

Preserving Bow And Arrow As Cultural Heritage Objects Of The Khasis

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Abstract:

Bow and arrow are very much part of the material culture of every society around the world. Material culture is a term used to designate the interconnection of tangible, human-made forms as an indicator of cultural ideas and traditions. The term refers to social relations among people mediated by objects and, therefore involves connections to social systems in cultures. Hence, bow and arrow form a vital role in the socio-cultural life of the people who used and crafted these objects. They also form a special and a significant part in the socio-religious performances. As for instance, the Khasi people involved the use of bow and arrow in their ceremonial performances such as birth and death. Besides, using of the same items in their recreational purposes. The paper will attempt to discuss the use, method of preparation and significance of bow and arrow in the Khasi society. In general, it will also try to highlight the folkloric aspects of these objects in the life of the Khasi people.

Keywords: Bow, arrow, Khasi, tradition, cultural, heritage, objects

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I. Introduction

The meaning of cultural heritage is a wider expression which consist of various aspects of culture, values and traditions. Cultural heritage implies a relationship of people belonging to a community. It represents the history of the people connected from the past, to the present and to the future generations. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either tangible or intangible. Tangible Cultural Heritage refers to physical artefacts produced, maintained and transmitted through generations in a society. It includes artistic creations, built heritage such as buildings and monuments and other physical or tangible products of human creativity that are invested with cultural significance in a society. However, cultural heritage is not only limited to material objects that we can see and touch. It also consists of immaterial or intangible elements such as traditions, oral history, performing arts, social practices, rituals, knowledge and skills transmitted from generation to generation within a community. As a result, cultural heritage helps us to remember one's cultural diversity, and its understanding develops mutual respect amongst different cultures. By understanding cultural heritage, one preserves one's identity as members of the society.

When talk about bows and arrows and the first few impressions that come to mind are weapons or equipment used in the game of archery. For the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, they are also the symbols of tradition and faith. As part of material culture, they play a vital role in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Khasi people. Hence, bows and arrows in the Khasi context, can be considered as symbolic cultural heritage objects connected traditional activities and create a sense of community. They represent identities in terms of culture and serves as indicator of cultural ideas and traditions.

II. Description And Method Of Making Bows And Arrows

Bows and arrows are found to have been used by people in many, if not, all countries of the world for either similar or different purposes. These tools were, and are still in use and practice in some parts of the world in the present day. Again, the way of making bow and arrow is more or less the same although the materials and the technique involved in making them may be different depending on the availability of tools, materials and the traditional method as followed in that of a particular culture. As part of material culture, bows and arrows are made out of different types of bamboo and it is found that in some cultural groups they are also made out of wood. In the Khasi practice, bows and arrows are made of specific kinds of bamboo which is slashed down at a particular time of the year. According to traditional belief, the Khasis follow a particular method in calculating the time for cutting of bamboos and other plantations, for sowing and harvesting of crops and for any other agricultural purposes. This has been ingrained in the society for generations and is practised even today. Based on this knowledge, crops are sown and harvested only during half-moon days of the season. Belief has that if they

cultivate any crop at the time of full-moon days, the crops that are grown will not sprout properly. The same is true for cutting the trees or planting of vegetation other than crops. For instance, the particular time for cutting of bamboos starts from the month of *Kyllalyngkot* (January) to the month of *Rymphang* (February) and these bamboos are cut only during the half-moon days. This belief is still followed until these days, in the midst of modernity, so that the bows and arrows made will be strong, flexible and durable. The bamboos are then kept on a kind of platform hung over the hearth called *ka tyngier* for drying.

The bow is a long stave of strong, flexible material, which is bent and held under stress by a bowstring attached to both ends. The Khasi name for a bow is *Ka ryntieh*. Bow is usually made from the matured bamboos (that is, at least three to five years old) namely *U Shken* or *U riñiai*. The stem is usually preferred for this purpose. The best bamboos considered for making bows are those grown at shady places. The bamboo stem is splitted into two or three pieces after which it is kept on the *tyngier* to be dried. After two weeks when it is supposed to be properly dried, people starts scraping the dried bamboo into the shape of a bow, starting from the middle portion and making it smaller towards both ends. Then the two ends called *kyoh-ryntieh* are shaped nicely with a design for tying the bowstring. Traditionally, there are two types of a Khasi bow – *Ka 'tieh-thma* (a bow which is used during warfare) and *Ka 'tieh-biria* (a bow used in archery game). There is also another type of bow known as, *Ka 'tiehpong deng* which is used both during hunting and war. For making the above two bows, the bamboo is splitted into two parts where one part is used for one bow and the other for another. The first one, that is, *Ka 'tieh-thma*, is longer in height than the second and is made with a bamboo of five joints, whereas the latter is a little shorter and is made with a four-joint bamboo. But today, these bows are rarely seen as people hardly use them. Nowadays, the Khasis make a common kind of bow which everyone who has the art of shooting can easily and comfortably handle it. The size of this bow is only as long as that of the bamboo with three joints and the usual height of about 5 feet. However, sometimes and in exceptional cases (because of the length of bamboo joints) it can be as tall as a man's height that is, about 5 feet 4 inches to 5 feet 6 inches, the average height of the Khasi male. The Khasi bows carry a considerable distance. It is believed that the Khasi bows wielded by experts can carry up to 200 yards. The average range however, is 150 to 180 yards.

The bowstring is made from one particular type of bamboos known as *U thri*. In some parts of the region where the *thri* is not available or grown, other types of bamboo such as *U Spit* and *U Shken* can be used. Mostly, the bowstring called *U 'Saisiej* is prepared only from the upper part of young bamboos which is a little hard to shatter. It is a splitted bamboo scraped in the form of a thread. The bowstring is a little shorter than the length of the bow. At each end of the bow string, a knot is tied so that it can be hooked to the bow when it is needed to bend and provide the strength to release the arrow. These knots tied at the two ends of the bowstring are called *ki kyrwoh*. Traditionally, this *kyrwoh* is made from the bamboo threads which are splitted very thinly but in the modern days, the bamboo threads have been replaced by threads of plastic fibre.

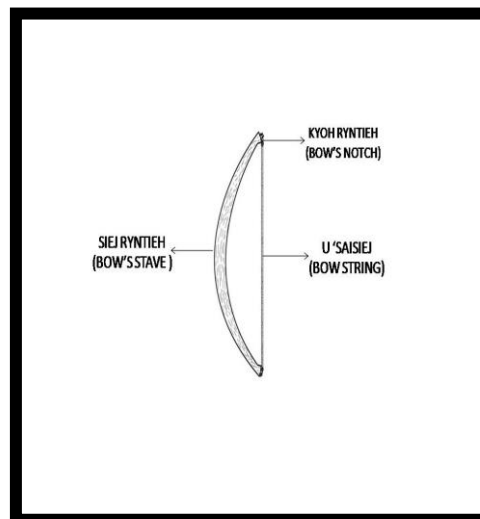


Figure: 1 – Parts of a Bow

The arrow called *u khnam* is usually a bamboo stick covered by a metal head at one end and has a feathered tail. The arrow is fitted to a string by a notch in the end of the shaft and is drawn back until sufficient tension is produced in the bow so that when released it will propel the arrow. The arrow is a straight projectile with a pointed tip. It has fins on the tail to direct its way straight to the target. Arrows are usually made of reeds called *u risaw* and *u stewlieh* or *u stewiong* which are carved as straight as possible. It can also be made from the

upper part of *u skhen* which is straight. Arrows made from other types of bamboos can also be used but these are not high quality when compared to those arrows made from the types of bamboos mentioned above.

As said earlier, the bamboos used for making arrows should first be properly dried up before they are used. When the shaft of the arrow is ready, one end of the arrow known as *kyoh khnam* is then shaped nicely. On this end which is the arrow's tail, feathers of some birds such as vultures, cranes, cormorants, eagles, hawks and hornbills are fixed on the shaft. These feather fletches called *ki 'ner pur khnam* are stitched near the notch, the end of the arrow and equally spaced around the shaft in such a way that it keeps the arrow pointed in the shooting direction when strongly released from the bowstring. The tip of the arrow's head could be sharpened to a point and hardened on the fire, or a separate arrow head could be affixed. The arrow head is then pushed into the sharpened tip of the shaft and sealed with *ka laha* which is the Khasi term for lac. Lac is a resinous substance exuded by a kind of insect, 'Laccifer' on the branches or barks of the *Kerria lacca* trees such as Dhak (*Butea monosperma*) and Ber (*Ziziphus mauritiana*). In Meghalaya, the Laccifer insects are reared mostly in the *Bhoi* area where these trees are found in abundance and are locally named as *Lapalang* and *Sohbroi*. The arrows are usually of two distinguished colours - black and red. These two colours are known as '*thingiong*' and '*thingsaw*' (black mark and red mark). '*Thing*' is a short form of *bthing* meaning 'wax' which is obtained from the raw honey comb. This comb is heated over the fire until it is fully diluted into the liquid form and is later kept aside for cooling. The hardened honey comb has now turned into wax. It is to be noted, however, that the *bthing* is yellow in its original colour and for the purpose of marking the arrows into the colours given by *Ka Mei Hukum*; it has to be mixed with the black and red colours. The black colour is collected from the soot of the traditional lamp of the Khasis called *Ka sharak rit* and is mixed with the melted wax until it turns black. This is later applied to the arrow shaft below the feather fletches and also at the tip of the arrow's tail.

On the other hand, the red colour can be obtained only from a particular type of clay which is red in colour and found only in a few stone quarries. This type of clay called *dewsaw* can be used as red colour after mixing with the wax and is applied to the arrow by following the same system as that for the black. As the work needs a lot of labour and concentration, it is therefore, done only by those experts in this craft. In the present time, due to the unavailability of the clay, the red colour powder used by the Hindus during the celebration of *Holi* festival is substituted in order to get the same. It is to be mentioned here that the red and black colours marked on the arrows are made only on the shaft. On the feathers, we can find a variety of coloured thread such as green, red, etc. These do not mean that they are the mark for the arrows, but they are there for decorative purposes. The use of such threads can be of any colour which the maker likes to, or according to the order placed by the customers, but he cannot replace the colour of the identity marker.

The arrows are of three kinds: (a) *U Nam-pling*, the barbed-headed or rusted arrow (b) *U Nam-sop*, the plain-headed and (c) *U Namsum*, which is also plain headed but shorter in length. The first is meant for hunting and war, the second type of arrow is used for archery matches only and the third is used for throwing arrows without a bow.

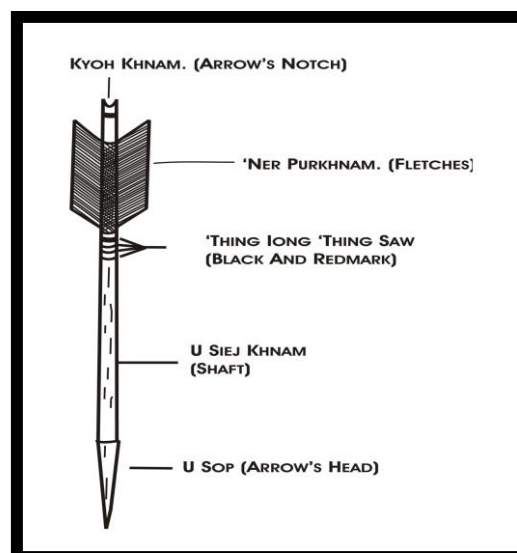


Figure: 2 – Parts of an Arrow

The Khasi archers, whenever there is need to move out from their home for hunting as well as for archery competition, used to carry the arrows inside the quiver known as *ka ryngkap*. Traditionally, this is made from the skin of animals, but today it is replaced by other materials like tin. It is triangular in shape with two sides of equal

length and a hollowed centre of a shorter length for keeping the arrows. Usually, *ryngkap* is made in such a way where twenty to thirty arrows can be kept inside it.

The target called *ka skum* or *ka sohpdung* is generally made of small bundles of grass or hay which is about 1 feet long and 4 inches in diameter fastened on a small pole.

III. Cultural Significance Of Bow And Arrows

Bows and arrows carry a very deep meaning in the Khasi context and also plays a vital role in the life cycle of the Khasi male member in the society beginning from birth to death. They are the symbols of a life-long companion to men. These two objects are very important in the ceremonies and festivals of the Khasis in relation to Khasi male members. Firstly, during the naming ceremony of a boy child, a bow and three arrows are placed near the child together with some other ritual objects. These ritual objects chosen for the boy have a deeper meaning as they symbolize the ideal man as a warrior, a protector and a hunter. The three arrows so placed carry different meanings. The first arrow is called *u 'nam- da lade* or the arrow for protecting his own self; the second arrow called *u 'nam-da ing kur* is meant to protect his family and clan; and the third arrow that is *u 'nam-da ri*, is to defend and save the race and the territorial integrity of the village from all dangers and harm. The bow that is used in this ceremony is called *ka 'tieh-jer* or *ka 'tieh-lymboit* and the arrows are called *ki 'nam-jer* popularly known as *ki 'nam-lymboit*. The priest who conducts the ceremony take each of the objects mentioned and calls them by name in words of prayers to invoke the blessings of God for the good conduct and health of the baby boy.

Secondly, during dances and festivals of the Khasis, both male and female dancers are properly dressed in costly costumes. For the male dancers, gold and silver are the main ornaments that they use to adorn themselves. However, their dress is never complete without the silver quiver and three silver arrows hung on their backsides. These silver arrows called *ki 'nam rupa* are kept inside a silver quiver called *ka ryngkap rupa* are tied with a chord around the waist with an animal tail at its end. The belief is that the use of arrows in such dances is based on the family religious rites like birth or naming ceremony and also death ceremony. Laloo (1978) in this regards writes that the first arrow is called *u 'nam-blei* which signifies the blessings of God the Creator through the first maternal uncle *U Kñi-rangbah* known as *U Suidnia*. It is called *'nam-blei* (arrow of God) because *Ka Hukum Blei* (God's decree) used to come to the people or the members of the family through the maternal uncle for the reason that the Khasi traditional religion follows that it is the duty of the maternal uncle to perform the rites and rituals within a family. The second arrow is called *u 'nam-kpa*, which symbolizes the blessings of *U Thawlang* (The First Ancestor father) and the third arrow called *u 'nam-mei* is a symbol of the blessings that comes from *Ka Iawbei* (The First Ancestress mother).

However, it is necessary to note that bow and arrow also plays a very significant role during warfare and hunting. Bows and arrows have always been the weapons used during wars. In the olden days the Khasi warriors were well-trained in fighting with their bows and arrows. Before going to the battlefield, the Khasi warriors would first inform *Ka Hukum* (goddess of decree) so that the goddess would protect them on the battlefield and bless them with victory. The way of appeasing gods and goddesses before they commence any activity is through rite and rituals. In times of fear and anxiety during wars, the ritual observed was by sacrificing an animal or a fowl and also by placing a bow and a fistful of barbed-headed arrows called *ki 'nampliang* together with some other weapons. Even after the war is over, a ritual is performed. In this process, the conqueror would behead the leader of the enemy and carry it to a raised platform where ceremonies were conducted. After the ritual was over, the head of enemy was hung on the village entrance. Later, the warrior who beheaded the enemy, took the head and placed it in front of a priest or diviner. The diviner then starts prayers and pours the sacred libation on the ground. The chief would then pierce the head with an arrow three times and let his *myntis* (ministers) and *basans* (elders) do the same with their swords.

On the other hand, the Khasis are very fond of hunting and considered it as a folk game. The main weapon used by the Khasi hunters are the bow and barbed-headed arrows. The 'hunting lovers know very well that in order to strengthen their, they have to pay obeisance to the deity of hunting by way of observing proper rites and rituals. Thus before moving for hunting and before leaving from their village, they first performed a ritual together with the sacrifice of animals. During this ritual, they place an offering to the gods and goddesses in the form of prayers and requests to bless them for the hunt, to free them from dangers in the deep thick jungles and guard them on the way from the day they started from home till they returned back. It is important to note that while performing such rituals, they never forget to place nearby the bow and a fistful of barbed-headed arrows and consecrated these implements in front of the deity.

Lastly, when a man dies, a bow and three arrows are placed close by the dead body. The bow which is used in death ceremony is called *Ka 'tieh- tympem*, whereas the arrows are called *Ki 'nam tympem*. After the funeral pyre is lit, these three arrows are shot skyward one each to the north, south and west directions. Arrows are shot only to three directions except the east for the reason that the soul of the deceased person makes his way through the east direction towards the House of God (*Ka Dwar U Blei*). These are shot to guard the soul from the evil spirits on his last journey to the abode of the Creator. The first arrow is called *u 'nam-lamphrang*. It is believed

that since the day of naming the baby, the first arrow will lead and make the baby healthy, make him wise and live long, so that when the baby grow up he could defend himself, his clan and defend the territorial rights. Here the first arrow indicate the symbol of the arrow that the Khasi used in warfare and recreation like hunting and archery .*U 'nam-pynbud* is the second arrow which guides the man in his every step so that he could be knowledgeable in dealing with clan relationship, state matters and humanity. The third arrow called *U 'nam-synran*, is another arrow shot from the funeral pyre to keep off the evil spirits. This arrow guards the man's spirit till the end of his life on his way to the House of God.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be understood that for a Khasi, bows and arrows are more than just weapons and archery game equipment. At birth or death and in celebration or war, they are greatest symbols of sacred belief and faith. It is a fact that with the advancement of development and modern education, and most of all the influence of Christianity, has brought about a sea-change in the life, tradition and custom of the Khasis. Their folklore, customs and practices, in a word, their culture has undergone major changes; people's life is faced with threats and dangers of continuity of lifestyle brought about by the modernism. Hence, a quest for one's own identity arises at this juncture, not how to adopt and live a new life style but how to go back in search of the roots of origin where one comes from and retain these roots partially if not wholly or to even create new ones that will fit in the present day amidst the influence and changes of the modern world.

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