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## Cannibalism, human sacrifice and the mechanism of social adjustment: A case study on the Lyngngam of Meghalaya

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### Abstract

Human sacrifices and cannibalism have been documented in certain tribes of Northeast India often linked to religious rituals, ancestor worship and tribal warfare. Human sacrifices were often made to appease the Gods, ancestors or spirits. Head were taken as trophies it was also done to ensure fertility and prosperity. The Lyngngam community inhabiting the western part of the central Meghalaya plateau is considered to be highly backward and the name 'Lyngngam' itself which is derived from the word *Langam* means people who are very isolated and remote. The Lyngngam have always considered themselves as being the sub-group of the Khasi and there are a number of Lyngngam clans who are present in the established Khasi and Garo clans. An interesting myth about these people is their association with the practiced of cannibalism. The notion of cannibalism of the Lyngngam is so popular that they have often been described by the other Khasi groups as *Lyngngam bam brieve*, literally meaning the 'Lyngngam who consumes human flesh'. Although so much has been portrayed about their cannibalistic practice in different writings about the Lyngngam, there has not been a single objective attempt to document the practice or record oral references about it. The paper will try to bring out the various narratives preserved in the memories of the people to get a closer examination on 'cannibalism' and human sacrifice among the Lyngngam as a constructed myth or a reality of the past.

**Keywords:** Lyngngam, Meghalaya, cannibalism, human flesh, rituals, human sacrifice

### Introduction

'Lyngngam', is an Austric-Asiatic speaking group inhabiting the western extremity of the central Meghalaya Plateau in the Khasi hills and the northern districts of Garo hills of Meghalaya <sup>[1]</sup>. The term 'Lyngngam' is generally considered to have been derived from the word "Lngam" a name coined by the Khasi of west Khasi hills, literally suggested to mean a group of people who had ventured and inhabited the areas deep inside the jungle. The Garo community on the other hand refers to them as 'Megam', while the Assamese people of Boko call them 'Nuniya Garos' <sup>[2]</sup>. The ethnic position of the Lyngngam who are nestled between the Garo and the Khasis is still disputed, since they are considered to be sub-tribe of both the Khasis and Garos. According to Gurdon, Grierson, Rodborne and Barret, the Lyngngam were considered as one of the five Khasi sub-tribes, whereas Bhattacharjee, Sangma, Hamlet Bareh, Playfair, identify them as non-Khasi, but belong to one of the twelve sub-tribes of the Garos <sup>[3]</sup>. Linguistics studies have established their dialect could be as Austro-Asiatic, but forty percent of the Lyngam vocabulary seems to be unrelated to the Khasi and it is still debatable if the Lyngngam dialect is of Khasi or as a related language <sup>[4]</sup>. As a community the Lyngngam is considered to be relatively backward as the etymology of the word *Langam* conveys a meaning of 'isolation' or 'remoteness'.

The Lyngngam have always considered themselves as being the sub-group of the Khasi and there are a number of Lyngngam clans who are present in the established Khasi and Garo clans. Banrida Langstieh's brought in her hypothesis;

Lyngngam is a small of probably only males might have migrated to Western Meghalaya and encountered the Khasi who were already there and who had probably had come from the same stock of Austric Speakers. Under those circumstances, they were probably forced to get female spouses from the Khasi and from the later migrants the Garo, ultimately emerging into an admixed but independent group <sup>[5]</sup>.

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She further added that...there are a few Lyngngam clan titles that shared the same name, with the other Khasi or Garo subgroups that may or may not be related. Notable examples of those Lyngngam clans present in the Khasi groups with similar clan titles are-Mawlong, Nongbri, Diengngan, Langrin, Nianglang, Sangriang, Nongsiej, Puwein etc. and some of the Garo clans Momin and Ritchell Marak represented by Nongmin and Rashir clans of the 60Lyngngam. The presence of such similar clan names no

doubt suggest that they maybe be of Khasi or Garo origin but the degree of relatedness with their counterparts in the other groups needs to be critically tested and verified. For example, the Nongbri clan which is predominantly found in the adjoining southern parts of the Lyngngam although Khasi in name does not seem to have any relation with the Khasi-Khynriam Nongbri clans found abundant in the Shillong plateau <sup>[6]</sup>.



**Fig 1:** Map showing the geographical distribution of the Lyngngam community in Western Meghalaya, indicating their settlement between the Khasi and Garo regions along the central plateau.

### Cannibalism

The term “cannibalism” can be used broadly to mean the consumption of members of one’s own species. The Greek-based term “anthropophagy” quite literally means eating humans regardless of who is doing the eating <sup>[7]</sup>. There are different forms of cannibalism practiced by pre-literate cultures across the world at different periods of history. Funeral rituals involving cannibalism have been well documented among the Fore people of Papua New Guinea who are known to have eaten the bodies of their deceased. The practice was seen as a sign of love and respect, preventing corpses from rotting or being devoured by insects. The Aztecs reportedly ate the corpses after making human sacrifices to the gods, which they considered it sacred. Eating the body of an enemy was perhaps the ultimate act of revenge. In addition to showing domination and inspiring fear, consuming one’s foe was thought to enable the victor to possess the strength and bravery of the vanquished. The Suki people of Papua New Guinea practiced headhunting as a part of marriage customs. The whole culture revolved around head-hunting and related cannibalism which is reflected in their material culture and

its symbolic expression <sup>[8]</sup>.

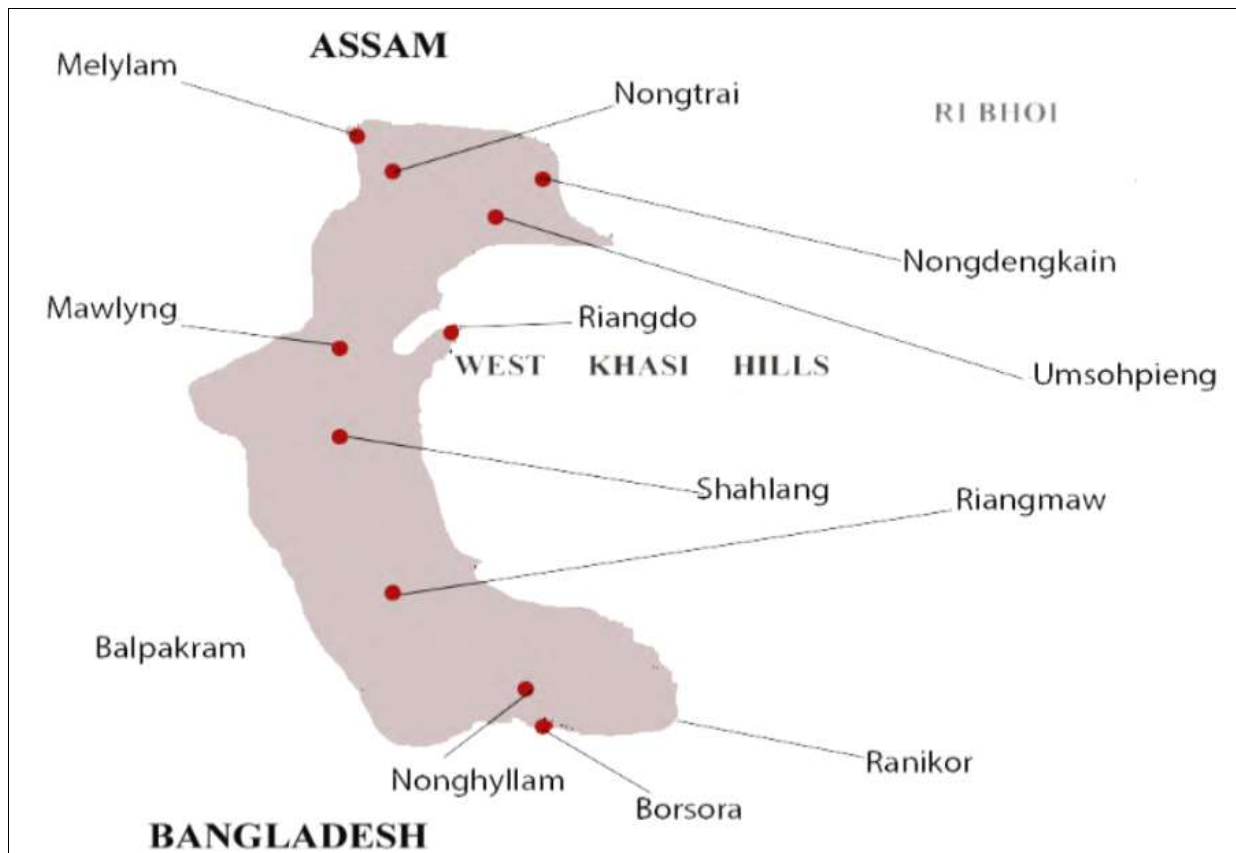
Northeast India has numerous tribes whose oral history and tradition handed down from generation to generation constitute an important part of their culture. Although most of these collective memories are anecdotal and their authenticity and chronology cannot always be determined, yet they hold hidden facts which can add some understanding about their culture and history. Human sacrifices and cannibalism have been documented in certain tribes of Northeast India often linked to religious rituals, ancestor worship and tribal warfare. Human sacrifices were often made to appease the Gods, ancestors or spirits. Head were taken as trophies it was also done to ensure fertility and prosperity.

### Lyngngam and the Myth of cannibalism

The connection between ‘cannibalism’ and the ‘Lyngngam’ is so popular that they have often been described by the other Khasi groups as *Lyngngam bam briew*, literally meaning the ‘Lyngngam who consumes human flesh’ <sup>[9]</sup>. Although so much has been portrayed about their cannibalistic practice in different writings about the

Lyngngam, there has not been a single objective attempt to document the practice or record oral references about it. The current paper is a preliminary investigation with an objective to highlight some of the popular narratives preserved and circulated among the common folks and elders in the form of folk stories and hearsays, both documented and undocumented in order to test the existence of the cannibalistic practice among the Lyngngam. According to Albizuri, the Lyngngam were head hunting people till about the year 1850. The Rashir clan seems to

have been head hunters till recently, there seem to be indication that some of them were also cannibalistic<sup>[10]</sup>. Rev P Dkhar in his work, stated that the Lyngngam in the past, separate the human head and boiled it in a large pot and as the head of the deceased started boiling, all the family members of the deceased gathered and inhaled the vapor that's comes out of the boiling head and because of this practiced the Lyngngam were term as the Lyngngam bam brew or cannibals<sup>[11]</sup>.



**Fig 2:** Location of important Villages in the Lyngngam inhabited area

John Hughes Morris<sup>[12]</sup>, a Welsh author and administrator of Christian Missions, stated that the Lyngngam country is exceptionally wild, covered with dense jungle and extremely difficult to travel, owing to their isolated position the Lyngngam differ in many respects from the ordinary Khasis and are notoriously filthy in their habits and were superstitious. Morris accounted that prior to the advent of the British, the Lyngngam were reputed to be cannibals.

### Lyngngam Funeral Practices

There are various versions of the story connected to the funeral practices interpreted from oral sources which seems to overlap with the practice of cannibalism. Therefore, it is important to delve briefly on the funerary practices of these people in order to gain a proper insight into the rubric connected with cannibalism.

According to all Lyngngam oral sources, the most important feature of Lyngngam funerary practice is the demand of a 'death price' which is a kind of compensation which the wife's family have to pay on the death of her husband. Abizuri also stated....that for the Lyngngam, 'Bai Jainbah' is payment made in cash to the bridegroom's parents by the bride's parents or her clan members as a symbol of

compensation, which in literal translation means payment for the sling-cloth used for carrying little infants. This payment is returned on the event of divorce or death of the husband<sup>[13]</sup>.

In the traditional Lyngngam practice the funeral rites cannot take place till the wife of the deceased and her clan relatives repay back the life's earning of the man to the paternal family called *Bailet/baileit* in the local dialect or the cost incurred by his mother for nurturing and raising the deceased from his infancy. The wife and her clans will have to pay compensation either in cash or in kind, such as in the form of Cattles or Guns. The amount or rate of this repayment will be decided by both sides of the families of the deceased. However, even if an agreement is reached, the funeral cannot be conducted till the actual payment is made and delivered to the paternal family. If there is any delay in repayment due whatsoever reasons, the dead body cannot be disposed but should be kept inside the house of the wife for as long as it takes till the promised repayment is made. On such occasion, the dead body will be placed on a hanging bamboo ledge inside the house and it is the duty of the wife and her family to protect it from decomposing. Due to any circumstances where the wife's family is unable to pay the



agreed price, they will have to serve as slaves and bonded servants in the house of the chief. If the repayment however is made, a final inspection of the dead body will be conducted by the deceased clan relatives to make sure that all the body parts of the deceased are intact, and in case if any of the body parts are found missing, the wife's family will have to pay a fine or an additional payment <sup>[14]</sup>. It is only after these arduous stages within the tradition is completed, that the funeral ceremony by way of cremation will be performed.

Owing to such rigorous kind of a funeral practice, the Lyngngam are probably viewed by outsiders as cannibalistic, firstly, because they keep the dead body inside the hut sometimes or for a long period of time and secondly, because the cost factor involving the compensation can have a far reaching economic consequences on the wife and the living family. Such economic impact may have probably be equated by the neighboring Khasi groups in a metaphoric sense, as an act of cannibalism or eating away the earning of the wife and her living family <sup>[15]</sup>.

Now turning to the western neighbor of the Lyngngam, Play fair in his monograph *The Garos* mentioned about the practice of human sacrifices in the Garo traditional funeral practice especially on death of the a *Nokma* or chief or the Village headman, whereby slaves were offered as sacrifices <sup>[16]</sup>.

Human sacrifice and Head hunting was a common practice in the past for the Tibeto-Burman Garos and restricted to one particular 'Rashir' clan of the Lyngngam <sup>[17]</sup>.

An interview conducted among the Rashir clan who have a dual recognition or have applied equivalent in both the Lyngngam and Garo groups are said to be one of the notable Lyngngam clan who performed human sacrifice at funeral ceremony of some of their prominent members. As per the sources none of the other Lyngngam clans practice anything close to this kind human sacrifice like the Rashir clan. However, all the Lyngngam clans practice the demand of a 'death price' from the wife and her relatives.

Shifting the attention to the Lyngngam traditional funerary practices, the informants says that in case the wife's family is unable to pay the agreed cost of compensation, she and her children will have to serve as slaves and bonded servants in the house of the chief <sup>[18]</sup>. It is important to note that in his report, Martin, mentions that the Garo *Nokma* procured slaves from the *Nuniyas* and these slaves were actually sacrifice on the death of the *Nokma* <sup>[19]</sup>. In a strict sense of understanding, the actual identity of the *Nuniyas* is still ambiguous although PRT Gurdon's writing's about the Khasis refer to them as being the Lyngngam. Furthermore, it is interesting to integrate by conjecture that could the Garo *Nokma* acquired slaves from the Lyngngam people? Could this be connected to the family of the deceased who failed to pay the death price?

#### **A view from oral sources**

An etic version of Lyngngam cannibalistic practice is fairly common among the people of Langrin a sub-group of the Khasi, the close eastern neighbor of the Lyngngam. The Langrin people say that the Lyngngam did practice cannibalism in the past on two occasions one, when there is shortage of food during a funeral feast and another is during the house construction. As it is customary for the owner to offer feast to all those who voluntarily extends their labor for the construction, in such cases when there arises

shortage of meat for the feast, the old and frail people from among the Lyngngam group are chosen to sacrifice their lives for their meat <sup>[20]</sup>.

An emic version from the Lyngngam informants on the other hand, claims that the narrative of 'Lyngngam cannibalism' was constructed by the other neighboring Khasi groups due to their misconception about another practice which is connected to human sacrifice. According to their narrative, it is said that the Lyngngam being staunch animist in the past would once in a year conduct a sacrificial ritual to propitiate their deities of nature inhabiting the hills, mountains, rivers, streams, forest etc., seeking protection for the people from any form of evils befalling the village or the clan <sup>[21]</sup>. During such a sacrificial ritual refer to in the Lyngngam dialect as *Knia Sap* or *Knia Shiga* (knia= sacrifice), they would offer goats and chickens sacrifice to the deities and also observed the entrails of the animals for omen. The informer states that while the ritual is in progress, unknown person(s) would appear in their midst. At such a point of time, the shaman would consider these strangers as gift from their deities or as offerings to their sacrifice. The severed heads of the strangers would then be impaled on a bamboo spike and stuck to the ground for display on that very spot. This process is repeated every year when the annual sacrifice is conducted. Owing to this practice, the people outside the Lyngngam community constructed the myth of Lyngngam consuming human flesh and hence the narrative of cannibalism gains acceptance.

Turning back to the funeral practices, Oral sources from among the Lyngngam agrees that the Lyngngam demands death price from the wife's relatives but decline to accept that they practice cannibalism which they attributed as practice only by the Rashir clan who have Garo origin. Oral sources claim that the Rashir clan would perform another ritual after the deceased was buried in a temporary place and this correspond to the stage of building gravestone or tombstone for the deceased to complete the entire mortuary practice. It is at this ritual that human head or human blood is needed to appease the spirit of the death. This ritual is however, done only for influential or important members of their clan. On such occasion members of the clan would hunt and killed a person to be buried along with the deceased. In case if such a sacrifice is not made the gravestone or tombstone of the deceased that was constructed will break or fall apart <sup>[22]</sup>. Thus here again the killing is not done for consumption but as an act of sacrifice. This paper explores the complex phenomenon of Cannibalism and human sacrifice through a qualitative research approach, employing an ethnographic methodology to gather and analyse narratives from community members, elders and tradition bearers. By conducting in-depth semi structured interviews this papers aims to provide an understanding of the significance and constructed meanings of Cannibalism and Human sacrifice in the community, shedding light on the blurred lines between myth and reality.

#### **Discussion**

Cannibalism or the practice of consuming human flesh has been a topic of revulsion throughout history, while many instances of cannibalism have been documented around the world however; many reported cases are shrouded in myth, folklore and cultural misconception. As far as the Lyngngam community is concerned, analyzing the Etic and

Emic perspectives, it becomes clear that the Lyngngam never practice cannibalism in the true sense of the term. From the Etic sources, only a particular Rashir clan is considered as cannibalistic and even this is an exaggerated version for the clan's practice of ritual human sacrifices. While from the Emic perspective, the Lyngngam being cannibals is a misrepresentation with the practice which does not involved the consumption of human flesh but human sacrifice having ritualistic connotation since the aim of such sacrifice is to appeased the spirit of the dead and this too restricted only to the clan which has Garo origin.

On the funerary practice and especially concerning the 'death price' more questions have emerged out of this paper. A pertinent question being what happens after the death of a Garo male who was married into the Lyngngam clan. Does the compensation also apply to the Garo male clan relatives and if such a practice is not prevalent among the Garo, then what does the Lyngngam wife offers on the death of her Garo husband something that was already an established tradition so strongly attached with the Lyngngam people. At this stage of the research it appears that the offering of human head as a sacrifice entered into the Lyngngam society as a means of adjustment between the Garo and Lyngngam funerary tradition.

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