancing. So, girls from the scattered war willages came to attend the dancing. This dancing is held in the adjacent ground and not in the same ground. There are improvised stone galleries surrounding the place. In the middle sit the drummers and the flute-tunners. Now-a-days competitions are held on musical performances and that too, area-wise and team-wise.

The participating girls should be unmarried. They dress with the short saree (Jaintia) but in a different style from that of the adjacent Bengalees. The uniformity

28. Ibid
appears only in colour, it is yellow or of any shade of yellow. They dance mostly in a circular way. It resembles the Khasi Nongkrem dance. It is a short and slow rhythmic movement. The onlookers are also dressed in their best. This all-female dance goes on for the whole night.\textsuperscript{29}

As in the case of other major tribal festivals, this festival also seems to be a synthesis of numerous rites and worships.

\textbf{MARRIAGE}

The Pnars have the idea that the mother is the owner of everything. The males only business is procreation. Therefore, the males always have an inferiority complex. The males are foreigners in their own family. For a Pnar marriage means cohabitation and procreation.

Among the Pnars both boys and girls should know each other before marriage. They must agree for marriage. They must develop mutual love and affection for each other. Then only the mother is brought to the notice of parents. The parents of the boy send the maternal uncle or a negotiator to the girl's house for negotiation.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid
The negotiator's first duty is to see that the boy and the girl are not from the same kur or jait. Divinations are held to find out suspicious days for the marriage. The Pnars feel that unfavourable auspices may result in barrenness, poverty and death.

The customary laws relating to marriage are very carefully observed among the Pnars. Prohibitions in the selection of mates are several. The traditional law of marriage prohibits not only a marriage within the same clan but also a marriage with a paternal uncle or aunt. The latter is known commonly as I Lai Paruit. In some cases I Lai Paruit has been tolerated but then at the time of death of the spouse, his or her bones are not kept together with the bones of the deceased members of the clan to which he or she belongs. The opposite concept to I Lai Paruit is I Kynsai Pongrai and it is the best form of marriage relation. A person marrying his maternal uncle's daughter is one of I Kynsai Pongrai. But then it has been considered that it is not advisable for the person to marry his maternal uncle's daughter so long as the uncle is alive.

30. Narrated by Rev. H. Fautin - Jowai
31. Ibid.
Marriage within the clan or a brother and sister's marriage is a serious taboo (sang). If such a thing happens the couple are exiled to a place beyond the boundaries of the Pnar Hills. No person is also allowed to marry his father's sister's daughter though apparently it falls within I Kynsai Pangrai. Such a marriage may occur irregularly and it is considered as an exchange (I Yakyllliang) between two clans. When a marriage occurs by way of I Yakyllliang, disease leading to death known as Langshor may be inflicted upon either clan. This is traditionally believed to be a penalty imposed by the gods. In the case of death of wife, the widower can marry the younger sister of the diseased wife but not the elder sister.

Marriage among the Pnars is strictly manogamous. At the time of marriage ceremony, the groom is usually exhorted by his uncle not to fell in love with any other woman (U boon khmut boon khmat). Thus there is no system of either polyandry of polygamy among the Pnars. The Pnars are essentially endogamous but now-a-days endogamy is not strictly adhered to.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
A PROPOSAL FOR MARRIAGE

Marriage among the Pnars is a pre-arranged one. Even though the boy and the girl have known each other and consented between themselves to get married, yet their marriage would have to be arranged by their clans. When the boy has reached a marriageable age either his parents or his uncle would make effort to find out a suitable girl for him through friends, relative or a go-between. When a suitable girl is found, a formal proposal (I Kyllat kurim) will have to be made. Before the family of the girl could finally accept the proposal, they will consider all aspects of I Kynsai pangrai and the age (I Ratap Rabiang) of the boy and the girl. A few weeks after I Kyllat Kurim is made, the family of the boy would again ascertain whether their proposal would be accepted. In case the proposal is rejected, the family of the girl would very courteously convey the rejection. But if the proposal has been accepted, then a formal meeting is arranged on a suitable date and time for an engagement (I Yabodh Ktien or I Yapynskem Ktiem). On that day an engagement ring made of brass is presented to the girl.

33. From the lips of Rev. Balavan age 59 Namdong.
The rich may provide a gold ring. After the engagement, the fiancées are not supposed to visit each other. In these modern days this is not much observed. Once Ka Synjat is given, the marriage is bound to take place. In case there is a breach of the engagement on either side, a taboo (a sang) would be established between the two clans and no marriage would ever take place between them in the future.

THE MARRIAGE DAY

A day before the marriage is solemnised, the groom's family would provide the bride's family with a sum of money for the purchase of a special mat (U chylliah chlain) on which the groom will sit on the night of the wedding day. On that day, two persons from either side would help the other side in making necessary preparation for the wedding, in case a fairly big feast is contemplated.

In the afternoon of the marriage day, there is an exchange of some quantity of cooked food between the groom's family and that of the bride. In the meantime, two bunches of fire-wood are being prepared by both sides. Each bunch would be lighted with fire to serve as torches of flames

34. Ibid
at night time when the marriage ceremony would take place. Relatives, friends and guests all assemble together in the houses of the bride and of the groom and are entertained by their respective families with feasts. They continue up to sunset.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{THE WEDDING NIGHT}

Just after sunset, it is time that the groom should be brought to the bride's house where the marriage will be solemnised. In recent times there are cases where solemnisation of the marriage was done during the day time. One of the bunches of fire-wood is lighted with fire and taken by maternal uncle (U Kni) of the bride while the other bunch is taken by the bride's brother-in-law (the husband of any of her elder sisters) without being lighted with fire. On reaching the groom's residence the two bunches of firewood are kept along with the two bunches prepared by the groom's side in a room called Itra Thlang.\textsuperscript{36} All the four bunches are now lighted with fire. They sit together for some time and after the chewing of betel-nuts offered by the groom's family, the kni of the bridegroom along with the groom starts the procession to the bride's

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid

\textsuperscript{36} Interview with Bah Pyrthuh M.A. age 40.
residence with the four torches. One of the two torches from the groom's side must take the lead followed by one of the torches brought by the bride's party. The second torch from the groom's side is in the third position while the second torch carried by the bride's brother-in-law is in the rear. On the way, the marriage party taking the groom to the house of the bride would shout, 'He has come!! He has come!!' The torches of flames signify to the people that the two are becoming husband and wife from that night onwards. In recent times where the marriage was solemnised in day time, the torches are used all the same.

On reaching the bride's house, all take their seats in a room arranged for the purpose. The four torches are always kept in the room for some time and then removed outside. A gourd of fermented rice-beer is kept near the kni of the bride and another gourd near the kni of the groom. Then there will be an exchange of betel-nuts between the bride's and the bridegroom's parties. After chewing the betel-nuts, plates of meat are brought for the parties to eat, each person taking as much as is available. Just before they partake of the meat, the knis, from both sides would pour the fermented rice-beer in two or three bowls made of brass. The rice-beer is then served along with meat to all present in the room.

37. Ibid
38. Ibid
After they have had the meat and the beer, water in a basin is brought for washing the feet of the bridegroom. Any of the bride's brother-in-law or any of the husbands of aunts (mother's sisters) would wash the bridegroom's feet. Then the feet are anointed with mustard oil. In the meanwhile either the bride's mother or her mother's sister would spread the special mat where the bridegroom would sit. No one should touch the mat with one's foot. It is a taboo to do so. When the groom takes his seat on the mat, the solemnisation of the marriage begins. He is sanctified.

THE SOLEMNISATION OF THE MARRIAGE (I LAM YUTANG)

The appointed knis of the bridegroom and of the bride would recite the marriage contract one after another. The kni of the bride would start the recitation. Before doing so, he solemnly adjures the gods in a short prayer for the prosperity of the new couple.

The spokesman of the boy makes a speech. He explains the purpose of the gathering. He enumerates the good qualities of the boy. The speech is concluded with a wish for a happy life for the couple, with prosperity and many

39. From the lips of Fr. Alber age 63 Raliang.
children. Then the bride's spokesman speaks in a similar manner. He projects the girl's simplicity and chastity. He concludes with a happy married life. Then follows the exchange of rings between the bride and the groom.

The Ksiang of both sides explains to the respective parties that they should share the joys and sorrows mutually. The bride's Ksiang gets up and declares that the bridegroom is united with the bride and the bond of kinship between the two clans will grow up and expand in course of time 40.

The priest utters a prayer. Both the parties offer fermented rice-beer in gourds the Ksiangs, who hand them over to the priest. He mixes both and pours it on the ground. This is to respect the words of U Synriang who said that mother earth is next to God. The priest then invokes the blessing of the goddess. He solicits the good will of the ancestors. They insist on perpetual unity, fertility increasing progeny and wealth.

One striking element of the Pnar marriage ceremony is the ceremonial water. The brass vessel is used in every Pnar festival. It is used for ceremonial washing, ancestor-worship and symbolic offering of water to the souls of the dead 41.

40. Ibid
41. Based on field work in the rural areas.
Again by midnight the congregation moves out leaving the groom alone to be united with the bride. The mat, bedding and clothes are taken with the groom. He passes the night only and returns back to his mother on the following morning. The most important features of Pnar tribe is their visit marriage. This is mainly due to the matriarchate which they follow. He is not a member of his wife's family. Unlike the Khasi tribe, he eats, works and remains the whole day in his mother's house. The Pnar's moral is love their mother first.

BRIDE'S VISIT TO THE BRIDEGROOM'S HOUSE

A week after the wedding day the bride accompanied either by her grandmother or by her aunts, pays a visit to the house of her husband bringing with her a gourd of fermented rice beer (kiad). This visit is therefore called, I Lie Kiad pyncha. On reaching the house of the husband, the rice-beer is to be received either by the groom's mother or by one of his aunts. After chewing betel-nuts, the bride's relatives who accompanied her, go away leaving the bride alone in her husband's house. Thereafter, the male members of the groom's family would start taking the rice-beer after invoking the blessing of the gods.

42. Ibid
upon the new couple and their off-springs. The bride remains in her husband's house until the evening and after having had their meals, she and her husband come back to her house. In the modern days many of the Pnar husbands live together with their wives under the same roof. Also the husbands are taking better care of their children.

It may be observed that the christians are still observing the social aspect as well as the customary laws in marriage, although the religious rituals are not the same. The Pnars feel that marriage is a religious and social institution that should be respected by all, the state as well as the individual.

DIVORCE

Divorce among the Pnars is common. It is so common that it passes unnoticed sometimes even by the local people. Divorce does not affect the woman. She gets her children and property. Besides remarriage is easy.

43. Information collected from Rev. Herman Raliang
44. Gurdon P.R.T. The Khasis p. 31
One of the causes for divorce is visiting marriage. The husband stops visiting the wife or the wife stops entertaining the husband. When they mutually agree to part, they publicly intimate their wish by throwing away a few cowries taken from each other. Divorce takes place in the presence of the Doloi, the headman, the Lingdoh or both together with some relatives.

In some areas of the Pnar Hills the couple who do not wish to live together, inform a third person and give him some money and wine. The third person may be a priest, a negotiator or a person mutually agreed upon. This third person declares that so and so are separated and they are now free to remarry anybody. If one of the partners does not like to part with, the other who wants to divorce throws or hands over some money to the other and goes away. Such cases may end in quarrels.

Again there was the custom in olden days that the husband or wife desiring to divorce the other, pays half a rupee to the Basan who is the deputy to the Doloi. The Basan in turn hands over 7 as 6 p to the husband or the wife as the case may be and declares that the marriage is

45. Based on field work in rural areas.
dissolved. Then a village announcer goes around the village announcing that so and so are separated and free to remarry again anybody. The 6 p with the Basan is deposited with the Lingdoh who is to arrange a special sacrifice for the divorcees.

There are some obstacles in the way of divorcees in remarrying each other again. One year should elapse before remarrying. It is not allowed to remarry the same person again or one from the same family 46.

The reasons for divorce are several:

1. Barrenness on the part of wife.
2. Defects like impotency on the part of the husband.
3. Intemperence and rude behaviour on the part of both parties.
4. The most important cause is infidelity.

The Pnars are very particular about the expansion of family and clan by procreation. Therefore any obstacle in this regard results in a divorce.

46. Ibid