NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The seventh General Meeting of the Society for 1979 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00PM MONDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 1979

AGENDA

1. Apologies

2. Minutes of General Meeting held, Monday, 27th August 1979, to be confirmed. A copy of these minutes is attached.

3. New Members
   The following new members were elected to the Society.
   Stephanie Lynda MOSS
   Michael Leon DALLE-NOGARE
   Virginia DALLE-NOGARE

4. Papers and Journals
   Papers and journals from other Societies and Organizations will be tabled at the meeting.

5. Business
   (a) Fleurieu Peninsula Project
   (b) Other Business

6. Speaker
   Mr. R. ELLIS, Unit Head of the Aboriginal and Historic Relics Unit will give an illustrated address to the Society entitled:

"THE ANIU OF NORTHERN JAPAN."

VERN TOLCHER,
Honorary Secretary,
213 Greenhill Road,
EASTWOOD. S.A. 5063.

Telephone Office 272 2311
Home 79 2193
THE TRIBAL CULTURE OF BANGLADESH

by

A.K.M. AMZAD HOSSAIN MIAN

Before saying anything about the subject I must confess that I was never a student of Anthropology and have no claim on the subject. Nor do I profess to have acquired any expert knowledge of it. This paper is mainly based on my first-hand knowledge of the tribal people of Bangladesh. Since I had the honour to set up the first ethnological museum of the Indian sub-continent, if not of Asia in the 1960s I had to travel many times in different tribal territories of Bangladesh to collect their cultural materials for the Museum. I was fascinated by their culture and tradition and had the intention of learning more and more about these people but unfortunately circumstances beyond my control removed me far from their domain. Instead of going through the rigmarole of a scientific approach to the subject, I shall try to present the tribal culture in simple and plain language as I have seen and observed it during my contact with them.

Although Bangladesh is mostly a flat land of alluvial soil, there are some contrasting terrains of highland ranges and forest scrubs in the north, north-east, east and south-east. Almost every hilly refuge is the home of some primitive tribes or their offshoots. The scenic splendours of these areas are very charming and attractive no doubt, but the lives, livelihood and thoughts of the tribal peoples who reside in these serene places are singularly enchanting.

The major part of the tribal population inhabit the colourful and variegated tropical forest of the Chittagong Hill Tract district. Their primitive way of life, peculiar organisations in society with age-long customs, traditions, ritual and religious belief, separate ethnic entity and the comparative inaccessibility of the area, made them somewhat exclusive which is uncommon in other parts of the country. Of all the tribes in the area the Chakma, Magh-Narma, Mro-Murang, Tipra, Tanchungya, Kuki, Bon, Bonjogi, Pankho, Lusai, Khumi and Sendus are important. The Maghs can also be found in Cox's Bazar of Chittagong district and Khepura region of Patuakhali district. The Khasis, Megongs and Manipurs are scattered along the hilly frontiers of Sylhet, at the foot of Khasia-Jaintia hills. The Garos, Hajongs, Bunas and other minor tribes are settled in the vicinity of Garo hills in Mymensingh and in the forest-clad highlands of Madhubpur in Tangail district. In Rajshahi, Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts a few settlements of Santals, Oraons, Mundas and Rajbansis can be seen here and there. All these tribal people are not the original inhabitants of Bangladesh but outsiders. Those who now live in Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts migrated from Burma at different periods. The rest of the tribal people in Bangladesh are originally from India.

I have already mentioned that the Chittagong Hill Tract district is now the abode of a tribal population. In fact they form a vast majority of the population. Of about half a million souls in that district about 90% are hill tribe people. As a result the administrative and fiscal system are somewhat different from those in other parts of the country. The district is divided into three administrative sub-divisions - Rangamati, Banderban and Rangghar - under civilian non-tribal government representatives who are responsible for the general administration of the area. Corresponding to these three subdivisions, the district is again divided into three "circles" -

Cont'd.

4.
Chakma, Mong and Bomong - with tribal "Rajas" (Chiefs) who have equal status and right and who look after the collection of revenue and tribal administration of the villages under their jurisdiction. Far away from the corrupt and artificial modern civilisation and city people, these tribal people live in a serene peaceful environment matching their life style with nature. Their life style is primitive no doubt but they have an exotic cultural life which is remarkable for its honesty and simplicity.

The Hill Tracts tribesmen are ethnically different from the settled populace of Bangladesh. They have closer links with hill peoples of the vast region that extends from Tibet to Indo-China. They are short in stature, with prominent cheek-bones, narrow slit black eyes, wide and flat noses, yellowish complexion, black hair with sparse mustache and beard - features that remind one of the "Mongoloid type". There is no getting away from the fact that they have strong Mongoloid traits. The tribes of Hill Tracts are divided into many kin groups with usually more than one kin group living in a close-knit village. Administration of each such village is in the hands of a 'Karbari' who in turn is under the control of the Headman of a mounza comprising several villages. The Headman is responsible to the Raja of each circle. Nowadays the control of the social structures, marriage, religious ceremonies and rites and other related matters is not as rigid as it was in early days. By and large, it is not exogamous, though marriage outside the kin group is, in many instances favoured. The attitude varies with the tribe. Sometimes intermarriage between kin groups is somewhat looked down upon. Tribal people are Patriarchal. Although the women folk work harder than the men folk, only the male issue inherits the property of the fathers, which they share equally. A person belongs to the family of his father and not to that of his mother.

Among all the tribal people of the Hill Tracts, the Chakmas and Marmas are Buddhists and well advanced in education and culture. Altogether they are more than 50% of the total population of the district. Although the Chakmas claimed themselves to be the descendants of the Khatriyas from Champaranagar, the capital of Anga in Bhagalpur, which is nothing but a myth: their origin must be sought in Burma. Most of them lived in and around Rangamati. They have their own language, scripts and literature which are actually based on an admixture of Bengali and Arakanese. Most of the Marmas live in the Bomong circle. Like the Chakmas they have their script based on Arakanese but there colloquial language is a mixture of local Bengali and Arakanese. Among the other underdeveloped tribes the Tipras are in the majority. They follow a religion which is akin to Hinduism with trends to nature worship. The Bom Bonjogi and Lusai people are lure into Christianity. On the other hand the Mro-Murangs, Khumis and Pankhos are animists and nature worshippers. However more or less all the tribes believe in spirits. It is their belief that all the nature spirits which lived in trees, in water and on hills control their destiny and fate.

In fact, although there are differences in social structures, rites and rituals, customs and traditions, ornaments and dress among the various tribes of the Hill Tracts, there is a similarity of life style and culture among them.

The main form of livelihood by these tribal people is Jhum-ing which is a peculiar kind of cultivation on the hill tops and slopes without ploughs or cattle. Jhum is also prevalent in the adjacent territory of Tripura and Arakan. In this process a virgin forest is cut down, allowed to dry, then set on fire. (Known to some as 'slash and burn' agriculture). As soon as rain starts, seeds of paddy, cotton, sesame, maize, cucumbers and other vegetables are mixed together and all sown at the same time in a small hole made with a dao (some sort of sickle). The seeds grow up in due course and are ripe for Cont'd. 5.
harvest in their respective seasons. Thus Jhum cultivation is very harmful to the land. It is not possible to cultivate the same plot of land for at least two to three years. As a result the people have to switch to another area for cultivation next year. With the change of land for cultivation they have to change their residence as well and consequently the tribal people in the Hill Tracts are in essence nomads.

Apart from cultivation and hunting they have their own cottage industry such as basketry, crude carpentry and weaving. In fact they weave their own clothing. But it is strange that they do not know the technique of pottery or any metal-work. For their requirements of these things they depend completely on the Bengali people from the plain.

The houses of the tribal people are made by virtually the same process. The houses are entirely of bamboo construction raised from two to three metres from the ground by support of bamboo or wooden props. A roughly hewn stepped wooden log is usually placed as a ladder to climb to the house. The floor which is usually called Machan and the walls are made of bamboo and the roof is thatched with straw or leaves. The space under the machan is used for keeping domestic animals such as goats, pigs, poultry etc.

Bamboo is actually the backbone of the economic structure of the society and fortunately it also grows in abundance in that area. The tribal people use the bamboo not only to build their houses alone, but most of their daily necessities are also made of this material. They are very skilled in bamboo work.

Most of the people smoke their home-made cigars or Hukkah (hubble-bubble). Similarly they also drink home-brewed wine made from fermented rice.

Among the tribal people, marriage is generally arranged by parents. Adult marriage prevails among them. No child marriage has ever been noticed. Polygamy is permitted but is becoming rare. Widows can remarry and divorce is also permitted. The groom's father has to pay a dowry to the bride's father. There are many instances of marriage by elopement when the parents oppose a marriage; but the groom's family may have to pay a fine to the bride's father to soothe his hurt feelings.

In dress and ornaments there are marked differences between the various hill tribes. Lungis, Sarees and Dhoties usually go with education. The age old tribal costume consists of Finon (skirt), Khadi (breast-cloth), Kavang (headdress) for the Chakmas; Longi, (male dress) Enijiyi (blouse), Thani (skirt), Rangal (breast cloth), and Guung bong (headdress) for the Marmas; Renai (skirt), Korta (shirt/coat), Khadi (breast cloth), and Pugree or Khowang (turban) for the Tipras; Legti (loincloth for men) and Wanglai (skirt) for the Mro-Murangs, Khumis, Pankhos, Bonjogis, Lushais, Kukis and other tribes. Most of the tribes spin, weave and dye their own cloths. Womenfolk are in fact expert in weaving with very beautiful and intricate designs, particularly an elaborate pattern cloth by Chakma women called "Alam" has a resemblance to ancient Egyptian tapestry and is an object of great interest and art. Most of the tribal women are very fond of jeweller and adorn themselves with silver and other metallic ornaments as well as beads, shells, including cowries, etc.

The tribal people are usually simple, jovial folk. As long as they have enough to eat they are not much bothered by worries. The elders give themselves up to singing and dancing while children play or frolic. In the shaded woodlands children and adults play their age-old tribal games and it is very common that the forests still resound with the laughter of children playing different

6. Cont'd.
games. The games include ijibiji khara, kavajang, palapali, put put, palti and pur. European and other modern games are limited to the educated elite only.

The Chakmas, Marmas, Mro-Murangs, Tipras and some other tribes cremate their dead with elaborate rites and rituals which are different from tribe to tribe. However in case of death by cholera or smallpox they usually bury their dead.

The tribes are progressing only bit by bit. The more atrocious features of tribal life have died out. The savage ritual of cannibalism and making human sacrifice has died out not only as a consequence of social evolution but also from fear of Government action. Strict Government measures including several punitive expeditions have been a strong deterrent. However, now most of the tribal people are friendly, hospitable, amicable, simple and timid. Women folk work much harder than the men. In fact, the males are lazy and idle and unless there is a particular need they seldom work and spend their time either sleeping, or smoking, drinking and gossiping.

The other tribal people who have settled down in the plain or other parts of Bangladesh mostly belong to the Dravidian race though many scholars think they are offshoots of the Proto Austroloid group of the human race. As all these tribes - Garo, Hajong, Buna, Santals, Oraons, Munda, Rajbangshi - are in close contact with the civilized people of the plains their life style has substantially changed although they have been unable to integrate with the local population. In fact they are at a half-baked stage of civilisation. They can neither fully give up their own culture and tradition nor accept the civilised way of life around them. They are now suspended in a cultural vacuum.

Unfortunately time is very short so it has only been possible to give a general outline of the culture of these people.

Having come into contact with modern civilisation, the tribal people are gradually losing their grip on their own culture. Government is also determined to improve their lot. As a result, a day may come when no trace of tribal culture remains in Bangladesh. It is fortunate that the Government of Bangladesh in its effort to preserve the culture and tradition of this tribal people has set up the Ethnological Museum at Chittagong where people from around the world can see the wealth and charm of that tradition.

Copyright
The Author,
Flinders University of South Australia,
September 1978.