

EVOLUTION OF DORMITORY TRADITION IN MARA TRIBE

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Abstract: The tribal group of Mara has a distinct social culture such as dormitory of young men. Dormitory means a culture of young men visit to unmarried girl they admired most and they slept there as group every night until she got married. Such dormitory culture distinguishes Mara tribe from other tribal groups Myanmar and India. From here on, such dormitory culture of Mara will be denoted as dormitory. Dormitory was commonly known as *Laipho* in Mara. The dormitory had been prevailed in the Mara society since time of immemorial. If the girl got married with a man from the visiting group or someone else, the young men group changed to visit another house of a girl whom they admired again. It is the place for the young men not only the visiting place for their love affair but also a kind of library where they shared indigenous knowledge as a centre of learning social behaviour and moral conduct. The objective of this paper is to explore the influence of the dormitory in Mara society and its evolutionary changes due to the forces of Christianity and modernization.

Keywords: Dormitory, *Laipho*, Changes, Mara Tribe.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Maras are one of the many tribal groups living in both Chin state, Myanmar and Mizoram state, India. They are, currently, the inhabitants of the northeast of India and south-eastern part of Myanmar. The Maras belong to the Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman Language speaking family and are of Mogoloid stock. The ancestral homeland of the Mara people is said to have been somewhere in southern part of China. They were originally the nomadic tribe like many of their neighboring groups, moving from one place to another place before finally settling to the present Mara-land. It is possible Maras migrated from southern China through Tibet region across the hills of north-western in Myanmar, then reaching their present place in the middle of the sixteenth century. In the earlier time, the Mara people were called various names by the neighboring tribes. First, Maras were known as Lakher, the name given by their north-western neighbors, the Luseis (Mizo). The word is purely a Mizo word or expression which means 'plucking of cotton' (La = cotton, Kher = plucking.) The story held by local elders says that a Mizo on his visit to the Mara area where he saw a Mara woman was plucking cotton, and thus he named the Maras as 'Lakher'.¹ The southern neighbors, the Khumis and Arakanese, called the Maras as 'Shandu' or 'Shendu'. This second name 'Shandu' or 'Shendu', wrongly named after in English word in Khumi language of 'Samtu' which means 'hair knot' (Sam = hair, Tu = knot). This name had been used in early days, the Khumis were frequently encountered with the Mara warriors who were lofty hair knots above their forehead, and thus they named the Maras 'Samtu'.² Thirdly, the Maras were also known as 'Miram' by their northern neighbors, Lai group.³ It is probably that the term 'Miram' is a direct translation of Mara into the Lai language. The term 'Miram' literally means 'alien land' (Mi = alien, ram = land) in the language of Lai people. In the early period, the Mara people were called the various names

¹ K. Zohra, "The Origin of the Maras and their Migration with Reference to their Chin Hills Settlement." *In Chin History, Culture and Identity*, edited by K. Robin, pp.117-127, (Brussels, Belgium: The Euro Burma Office, 2009), p.124

² R.T. Zachono, "The Maras Towards Autonomy" in R.N. Prasad, *Autonomy Movement in Mizoram*", (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1994), p.134

³ Nay Aung, "*Socio-Economic Condition of Mara People*", (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Yangon, 2017), p.42

by the neighboring tribes, Mizo, Lai, Arakanene and Khumis. But the Mara people never called themselves Lakher, Shandu and Miram. They called themselves Mara since long time of immemorial. The word "Mara" is used as a generic term for the whole Mara people. The whole region inhabited by the Maras is known as 'Marara' in their local language, meaning 'Maraland or the land of the Maras'.⁴ With the independence of India in 1947, and Myanmar in 1948, the United Maraland was divided into two (West Maraland in India and East Maraland in Myanmar) and ruled by different governments. Today, the West Mara people are living in the Mara Autonomous District Council in Mizoram state of India and the East Mara people inhabited in Chin state of Myanmar. Despite the larger population live in West Maraland, the area of East Maraland is wider than West Maraland.

2. FORMATION

The dormitory was well organized among the early Maras, the social relationship characterized its primary foundation and functional organization through the organized group system. The early Maras had maintained their own cultural organizations called bachelors' house or dormitory.⁵ The dormitory was an unmarried young men institution and was the place where they slept together temporarily at the house of any admired girl. The dormitory was a very dominant social organization which influenced upon the unmarried young men of Mara tribe and it composed of many bachelors who chose a house of unmarried girl as a sleeping place and they slept together there until the girl got married with any boy.⁶ The unmarried young men freely organized themselves into a bachelor group, and then, they selected the house of any unmarried girl whom they admired most for a common sleeping place. There were many dormitory groups in every village, and the number for the formation of the dormitory was not restricted and limited. Thus they could form any number of dormitories in a village and the number of bachelors' house depended on the number of unmarried girls whom the young men admired. The name of each bachelor's house or dormitory was given particular in honour of a house of an unmarried girl where they selected to sleep together. If the name of a girl was Si Si and thus a group of young men who slept in Si Si's house was called Si Si dormitory meaning Si Si's boyfriends'.⁷ If the name of girl was Su Su, the group of the young men who slept in her house was also named as Su Su dormitory meaning Su Su's boyfriends'. The young men usually selected freely the house of the most favourite unmarried girl whom they admired most for their sleeping place, and there was some degree in selecting the dormitory house. Firstly, choosing the house of a girl whom they admired to sleep together was dealt with the personality of the girl and it was a very important factor. However, their choice had completely depended on virtue, beauty and behaviour of the girl. Secondly, choosing a house of a girl depended upon how much the girl was rich to provide feast, food, drink, etc. to the young men at any time or any certain special occasions and upon the attitude of the girl's parents. Finally, the house of the girl's parents was large and comfortable enough for considerable number of young men to sleep and to them.

3. MEMBERSHIP

Membership of the dormitory was open and free to all the teenage boys before they got married but married men and women were not allowed to participate in the membership of the dormitory. If young men did not take part in any dormitory group in the village, they were automatically omitted from the young community of the village, the celebration of festivals and the great activities of the village society. That was why the young men considered that the dormitory was a very valuable fundamental function of social interaction or relationship in the early Mara society. The parents of the selected girl served and acted only as the guardians or the hosts of the group. Only one dormitory group could be enrolled or joined by a young man by his own choice. In this way, he was not allowed to join double or multi-membership of the dormitory. Therefore, the Mara society firmly practised the rule for one membership and one group. When a young man got married or moved to another village and passed away, etc. he was removed and ended his dormitory membership.⁸ Nevertheless, he was also allowed to transfer his membership willingly from one group to another within the village. Not only a young man who had handicap such as slave, lunatic, insane but also married men and widowers were not allowed

⁴ A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, (London: Luzac & Co.Ltd., 1949), p.201

⁵ William Saw, *Thadou-Kukis*, (Government of Assam, 1929), p.70

⁶ K. Zohra, *The Maras: Their Indigenous Tribal Tradition and Folkculture*, (Saiha: Documentary Film Episode, 2001), p.5

⁷ K. Zohra, *The Maras Indigenous Tradition and Folkculture*, (Saiha: Mara Research Society, 2013), p.20

⁸ Taw Lwin, *Chin Yoeyar hnit dalay* (Tradition and Culture of Chin), (Yangon: Amyotha Toethetyet Sarpay Press, 1967), p.104

to become a dormitory member. Moreover, a young was not allowed to become a member of dormitory in another village if he did not transfer to his residence. Only if he was invited as a guest and visitor by his friends from another village, he could join any dormitory group there for a few days or on certain important occasions.

4. FUNCTION

The management of the dormitory institution dealt with the organization of family of the chosen house. The young men who slept in the dormitory house were patronized and kept watch over by the girl's parents or the owners of the dormitory house. The young men were often provided by the girl's parents with a wide living room, a lot of rice-beer, nicotine-water, special feast, various entertainments, etc. but they were not served daily food in the dormitory house. The girl from dormitory and her young men worked jointly together in the *jhums* cultivation from one's field to another in rotation system. The young men also jointly offered the girl's parents assistance in the *jhum* field and other domestic chores. They not only provided badly needs of the village community but also assisted the impoverished families such as widow, widower, orphan, disabled person, etc. By the time they came back from the *jhum* field, a girl was occasionally carried by the young men on their back to her own house to give honour to her and show her prestige. It is said that the young men showed their special or greatest courtesy and fondness to the girl. In return, a pig or *mithun* must be slaughtered for the young men (dormitory members) by the parents of the girl and made a special household feast for them for the sake of their daughter's honour. Together with the family feast, the entertainments such as drinking, singing, dancing, merry-making, etc. were also done in the dormitory house. At the same time, they often held wrestling of inter-village on certain important occasions.

5. ROLES OF THE GIRL

The Maras customarily regarded the girl that she was only the host of dormitory house. She could not reject or admit any young man who wanted to join her dormitory group. The girls welcome the boys or any visitor by giving a seat and asking them to sit down. They offer nicotine-water to her visitors, the offering of which is regarded as a social courtesy.⁹ The Mara girl needed to have good behaviour, etiquette and politeness in her manner, and she had to treat politely and equally to all the young men in her bachelor house. When it was time to go to bed, she had to arrange and make the bed for all the young men equally and then folded their blankets and pillows neatly and tidily after they got up. Then all the young men in her house highly hoped for having continuously fairness and politeness, which literally means politeness and courtesy towards all the young men.¹⁰ She also became involved in the social recreational activities like drinking, singing, dancing, etc. She always conducted her responsibilities in their accommodation but she never neglected her virtue and prestige.

The young men were provided by the girl with plentiful supplies of nicotine water regularly both at home and field works. Furthermore, they were provided with cloths, bamboo or wooden pillows, *mithun's* skin, etc. in their accommodation. It was also her responsibility that she often kept all the things the dormitory members took with them at night when they went to bed, and she gave them back after they got up. The girl always kept a peaceful relation among them by showing the same smile and courtesy to all young men (dormitory members) in a perfect condition. Some young men could pay a visit any girl outside the dormitory house at night, and in such case, a dormitory girl must not sleep until they returned back from courting their girlfriends. Dormitory girl played a vital role in the dormitory organisation. The social interaction strongly symbolized the dormitory among the young men and courting of a single girl by all young men. If a girl fell in love with any young man of group, her bed was placed near his bed who she loved.¹¹

6. ORGANISATION

The dormitory was a group of young men where they performed many social recreational activities. Courting of a girl before marriage took place among the young men who tried to persuade a girl with rigorous competition. The leader of the dormitory group was acted by the senior bachelor and was admired by the young men and boys. They all often entertained social recreational activities like drinking, singing, dancing, wrestling, and merry-making, etc. when a special feast was conducted for them by the host of dormitory house. There was no unfair treatment and social difference among the members of dormitory and they also treated each other as their own brothers. Therefore, the dormitory house was not

⁹ Nengkhanpan (Hauzel), "*History and Culture of the Paite Tribe*", (Ph.D. Dissertation, Manipur University, 1987), p.77

¹⁰ P.T. Hlychho, *Maraland Yesterday and Today*, (Shillong: Rhino Printers, 2007), p.90

¹¹ N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers*, (Calcutta: 1932; reprinted in Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 1976), p.291

only a common sleeping quarter and recreational centre, but it was also a very important place from where a marginal young man or weaker person was morally developed and also shaped into a responsible person or good worker. The dormitory house was also the place where all the young men were imparted valuable training, information, knowledge and taught sense of responsibility. Finally, the dormitory house was a very important for the defence of the village. In times of war or raids launched the offensive by the hostile villages, all the members of dormitory house collectively defended and protected the villagers. Thus, it can be said that all the members of dormitory carried out the interests and needs of the villagers, i.e. general welfare of the village and security of the village.¹²

7. IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNIZATION

Prior to the coming of the British, the Maras were absolutely independent people and they worshiped animism. There were no systematic social institutions which represented the training centre of education and indigenous knowledge for the young people. The Maras were illiterate, savage, did not have their own script and writing system. Hence, the Mara people depended on only oral messages that were passed down from father to son and from generation to generation. The dormitory culture played a significant role in the development and the unity of the Mara society. With the appearance of the administration of the British, the Christian missionaries made an attempt to introduce many reforms in the Mara society through the services of the development of social welfare. Christianity gradually replaced the tribal traditional religion of what was known as animism.¹³ They converted the Mara people into Christianity and open schools to change the primitive community to the modernized community which influenced by western culture. The Missionaries invented the Mara alphabet by using the Roman script and taught how to read and write. The Christian hymns and bible were translated into Mara language. The modern education and Christianity begun to gain firm footing within the land of Maras. The parents realized the value of education and sent their children to schools for the better future. When the modernized education appeared in the Maraland, the young men of Mara came to have competitiveness in education for the opportunities of the better professionals and went to study towns and abroad. The competition among them created the exchange of knowledge, ideas, information and pioneered greater engagement with the rest of the world. The Missionaries constructed the Churches in every village and the service commonly referred to as the prayer meeting associated with short addresses, prayers or testimonies and singing together has a significant function among the converted Mara younger people. The youngsters practised the rapid multiplication of hymns or choral singing with tonic solfa in a house at night and it was used for praising God in Sunday worship service. Apart from this, the pastors and heads of church formed a small Sunday school to imbue the spirit of Christianity in the Mara community. The children who more regularly attended the school were given pictures and rewards. Hence, the church took the place of dormitory and the young men also make use of their time to study their lessons for the better living standard. Moreover, with the passage of the time, the young people are more interested in using modern gadgets like television, cell phone and reading journals, magazine and Bible. The form of dresses, designs, music and dance began to change from traditional to modern fashion gradually also. The Mara people gradually repudiated their aged old customs and practices as they came to adopt the Christian way of life and the modernized system. Modernization and globalization can not only led to challenges in the maintenance of local culture of tribal groups but also creates new society and reproduce cultures in line with the times of modernization. The modernization takes off and washes the identities and culture of the Mara people and makes hybrid cultures. The conversion to Christianity, the introduction of western education and the using of modern gadgets made them began to lose the importance of the bachelor's dormitory in the Mara society. With ideological and material changes, the youngsters of the Mara have less time to spend in the dormitory. They spend time for the well-being of their family, the development of village and community under the impact of modernization and globalization. Nowadays, although Mara young men still visit the dormitory, they don't sleep at night at the house of girl. They sat and talked together for one or two hours and the young men went back just saying goodnight to the girl.

8. CONCLUSION

Although the Mara culture of boys and girls were living freely, there was hardly found any case of sexual misconduct. The dormitory was regarded as one of the ancient main social gathering in the village and each dormitory do not disturb each other. The span of a dormitory depended upon the time of the girl when she got married. The earlier the girl got married, the shorter the span of a dormitory. If a girl committed adultery, all the young men left the dormitory house

¹² Mylai Hlychho, *Mara History*, (Aizawl: Haulhira Offset Press, 2008), p.124

¹³ T.H. Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 2004), p.134

immediately. Provided that a young man was engaged for marriage by his parents, he was automatically resigned from the membership of dormitory. When the girl was married with a person from another village, he must pay the price of dormitory to all the dormitory members of the girl's house. For his price of dormitory, the bridegroom slaughtered a pig and served with a pot of rice beer. And then they all conducted the special feast in the girl's house and the time had occurred for them to say good bye to the girl and their dormitory house. Then they chose another girl whom they admired most and move to her house again. At present, Churches and schools replaced in the activities of the dormitory where the youngsters gathered to exchange ideas due to the impact of Christianity and modernization. As a result, it gradually leads to the abandonment of traditions and cultures like dormitory. Modernization which paved the way for the development of the Mara tribal group made great changes of everyday life. With the forces of the modernization and globalization, it can't be denied that the culture of the Mara people is not static and is changing from generation to generation. Some changes make a threat to one's culture and tradition but others bring about the preservation of the traditional culture. At present, the Mara people are making an attempt to accommodate the changes brought on by modernization and globalization with their cultural and traditional process. The influence of Christianization and modernization was both destructive and constructive the traditional and cultural elements of Mara society. It is vital to review cultural transformation and changes from the perspectives of both primitive and modern culture to discover new meaning in the traditional ways of life.

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