



NOKPANTE: THE BACHELORS' DORMITORY OF THE GAROS

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ABSTRACT:

Among the tribal people of the world, the institution of youth dormitory has been traditionally one of the most important social institutions. Youth dormitory is a place where youth, usually those who have entered into adolescence boys become a member mandatorily. According to Julius Marak (2000), The Nokpante of Garos is also such type of institution which is the centre of traditional life. The Garos form the major tribal population in the GaroHills Region of the State of Meghalaya. The Nokpante is a bachelor's dormitory constructed by the Garos at the courtyard of the village head or at the heart of the village. The word "Nokpante" literally means the house of the unmarried young men. Here, the Garo boys acquire knowledge in the fields of art, crafts, wood carving and basketry, music, culture, physical fitness, medicine, agriculture, defense, sports, moral standard and etiquettes which are propagated by the village elders. It also provides a community life of the youths and inculcates strong sense of unity, discipline and corporate life. Nokpante acts as an institution for acquiring and imparting knowledge through oral tradition.

KEYWORDS : Youth dormitory , acquire knowledge , culture, physical fitness.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, when the boys started to understand the basic society's norms, i.e., around the time of onset of puberty, they have to leave their parents' home and moves into the *nokpante*. Unless it is an emergency, the boys are not allowed to go to their parents' house. They are to learn and adapt the rules and discipline of the *nokpante*. *Nokpante* in a village is constructed through joint cooperative labours of married and unmarried young men of the village. Depending on the population in the village, *nokpante* is constructed separately for each clan. In the bachelor's dormitory of Marak clan (*chatchi*) only *marak* bachelors can sleep and learn the art, while it is the same for the clan Sangma, Areng, Shira and Momin.



Nokpante Nokdonggaa (Inauguration)

On the very first day of completion of constructing *Nokpante*, *NokpanteNokdonggaa* is performed. *NokpanteNokdonggaa* is a ceremony where the bachelors are ready to move in to a new bachelors' house. The first day of inauguration itself it becomes an introduction of rituals performed by the *Kamal* (teacher/priest), by the unmarried young men and by the elderly male villagers. The *Kamal* at this ceremony takes the opportunity to teach the bachelors as he chants out sacrificial songs over the burning incense at the altar in the *nokpante*. The *Kamal* chants out *doroa* (ordinances) on the native rhythmic beat of drums singing on the origin of *nokpante*. The *Kamal* inculcates how *nokpante* started since the era of the Demi-Gods. This ceremony becomes as a seminar where *Kamal* gives lectures and bachelors acts as scholars inside the *nokpante*.

Nokpante and Semiotics

The basic historical background the bachelors need to know are the totems carved on the posts and pillars of *Nokpante*. It becomes important for every bachelor to know because as they build *Nokpante*, they carved the pictures of the stories they have seen in the past of their lives. It acts as an observation, experimental and participatory education system. The important part of the totem in *Nokpante* is *Do'kaku*. *Do'kaku* is carved on a pillar that connects the roof above the entrance which signifies the 'beginning and salvaging' of what has been practiced in the past shall be redone and remembered through totems and cultural preservation. *Do'kaku* consists the symbols of diamonds (*miksep*) which signifies 'keeper and the holy eye', shield (*sepi*) which signifies 'protection', Closed gongs (*rang kingkipa*) which signifies 'property' and Necklace with a precious stone (*Ripokdokatchi*) that signifies 'beauty and high status'. These symbols act as the signs to inculcate the bachelors of their origin and the need to preserve their culture through visual communication or traditional media.

Other totems on the woods inside the *Nokpante* are made for judgment and oath taking. The cause and effect of the crime can be known after having taken the oaths by touching the totems if a person is really saying the truth or lying. The totems consist of the sun, moon, star and all the wild animals and insects that are liable to hurt human beings. Animals and insects like elephant, tiger, alligator, snake, Goral, scorpion, centipede etc, are engraved on the posts. *Nokpante* at the same time acts as the court for judgement for them. Sun, moon and star refers to witness and proof both for truth and lie. With fear of these animals groom the bachelors to live a truthful and peaceful life inside the *Nokpante* and in the society in future.

Education system in Nokpante

The first and foremost practice the bachelors need to do in *nokpante* is to keep the traditional kitchen, the indoors and surroundings clean. The bachelors are also taught to be well-behaved, show respect and learn the social etiquette they need to show in front of elders and women. Members in the *nokpante* are led by the eldest bachelor, a leader selected among them to guide the younger bachelors. He makes sure that other bachelors learn and grasp the knowledge in a right way. Boys in the *nokpante* learn about epic stories, myths, legends, Gods, origin, migration from the elders told by way of reciting poems, ordinances, chanting, mourning and mostly singing. They mostly learn all these through singing, merry making, sharing stories and their experiences during recreation hours after going through a hard labour of the day. The Garo bachelors and other elders mostly pay attention on the knowledge of ritualism. Their practice in *nokpante* becomes ritual and it gets propagated to the younger generations. Bachelors in *Nokpante* learn to grasp the information without any attempt to test its validity by argument. The bachelors learn from each other through conversation, songs, dialogues, etc.,. It acts as a casual institution of knowledge where nature motivates to groom them through their observation and act of participation.

Today, the Nokpante system is almost dead. There are very few unproductive Nokpante structures still to be seen. Time has relegated it to the background. Modernisation (as in modern education) and Christianity has impacted the Nokpante system. In Garo hills, in 1857 after the British territorialisation and influence of Christianity the villagers themselves destroyed artefacts, musical instruments, metals and structures including nokpante. There are few nokpante preserved and reconstructed in few villages. The nokpante from the year 1800 is still being preserved in EmanA'sakgre, South Garo Hills. Chidaogre village still preserves its old nokpante but abandoned without any renovation. The transmission of oral literature, recitation of sacred texts and texts in performances are like a syllabii in *Nokpante* where each and every individual besides learning other things can also specialize their own interests through oral tradition and observations. However, construction of *Nokpante* and the institution itself in villages is now rare in today's digitized era which once acted as an important oral educational institution.

Songs and Texts

What seems visually fierce is opposite when Garo bachelors, elders and women speak. Their conversations and dialogues are in a form of songs and ordinances. The texts are orally executed since there has never been a culture of writing a record in the ancient Garo society. The verbal communication existed since time immemorial where a language itself acts as a song. These are regularly practiced inside the nokpante where daily life's event is sung for the other person and the other person reply back in a form of ordinances and other folk form of singing of the Garos such as Doroa, gonda, serinjing, ajea, ahomring'a, danidoka, ajemaring'a, gogaedoka, nanggorerering'a, harara and many more.

Bachelors acquired the sacred rituals and techniques from the village elders in Nokpante. Every action of human and nature are converted in a form of songs inside nokpante. Mistakes committed by the boys are corrected by elders and lines are added to the mistaken line. During few festive occasions the Kamal (priest) recites and sings the history of every living being, nonliving being, origin of mankind etc, for a week long days as they drink and make merry. These are not just festivities but a time to grasp every words and tunes which needed to be carried forward for the upcoming generation. These occasions for gathering knowledge and bachelors listening with an educated ear can become a difficult task as there are beating of drums and gongs being played inside the nokpante. The bachelors strictly follow their own responsibility in completing the characteristics of the institution.

Today, there is a grave risk that much indigenous knowledge is being lost and, along with it, valuable knowledge about ways of living sustainably. This module illustrates ways that indigenous knowledge may be integrated into education and thereby, brings the benefits of helping to 'sustain' indigenous knowledge and societies to all. It also encourages teachers and students to gain enhanced respect for local culture, its wisdom and its ethics, and provides ways of teaching and learning locally relevant knowledge and skills. Hence, there is a need to study the indigenous knowledge of tribal people like that of Garos. This knowledge needs to be captured and preserved.

CONCLUSION

The bachelor dormitory practice among the Garo, emerges at the outset is the centrality of the *nokpante* institution in the settlements of the community. Another point that became explicit in the linkages of the institution of *nokpante* with the family organization, marriage system. Concept of manhood and chastity, institutional enabling of parental privacy, mobilizing of youth labour, juvenile socialization and imitation to community polity and so on. Most of the studies on the variety of dormitory practices with or without gender

exclusiveness prevailing among the different tribes in the Indian subcontinent clearly show that the *nokpante system* also was primarily an arrangement to ensure sexual privacy for the cohabitation of husbands and wives.

The *nokpante* functions as if it is a club, a place of juvenile happiness, a non-formal school, a training center, and so on for the making of unmarried men to a mature community member. It enables them to get to know how to protect the community by learning the ways of defense against animal raids and enemy attacks, teaches them how to be useful for the community through co-operative labour, enables to know the community rituals and rites and also how to participate in them, provides an avenue to be community conscious and corporate in their feeling and actions thus making them responsible to the community. The *nokpante* is also function as a common shelter of the community, serving a variety of public purposes like community's guesthouse, space for convening meetings and conducting political deliberations, and after all a site for community entertainment and amusements. All these features make it obvious that the existence of the *nokpante* amongst Garos is not accidental. To conclude, *nokpante* is still a pivotal institution entrenched in the community culture of the Garos.

REFERENCE

1. Julius Marak: Garo Customary Laws and Practices. Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi (2000).