

MOTHER'S LOVE SONG

Musical tunes in the Khasi hills

Written by: Habiba Haroon (AIF Intern)

The scenic town of "Kongthong" is nestled in the heart of the East Khasi Hills in the Indian state of Meghalaya. The hamlet is flanked by beautiful high hills and dizzyingly deep valleys with rich greenery all around. The village is sparsely populated, with small huts and farms surrounded by betel nut trees, and with a population of nearly 700 people.

The village is a popular destination known for its inhabitants' unique culture and the remarkable living root bridges. The locals usually survive on the pastoral mode of subsistence by cultivating lands and hunting in the woods. Although it is a multi-clan village, the positioning of the houses cannot determine the social hierarchy of the clans. There are ten major clans in the village, out of which four clans, i.e., Khongsit, Majaw, Lynrah and Pohnong, claim to be the founders of the village.

However, the musical tunes coming from the hills draw more attention, earning the village a nickname i.e., 'whistling village' or 'Singing village'. It is also the country's only 'whistling village' that has the UNESCO Intangible and Cultural Heritage Tag. The musical sounds heard in the village are not just random melodies but are a part of the hamlet's unique tradition of naming children in musical tunes by their mothers. This village exemplifies the special attachment between a mother and her child. This unique custom is known as "jingrwai iawbei," which translates to 'mother's love song' or 'the song in honour of the root ancestress'.

According to this tradition, each child in Kongthong village is given a regular name and a peculiar melodious tune by their mother. When the female is pregnant with a baby, she assigns a particular melody to her child, and this melody becomes the identity marker for the child. While their regular names are just for formal purposes, their unique musical tunes become their identity marker, and they are known only with those tunes. Thus, tunes are a medium in which people of the Kongthong village communicate with each other.

Moreover, one's tune dies when they die, and it can never be heard or used again by anyone else. The research also revealed that Jingrwai Iawbei is memory-dependent, with no one writing it down in a diary or other record. Still, individuals do recall two songs: one composed for them by their parents and the other composed by them for their children. People sometimes recall the tunes of their neighbours.

The villagers believed that this tradition of naming in musical tunes is engraved in their DNA. When a woman is pregnant, she composes a melody that comes to her naturally after childbirth. Also, tunes are inspired mainly by nature, such as the voices of birds and animals. This tradition also has a great significance attached to it as it is not just about assigning a tune to a newborn but also paying respect to and seeking blessings of their root ancestress. It is an expression of a mother's overwhelming love and joy at the birth of her child.

Jingrwai Iawbei is usually used as lullabies for the children, where the familiar tune and voice help the child to bond with the mother and other family members. It also lets the child begin with their language exercises and introduces them to music. The tune is a mother's heart song, full of compassion, tenderness almost like a lullaby, and it's roughly 14 to 18 seconds long. The original, long versions are mostly sung in the fields when someone needs to call across the hills and valleys, while the short version is an extract of the long tune and is usually sung in closer proximity like at home or the playground thus used as a nickname. The tunes sound like whistles when heard from a distance, which is why Kongthong is popularly known as the 'Whistling Village'.

The genesis of this tradition can be traced back to the foundation of the village. The custom of using tunes as names is deeply established in their cultural ethos and is passed down orally. It's a sign of their matrilineal relationship. It is believed that the tunes were once used to keep track of one another when hunting in the woods, as well as "to ward off evil spirits." It is believed that evil spirits who live in the woods cannot distinguish tunes from animal noises. Hence, it causes no harm when the tunes are heard in the forest.

This tradition also holds a significant place in the village's musical heritage and the village's marriage rituals. Every year on the summer's full moon night, the villagers light a bonfire and participate in a ceremony where each unmarried young man performs his song. The most beautiful single women usually choose the best singer as her groom.

Furthermore, according to village folklore, melodies as a means of communication was essential in preventing raiders from attacking the inhabitants. An interesting similarity can be seen in Kuskoy, a remote mountain village high above Turkey's Black Sea coast, where locals communicate through a series of ear-splitting, warbling whistles that sound quite similar to birdsong. However, despite the efforts of scholars from Europe and United States to study and understand the unique system of communication, this oral tradition remained poorly known in its own country.

Jingrwai Iawbei is a distinctive tradition as it is part of the Khasis' everyday lives and does not require a specific occasion to be hummed. The tunes are unique to each individual and not classified by clan or gender. It is a Kongthong-only ritual that is significant to Khasi society because it reveres and brings attention to Iawbei (root ancestress). Iawbei provides an identity to each clan as it forms a connecting link with the origin of each clan in the Khasi matrilineal system, where the origin and foundation of each clan is elaborated.

Thus, Jingrwai Iawbei is significant to the Khasi tribes and their culture. Each clan in Khasi society has its unique tale about its Iawbei, which aids in the preservation of clan exogamy among the clans. The legends demonstrate that women have always enjoyed a respectable place in Khasi society, and surprisingly they appear to have a more significant part in the stories than the male characters. Ka Iawbei comprises not just the clan's overall life but also the lives of each clan member. Thus, in the larger Khasi social life, Iawbei emerges as the lifeline thereby, the tradition of Jingrwai Iawbei also becomes a source of understanding the matrilineal set-up as followed by Khasis in general.

The practice is losing its value in contemporary times because of villagers' exposure to modern lifestyle and migration to Shillong for higher education and job security. Indian filmmaker Oinam Doren made a 52-minute documentary titled "My Name is Eeooow" on Kongthong and its unique tradition. The

film won the Tangible Culture Prize at the 15th RAI Film Festival in Bristol, which explores this maternal expression of love when children fly from the nest to bigger cities to a more modern lifestyle.



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