

## Functional Unification by Marking off Inner Structure: A Study on the Clan System of Tiwas

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### INTRODUCTION:

*Clan occupies greatest importance in the socio cultural life of the Tiwas of Assam. Lineages are numerous in number among the Tiwas, thus the clans. Clan system is the basic institution of their society. Since a Tiwa society is structured around clan system, therefore the system has a significant impact on inter family relations. The whole society is being arranged through different clans and these clans are traced through maternal lines. Every clan follow their own sets of rules and regulations. Even festivals celebrated by clans are not same with each other. Though some celebrations are same for various clans but their way of celebration or mythical origin differ. It is interesting to note that they divide clans into clusters. On the basis of the social status achieved in the past a particular clan is considered as the dominant clan in each cluster. They strictly adhere to clan exogamy. This paper tries to examine how highly structured clan system being an important segment of the social system of Tiwas gives emphasis on maintaining collectivity and community harmony.*

### Clan

A clan being perpetually a unilateral group is internally composed of segmented lineages. Each lineage matrilineal or patrilineal descent, contains such kins who are connected through blood relations. Members of every clan claim to be the offspring of a real or perceived ancestor. So often they consider the ancestors as totem, a legendary or mythical character. But they are unable to uncover evidences of their genealogical association with the claimed ancestors. So the ancestors who are believed to be from the past are not known to anybody. Almost all the ethnic groups of India are organized around various clan organizations. Usually a member of a clan is not allowed to change his/her clan by own choice. Following characteristics of a clan can be discerned-

1. Common ancestor: Each clan holds one common ancestor as their descent.
2. Unilateral group: A clan is constituted of those relations who believes to be connected with either mother's lineage or father's lineage.
3. Exogamous group: Since the representatives of each clan consider themselves to be the descendants of a common ancestor, hence marriage between the members within a same clan is not usually permitted.

### The Tiwas

The Tiwas being one of the major ethnic communities of North Eastern region of India inhabit in different parts of Assam. Based on their settlement pattern Tiwas are divided in to two groups; the

Hill Tiwas and the Plain Tiwas. Reasons behind their settlement in two different divisions are considered as so many. In case of plain area they are again scattered in many places. Majority of them are prominently concentrated in Marigaon and Nagaon district of Assam. The hill Tiwas are based in Karbi Anglong and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. Tiwas belong to Indo-Mongloid group and speak a language of their own with the same nomenclature. The topography and ecology of hill areas and plain areas always differ from each other partially or entirely. Hence the geographical as well as environmental conditions put direct effect on the socio-cultural lives of hill areas and plain area. They are also more or less influenced by their neighbouring tribes. In case of plain Tiwas the Tiwa villages are not almost exclusively meant for them. Non-Tiwa dwellers are interspersed with Tiwa people. Thus it has another effect on the socio-cultural life of the Tiwas of plain areas. The hill Tiwas are believed to be the possessor of their age old traditional culture, whereas the plain Tiwas have lost many of its traditional traits. Due to the lack of a factual written history their origin and evolution can be searched in their folk songs, legends, myths, and over all oral traditions.

### Clan system of Tiwas

Tiwas hold the view that clans have come into being due to some historical circumstances which are revealed through several folk tales. A proper interpretation of those tales shows efficient possibilities of the origin of the clan.

1. Narrating the origin of clan one such tale illustrates that in order to keep the seven days of a week in memory, Lord *Mahadeo* created seven clans. Later he created another five clans to keep count of the twelve months of a year. The expansion of numerous clans certainly occurred from the branches and sub branches of these twelve clans.<sup>1</sup>
2. According to another folk tale in ancient time twelve sisters were born to a legendary family. Out of frustration they went to jump into a river when they were unable to find suitable matches for them. Showing compassion to them the river God sent twelve young men, who met the girls and married them. All the clans of Tiwas consider these twelve sisters as their descents.<sup>2</sup>

### Clan Clustering

Consisting of more than twelve exogamous clans and their sub clans Tiwas have not less than thirty one clans in number. It is interesting to note that they divide clans into clusters. On the basis of the social status achieved in the past a particular clan is considered as the dominant clan in each cluster. Some clans and their sub-clans are as follows-

<u>Clan</u>	<u>Sub Clan</u>
Masarang	Maachereng, Maagor
Maadur	Laadur, Puru, Chagara
Moloi	Phaangchong, Pumba
Daqfor	Mithi, Lamphui
Hukaai	Khorai
Amchi	Aagaraa, Chanchaar
Kush	Mithi

<sup>1</sup> Deori, Maneswar, *Tiwa Samaj*, p. 77

<sup>2</sup> Baruah, Bandana, *Society, Economy, Religion and Festivals of Tiwas in Assam*, p. 37

Chaalong                      Muni, Melaang  
Kakhor                        Darpong  
Aamchong                    Aamchi  
Daarpong                    Daamlong, Kholar  
Lorom

Every hill Tiwa village is characterized by a *phoid*. *Phoid* is a social system where several clans can come under. Though each *phoid* use the same language, but so far the tone of speaking the language, customs and observances are concerned, they differ from one *phoid* to the other.

Phoid	Main village	Sub-village	Clan
Amsai	Amsai Paro	Moro, Punduri, Amsoi	
Marjong	Marjong Paro or Barmarjong	Khaplangkhunji, Ukshangkhunji, Singlangkhunji, Hadao, Khawrakrai, Mobai, Umbormon, Singkum, Natral, Murgaguri, Khengapat, Amdoba, Maslaikhunji, Makhaguri, Daborghat, Sonaikhunji, Deosal, Majung, Pumakhunji	Amsong, Puma, Malang, Maslai, Madar
Rongkhai	Rongkhai Paro	Tharakhunji, Palikhunji	Amchi clan
Amlı	Amlı Paro, Amlı Sa		Maslai, Sagra, Puma, Khorai
Lumphui	Lumphui		Mithi
Magro + Amkha	Phat Magro	Ulukunchi, Silaguri, Kromkhunji, Khumraikhora, Tiwa Archon	Soleng, Chamchal, Darphong
Sagraa			

### Ways of Nomenclature

How the various clans have been named is a fascinating area to look upon. The reasons behind the naming of different clans have been discussed below:

1. Totemism: Interpretations indicate the link of several clans with totemism, such as *Mithi* clan believes tigress as its progenitor. *Misa* is a word in Tiwa language which means tigress. From this word the word *Mithi* has believed to be originated. The *Amchi* clan

claims to be the descendants of monkey though they received their clan name from the place where they once lived.

2. Occupation: Whereas some clans are believed to be named after occupation. Such as the members of *Amchong* clan were believed to be blacksmiths in ancient time<sup>3</sup>.
3. Territory: Some other clans are named after the places where they originally resided. Tiwas spent many years at Amswoi after their migration from Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. Due to internal clashes they were divided and into five groups and scattered in many places. These groups were named after the places where they once settled e.g. who settled at Marjong, Rongkhohi, Majra were known as *Majorong-wali*, *Rongkhohi-wali*, *Majra-wali* respectively.<sup>4</sup> Here the suffix 'wali' indicates female line of descent.

### Clans and Variations in Traditions

Variety of clans definitely lead to variety in language, customs and traditions. Therefore so far the tones of speech, customs, and traditions of each clan are concerned variations can't be overlooked among the different clans of Tiwas. Every clan has separate *Borghars*<sup>5</sup>, *Borjela*<sup>6</sup> and *Hari-kunwori*<sup>7</sup>. No religious ceremony can be observed without the presence of *Borjela* and *Hari-kunwori*. When cognate families belonging to the same clan, unite in one cluster, Tiwas call it *khuta* or *bangsha*. Thus each *khuta* has vital role to play while propagating and administering culture of the cognate families within the same clan. When two or more *khutas* are clubbed together it is called *khel*. One village may comprise of different *khels*. It is the responsibility of the *khel* to organize different village level ceremonies and festivals. The members of *khel* are supposed to abide by the rules and regulations of a *khel*. Violation leads to punishment. Punishment specially includes monetary fine.

### Clan Exogamy

As like other communities, members of same clan of Tiwas possess brother-sister relationship. The inter-clan marriage is considered as taboo. The clans which don't allow inter-clan marriage are-

<sup>3</sup> Syamchaudhuri, N.K. and Das, M.M., *The Lalung Society*, p. 62

<sup>4</sup> Gohain, Birendra Kumar, *The Hill Lalungs*, p. 56

<sup>5</sup> *Borghar* is a very revered and holy place for the Tiwas. Before initiating any significant work they offer prayer at the *Borghar*. Besides the religious utilization *Borghar* is also used as a place for dwelling by most of the hill Tiwa people.

<sup>6</sup> *Borjela* of the family is the elder brother of the family. Within a family which is comprised of *Borjela's* sister, her husband and their children, *Borjela* is not considered as a member of that family. He goes to live with his wife after his marriage. But it doesn't terminate his relation with the family of his birth. He has some defined roles to play. When there comes some socio-economic obligations for his sister and her children, *Borjela* being the male head in his parental family has a significant role to play such as settlement of marriages, selection of inheritress amongst his sisters etc. On the other hand *Borjela* of a clan is recognised as the senior male element of the descent in a clan. He has a structural position in that clan.

<sup>7</sup> *Hari-kunwori* is the female priest. She takes part in performing various rituals at *Borghar*. When the youngest daughter of a generation is selected as *Hari-Kunwori* she is not supposed to leave her parental house after marriage and as such she holds the matrilineal system.

1. *Puma, phamjong, mothrong*
2. *Aamsong, amsi, amphi, khamli*
3. *Madar, madur, ladur, puru, kholar*
4. *Lumphoi, mithi*
5. *Melong, damlong, sagra, maslai, aagori*
6. *Malang, muni, khorai, hukai*
7. *Darphang, dilar, chamchal*

### Functions of Clan

Clan system among the Tiwas displays several functions in the society. Some of the functions are discussed below-

1. Regulation of marriage: As the clans are exogamous, the primary function of the clans or cluster of clans is to regulate marriage. As discussed earlier no marriage can take place within the same clan or cluster. There is yet another interesting feature that distinguishes clan organisation amongst the Tiwas, when a family does not have a daughter, the family line eventually ceases to exist because the boys after marriage have to leave their homes to live in the house of their wives. If however the family wants the line to continue, the parents of a son eligible for marriage will request another family belonging to a different clan and a different cluster for the hand of a girl. Discussions are held not between the involved families but between the two clans. The clan functionaries collectively go down the memory lane to examine if any consanguine kinship ever existed in course of their past twelve generations. This is called *paro pongosh thinga*. In case if no such kinship is detected the price for the bride is settled by consultations with the clans that the two households belong to. If the bride price cannot be collected from the clan to which the boy belongs, the parents of the boy will approach another clan (other than the one to which the girl belongs) for collection of the bride price. The clan that contributes towards the bride's price is called *thagane bangsh*. *Thagane bangsh* is thus a relationship between two clans bound together by the relationship of mutual help. A helper clan is protectively affiliated to the cluster of the clan receiving help and probably this was the original process of formation of cluster bonds between clans. This bond of mutual help probably helped exogamy to flourish between the clans of the same cluster. If any couple fails to follow the rule of clan exogamy they are expelled from the village by the villagers. There is a popular myth among the Tiwas which they refer as *Momai Bhagin Sila*, which is narrated out of contrition whenever any illegal union takes place. According to this myth- disobeying the rules of exogamy a man named Sola Sing of Sahari village married his niece. Aftermath they were obliged to quit the village by the villagers. Under such instance the couple offered prayer to the goddess *Basundhari* at *Basundhari than*. They couldn't gratify the goddess, instead the couple was cursed to become stones.<sup>8</sup> Slight variation can be observed in case of *Mashrong* clan of Tiwas. A boy and a girl belonging to *Mashrong* clan can marry each other if both worship different clan gods.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Sarma Thakur, G.C., *The Lalungs ((Tiwas)*, p. 42

<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Tiwa Sampradayor Porichoi*, p. 29

2. Joint responsibility: Another interesting function of the clans of Tiwas is to share joint responsibility. During any matter of conflict a Tiwa usually seeks help from other members of his clan. When someone is supposed to pay fine and if he is not able to pay the amount then he can ask his clan members to help. Members of his clan help him while collecting the amount. Members of a clan again help the groom in arranging the wealth and money for bride-price if it is too high. Though this function of sharing joint responsibility is not in practice nowadays, it has become the responsibility of the person to pay any compensation, or borrow from others.
3. Clan system divides the whole village into various structures: another important function of the clan system of Tiwas is it divides a village into structures. Within a village people of different clans live together. Few clans together also form a cluster. But most of the folk practices of Tiwas differ from cluster to cluster. In this way the whole village gets divided through the system of clan.
4. To keep peace and amity among the clan members: if any dispute occurs between two clan members, then it is tried to solve within the clan first. Within the system of clan the Tiwa members learn how to maintain solidarity. In this way clan system helps to maintain peace and amity.
5. A clan functions as a family: a family is not just a household under a head consisting of some countable members related to each other through blood or marriage. Tiwas consider the whole clan as a family. Each family has a *Borjela* and each clan has a *Borjela* too, but their functions are different. *Borjela* of a family has a specific role to play in the family, but the family connects itself with the customs and rituals of the clan through the *Borjela* of the clan. Therefore the family can't stay disconnected with its clan. Apart from this, a family can take any help from its clan members when they need. Therefore the very essence of collectivity is developed by a member of a Tiwa family is actually rooted within the family itself and it helps to maintain the community's solidarity to a great extent.

## CONCLUSION

A traditional Tiwa society is organized according to the system of clan in a highly complex yet systematic way. With the passage of time some flexibility has been propagated. Among the plain Tiwas there is no concept of dominant clan nowadays. *Wali* is used as a suffix with a clan name to address a Tiwa person, for example *Daafor-wali*, here '*Daafor*' is the 'clan name' and '*wali*' means 'matrilineal descent'. But this '*wali*' word has been replaced by the term '*lok*' especially by the plain Tiwas, here '*lok*' means people in Assamese. So a *Daafor-lok* doesn't mean a person belonging to matrilineal descent. Clan endogamy and marriage outside their community are very common now. If a love marriage takes place between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan then either the boy or the girl is raised to the clan of any parent of the boy or the girl belonging to a different clan. In such instances some ritual performances are observed for purification followed by some monetary fine and a feast for the villagers. So this imbalance occurred in their inner structure has been compensated by ritual performances and monetary fine to keep the original structure in its place and also to get accustomed with the changes that time brings to them. Apart from these accumulated changes Tiwas are still highly structured around the clan system. It is the system of clan which divide their inner structure.

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