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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# TRADITIONAL RURAL RECREATION OF THE PEOPLE IN MAWIANG SYIEMSHIP

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the customary traditional recreations of the Mawiang, one of the classified sub-tribes under the Khasi tribal division residing within one of the twenty petty Khasi states called Hima Mawiang, characterised by traditional chieftainship or Syiemship as the ultimate leadership in ruling the state. The study also aims at examining the concept of utility of recreation in the life of sub-tribe under study. The study is conducted based on a firm conceptual background and suitable research methods are used in order to obtain a desired outcome. The findings in the study can be of significant contribution towards understanding the tribal concept of using recreation in an agrarian or rural setting, the role played by recreation in religious rituals and ceremonial events, and also in shaping social, physical and mental quality of the people.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Recreation" in Latin signifies any activity pursued during leisure time with an intention to recreate the health of a person. The Finnish word "*virkestys*" for recreation signifies outdoor activities. The essence of recreation differs from one individual to another and the way an individual perceives a particular leisure activity defines its essence and even its meaning. From the economic perspective, recreation can be defined as any pleasant activity pursued during leisure time which can enhance creativity as well as productivity of an individual. From a social point of view, recreation can be defined to mean any group activity pursued during leisure time to enhance community cohesion. From a therapeutic or health perspective, recreation refers to any leisure activity intentionally pursued to revive or to enhance a healthy living. To an average person, recreation denotes a leisure activity which is usually undertaken for the sake of enjoyment or amusement. To certain tribal and ethnic communities, recreation is part of their daily work, that is, they sing a psalm, whistle a tune while working, play a wind instrument while taking a rest and so on. One leisure activity can be perceived as recreation by one individual, which in turn is considered as a work or profession to another individual. For instances, a fisherman thinks of fishing as his work. However, according to Nakhuda (1961) the same work or profession becomes a recreational activity for a doctor. However, there are certain activities which are universally considered as recreational such as dramas, social functions and the entire gamut of hobbies.

**Conceptual framework:** Archaeologists discovered evidences which showed the existence of vestigial creative and athletic

recreational activities since the prehistoric periods. Several recreational activities underwent through a process of transformation as people found more utility of them in another form to prove physical skill and strength, rather than the original forms, and several others were inclusively used both in original as well as in transformative forms. However, popular recreational activities were basically practised by primitive people either in religious rituals to symbolize a consistent fight of the good against the evil or in warfare in which sport was used as a strategy to win a fight (Kraus, 2014). Garments, jewelleries and other tools were actually used in such rituals or sports either for the sake of manifestation of cultural identity and group affiliation or for protection purposes. Moreover, remaining evidences showed that musical instruments were used in the past for accompaniment in religious ceremonies. There is a sharp difference between modern technologically advanced societies and rural tribal societies in time management for leisure and work. Kraus (2014). Pointed out that the technologically advanced societies choose to have a separate time for work and recreation whereas among the tribal rural communities, work is customarily done when it is available or necessary, and it is often infused with rites and customs that lend its variety and pleasure. In such tribal societies, work tends to be varied and creative, rather than being a narrow, specialized task, demanding a sharply defined skill, as in modern industry. Work is often accompanied by ritual that is regarded as essential to the success of planting or harvesting or to the building or hunting expedition. The ritual may involve prayer, sacrifice, dance or feasting, which thus become part of the world of work (Kraus, 2014). Contemporary analysis of recreation has its base in its past history. Niche recreational events of today are actually

founded or renewed from traditional events of the past (Mallen and Adam, 2008). In today's world recreation is considered a valuable tool in shaping the life of an individual or society and hence people are encouraged to learn and be educated to make good use of leisure time. Manitoba (2008) used the 'medicine wheel' as a traditional approach to understand the utility of recreation which described it as a holistic approach to understand the interconnectedness between human life and the surroundings. The 'medicine wheel' comprises of four quadrants dealing with four parts of an individual: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. 'Spiritual' implies the utility of recreation in nourishing the spirituality of an individual by providing opportunities for contemplation, reflection and spiritual renewal. 'Emotional' implies the utility of recreation in nourishing the spirituality of an individual by providing opportunities for contemplation, reflection and spiritual renewal. 'Physical' implies the utility of recreational activities like exercise, gardening, etc. in nourishing physical health for happy existence of an individual. 'Mental' implies the utility of recreation in nourishing the mental health of an individual by providing opportunities to stimulate the brain for learning. Hence, recreation is a powerful tool in nourishing physical, social and mental health for people of all ages as well as in shaping the personality of an individual.

**Review of related literature:** Gurdon (1907). Conducted a study on the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya. The objective of the study was to give a systematic account of the Khasi people, their manners and customs, their ethnological affinities, their laws and institutions, their folklores, their theories as to their origin and their language. The data were from different primary and secondary sources: Books, interviews, Observation etc. The most impressive finding with regard to traditional dance was that the investigator found out the practice of local traditional dance specific to one particular *Raid* (region)/village. At Mawsynram, the investigator witnessed a dance called *Ka Shad Lymmoh*, performed by men who held the leafy branches of trees in their hands. Then followed by a dance of forty young girls, very well dressed, covered with usual gold and coral beads and silver chains and wearing the silver crowns or *pansngiat*, the girls were free from the control of shyness. The investigator also found out the existence of recreational artefacts like iron smelting and forging of iron in some parts of Khasi and Jaintia hills. Pottery was manufactured at one place in Jaintia hills, Larnai. The earthen pots are still popularly known as *KhiewLarnai* or *Khiewraneitill* today. Mawrie (2001). Pointed out that in ancient times the Khasis love to tell stories in the form of *phawar* (psalm), they love to sing or whistle a tune while working in the field, they sing about nature, and implore God's blessing on the crops through songs. The author also pointed out that the Khasis since the ancient of times had been performing auspicious periodical dances which had a deep connection with nature. Some of the dances were performed to implore God's blessing on cultivation, others were performed exclusively on account of festive religious ceremonies, others were performed to symbolize thanksgiving to the creator for the blessings showered upon cultivation, and some others were performed to symbolize struggle between the good and evil. Some of the dances were quite popular and organized till today at state level, while some others were quite localized and performed only in certain parts of the Khasi or Jaintia hills. The emergence of localized festive dances indicated a vestigial difference in customs and tradition among the different ethnic groups in Khasi and Jaintia hills. The author also mentioned

that in performing all the dances, percussion, string instruments and wind instruments were used. Syiem (2005). Conducted a *study of the classical content in the evolution of Khasi Music*. The investigator collected the data pertaining to Khasi folk songs and traditional musical instruments. The data were from different primary and secondary sources: Government records/documents, books and interviews. The study pointed out that folk music reflects the way of life, culture and tradition of any community or race. The study found out that Khasi folk music has evolved and developed as part of day to day life of the people in the family, the clan or the community. The organized folk music beats have the scope of becoming 'traditional' or classical. The use of *kapadiah* (small drum) which served as an embellishment to the rhythm or time measure of the beats at *Hima Khyrim* during state religious festival, shows that the root of the religious beats was 'folk'. The use of female drum beat created another interesting aspect as could be seen at *Hima Myllem*, most notably at *Mawrniang* village under *Raid Myllem*. *Ka Bom* (big drum) was used as the percussion instrument here and the male drum was used in the form of *kaPadiah* (small drum). It was referred to as *ka Dum Dum*. Folktales had a predominant contribution to Khasi Folk music. For example, the song '*U SierLapalang*' had been based on the popular folktale of *U SierLapalang* (the stag). The researcher suggested that the use of notes and scales in khasi folk music could provide more room for research. Singh and Singh, (2012). Conducted a study on *Traditional sports and martial arts of Meghalaya*. The objective of the study was to find out the Traditional sports and martial arts of Meghalaya's tribal of India, and selected aspects of social and cultural life.

The investigator collected the data pertaining to the traditional sports and martial arts of Meghalaya. The data were from different primary and secondary sources: traditional books, written documents, interviews, visitations and questionnaire. The information collected was sorted out and classified under two different heads: 1. Traditional Sports and 2. Martial arts. The study found out that the people of Meghalaya played different types of recreational activities. They were: *wa pong sala*, *katsucao*, *resudena*, *wa pong piksucao*, *ra-ongdea*, archery, peg-top spinning, bamboo climbing and *wapongsika*. The investigator also found out that the Garo tribe in Meghalaya performed the activity of individual fight without weapons. The Garo of Meghalaya have keen interest in Garo traditional wrestling of which rules and regulations are different from those of international or Indian wrestling. The wrestling was called '*GandoMakhal Pala*' in Garo language.

### Profile of the area and the respondents

The term 'Mawiang' is used to refer to the people residing within Mawiang kingdom which was one of the pre-colonial Khasi kingdoms called '*Ki HimaKhasi*' which were also referred in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as 'petty states' led by one or two chiefs called '*Syiem*'. 'Mawiang' is also used to refer to the dialect that the Mawiang people speak. At present there are 24 villages within the jurisdiction of the Mawiang chieftainship or MawiangSyiemship. The Mawiang state shared its territory with other petty states viz., the Maharam and the Nobosohphoh states in the south western area, the Myriaw state in the north-western area, the Nongkhlaw state in the north and the Nongspung state in the east side (Marthong, 2016). The Mawiang people are well known for their peculiar friendliness, creativity, jovial nature and talkativeness. They

are known as 'Mawiangthlia' or 'critics in their own way' by people from other similar states on account of their skilful humorous criticism in every verbal encounter. They are also well known by people from other similar states for their capability to convert any situation into fun, thereby making them good comedians in their own way. The Mawiang people live an agrarian way of life with a stringent adherence towards past culture and their longing towards their land is quite strong, thereby, bringing them closer towards nature and tradition in the way they pursue their work and recreation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethnographic method and observation were used as a method of research and face to face interview was one of the tools used in conducting the research. Secondary method by reviewing first hand records related with leisure and recreation in the study area was also used as part of the study.

### Findings

**Face to face interview and observation:** A result of a face to face interview with village elders from the 25 villages in Mawiang Syiemship revealed the existence of various recreational related activities which were concurrently practiced to express people's traditional way of life and religious entity, people's interconnectedness with nature, people's prayer or thanksgiving and happiness for the blessings of the almighty creator of heaven and earth, people's way of using sport and music in hunting expedition and in a fight against evil curses. The present study also found out the existence of exclusive recreational activities which were unintentionally practiced for the sake of having fun or intentionally for the sake of reviving physical, social, mental and spiritual strength. Both allied recreational activities and pure recreational activities can be classified into traditional music, dances, sports and games, and dramas.

**Traditional music:** As it was in other parts of Khasi and Jaintia hills, the Mawiang people were fond of music. Six major types of traditional music were usually practiced by the Mawiang people viz. *kaphawar* (chant or psalm), *kasiaw* (whistling tune), ordinary vernacular or folk music, *ka put besli* (flute), *ka put sla* (leaf flute) and *kachangksein* (drum beating).

**KaPhawar (chanting):** Music in the form of *Phawar* was prevalently used as a strategy to impart moral teaching (*kasnengkakraw*) to mankind which was usually performed either at home during leisure or during certain indigenous religious awakening events (*Seng Kyrsew*) in the past. It was also used as an instrument to instil a spirit of readiness, endurance and happiness prior to, during and after certain ceremonial, fighting against enemies or evil and hunting occasions and as a strategy to bring the attention of the public towards public announcement prior to hosting of any village council meeting (*dorbarshnong*) or social events and fighting and hunting expedition. Staging of *phawars* was usually done with the accompaniment of percussion and wind instruments.

**Ka Siaw (Whistling a tune):** Whistling a tune was a men's hobby. However even women do whistle too. To a cultivator, whistling a tune while working in the field or while walking along a crook and steep path helps to reduce emotional and mental the stress.

**Ordinary vernacular songs:** Singing was one of the hobbies out of the entire gamut of hobbies of the Mawiang people. People sing either intentionally or unintentionally while working or during leisure time. People sing about anything at any time. They sing about the beauty of nature, about the hills, rocks, trees and birds, they sing about God, parents, legends and freedom fighters, about love, gratitude and hatred, joy and despair, or about anything which they are concerned about. The accompaniment of musical instruments while singing is a common practice both in the past and at present.

**Ka Put Besli (Flute):** KaBesli was commonly used as an accompaniment for folk music. However, playing it for producing solo musical tune was a common nocturnal leisure activity in the agrarian households. Playing a flute was a pertinent hobby of the cowherds in the past.

**Ka Put Sla (leaf flute):** Playing a leaf flute was a common practice among cattle herders in the past. Playing a leaf flute for solo recital requires a lot of practice before one can come out with a desired tune.

**Chang Ksein (Drum beating):** Chang Ksein was a common activity in any event or social functions which was performed either as an accompaniment to a song or psalm or to make a solo rhythm for a dance. Various drums were made and named according to their size and their convenient utility. Apart from the above techniques of making and playing music, the people of Mawiang had a keen interest to make fun through music by making use of any materials available around them to create a sound or tune and to sing a psalm or whistle a tune and dance along to the rhythm of the sound. Using of random solid or hollow objects like aluminium basin, iron pipe, spades, tin sheets, etc to create sound was a common practice among the Mawiang people in chasing wild animals, in chasing evil shadows and in triggering community response towards an incidence.

**Dances:** Dancing is an expression of relief and bliss. The Mawiang people were fond of dancing. People dance randomly with or without music whenever they were excited about something. People also dance to combat physical or mental stress. *Ka chad longmuh* or random dancing style without using any standardised dancing skill was a common habit among the people. Showcasing of well-arranged dancing style was observed in certain festive or non-festive special occasions.

**Chad Khristmas (Christmas dance):** Christmas is a typical christian ceremony, however, even non-christians do feel the joy and excitement of Christmas season. The people of Mawiang had a usual tendency to label any festive occasion as a dance because dancing was an integral part of any celebration. Hence Christmas celebration in itself was labelled as "*Chad Khristmas*" or Christmas dance. During Christmas, people of all ages leave their work schedule and, with a joyous heart, get themselves involved in dancing to the rhythm of Christmas carols. Dramas, action songs and mass drills were some other recreational activities being observed on the day of Christmas.

**Chad Seng Kyrsew Chad Nguh Bliy (Religious awakening dance or Thanksgiving dance):** Both are typical ceremonies of the indigenous religion or Seng Khasi and yet dancing is an integral part. In both the dances, it was observed that the female dancers dance in the middle of the dancing arena, sliding their feet in harmony with the beat of the drum, and the male

dancers dance around their female counterparts with a 'rymphum' (flore) or a sword to symbolise safeguarding of women by men.

**Chad iahtoh (wedding dance):** On the occasions of wedding both random dancing style (*chad longmuh*) and well organised dancing styles (*Chad bha*) were observed.

**Traditional sports and games:** The Mawiang people had keen interest in sports and game either to win a competition or simply for the sake of fun making. The following are the various types of traditional sports and games which exist even.

**Chong kali khurkhur (Ride a wooden car):** It is a popular winter game among the children in Mawiang areato ride on a handmade wooden car along the sloppy pathways.

**Hunting:** Animal hunting was an ancient sport which was performed for eradication of harmful wild animals, for symbolising rejuvenation of village well-being or simply for fun-making and food.

**Fishing:** Fishing in the river either to catch a big fish, craps or small fish locally known as 'dohthlei' in Mawiang dialect was a leisure time activity in the past. However, nowadays fishing is projected as a popular gambling sport in Mawiang area.

**Tong byrthih (Catching small fishes):** Catching small edible aquatic animals for food by using basket-like catching jars is an exciting leisure activity as the catchers use their skills to catch more and more small fishes. Apart from music, dances, sports and games, it was found out that the Mawiang people resort to chatting, joke-making and comedies while working or while taking rest. Jokes and comedies were also seen being performed on stage during festive social events.

**Findings through review of first-hand records and publications:** An in-depth investigation of primary records and publications available in the library of the Pariong Presbytery Higher Secondary School which is also an Integrated Cultural Centre, revealed the existence of cultural dances at Pariong which have been conceptualized and created to depict the ancient agrarian and traditional lifestyle of the people of Mawiang in the form of traditional dances.

**Shad Khrangkhaw (Rice collection dance):** The dance was created to depict a joyous thanksgiving ceremony after the harvest of paddy was done. It depicts the traditional way of rice collection from each household for a village feast to commemorate the blessings of god during the whole year and the joy of the harvest season (Bannett, 2009).

**Shad Nongrep (Farmer dance):** Farmer dance depicts the agrarian lifestyle of the people in West Khasi Hills. In the dance, the dancers make their entry into the dancing arena one after another carrying their farming tools according to the type of work entrusted upon them (*ibid*).

**Shad ThungPhan (Potato cultivation dance):** The dance was performed to connote the process of potato cultivation which was one of the main crops in West Khasi Hills.

**Shad Rep Kba (Paddy cultivation dance):** The dance was performed to connote the process of paddy cultivation which was one of the staple food crops in West Khasi Hills.

**Shad BehMrad (Animal hunting dance):** The dance was beautifully conceptualised on hunting dangerous animals which destroy crops, livestock and even human habitation in Pariong area. The dance involves a call for village gathering to perform a ritual asking God whether it is the right thing to do or followed by a device of a plan for hunting a particular animal responsible for any destruction. Killing of a harmful animal was followed by *phawaror* chanting to insult the hunted animal and then a village gathering was held to celebrate the victory and to divide the slaughtered meat among the village folks. Apart from the above dances, records showed that there was another dance known as 'Chang Ksein' or drum beating dance which was actually performed in the ancient of days in every part of Khasi Hills on occasion of funeral or death anniversary of kings, priests and elders, however, the dance was on the verge of extinction as the present generation could no longer follow the original steps of the dance. The dance was however vividly preserved, practiced and taught to school students of Pariong area to keep it alive and to preserve its originality. The drum beating dance portray the way of calling on God to accept the dead into his dwelling place. Drums of various shapes and sizewere used. Each drum had its own phase and purpose of use, and each dancer had his unique way of beating and body movement while participating in the dance.

## Conclusion

The findings in the study indicates that the scope of recreation among the people of Mawiang is very rich and unique. Music has been an integral part in the way of life of the people. People sing and whistle as a hobby, they also sing and whistle with a purpose to get over stress while working, singing is also used in rituals as a method of thanksgiving or prayer, as a way of showing gratitude to nature and all the good things that come into their life, as a call for public attention in the form of *phawars* (psalm) as well as a method of entertaining people. Dances were a common recreational activity among the people of Mawiang. Dance are performed simply for fun or to express a climax of happiness in people's hearts, as a token of victory, as a method of giving thanks to God for his blessings and as a way of showcasing the cultural lifestyle and tradition. Sports and games were of both simple and complicated types and in performing any game or sport activity, nature has been the playground or the sole provider of prerequisites for pursuing any game or sport activity.

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