

MAWPHLANG SACRED GROVE: A LOSING BATTLE?

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Abstract

In 2015, Mawphlang village, located 25 km from Shillong, played host to the Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM) Festival that brought together 140 indigenous food communities from 58 countries. This international event was a collaboration of the Indigenous Partnership for Agro-biodiversity and Food Sovereignty, Slow Food International and North East Slow Food and Agro-biodiversity Society (NESFAS) to celebrate the rich cultures of Indigenous Peoples and showcase their resilient food systems and sustainable practices. A walk through the sacred grove was a part of the festival where accompanied by guides, visitors are shown the benefits of traditional management that has kept this island of trees intact amidst the landscape dominated by grassland. The selection of Mawphlang for the event is due to its identification as one of the last bastions where traditional management is still being practiced. Mawphlang sacred grove is considered to be a symbol of the endurance of indigenous culture under assault from the forces of modernisation. Apart from ITM, other festivals like the Monolith festival that take place during winter are also celebration of indigenous culture. Although, this intrusion of non-traditional functions has brought attention to these traditional spaces of conservation it also has the potential to damage the fundamental basis of the conservation practice as well, i.e., dilution of the sacredness of the forest. What Mawphlang sacred grove has become is just another commoditized object for economic consumption. In this trying to build alliances to resist modernisation it has in fact become a part of it. The present study tries to assess the changes that have been brought to the sacred landscape of Mawphlang due to the intrusion of non-traditional practices, and the capacity of the local inhabitants in the whole process. Are they willing participants or reluctant members? And in the process what happens to the sacred status of the forest?

Keywords: *Mawphlang; sacred grove; indigenous; modernization; commoditization*

Introduction

Sacred grove is a place or an area with particular type of trees growing on it and are considered to be holy by the local community or as a sacred place where ancestors are buried. The sacred grove, sacred areas, sites and geographies are found almost all over the world. The sacred groves have been reported from different continents of the world such as Africa, Asia, Europe, Austro-Pacific region and Americas¹. Though the forest is usually conserved for religious purposes, sacred groves play a very important role for conserving the environmental conditions, providing habitat for different species of plants and animals from extinction. In south Nigeria, Onyekwehu and Olusola² found that among the two

sacred groves, two primary forest and two degraded forests selected for study, highest species diversity is found in the grove which was attributed to its mature, fairly undisturbed forest canopy, which supports a rich and diverse flora and fauna. They also found many endangered species with the sacred groves. Under the sacred grove system, preservation of species are more secure because of their teaching as taboos and dedicated to God.

Management of sacred groves differs from one place to another and changes from time to time. Sacred groves are found all over the Indian sub-continent but management controls are a little different. In Meghalaya as well as Kerala, community control is the dominant mode but the role of government agencies like the forest department is not the same. In Meghalaya it

is the priest clan like the Lyngdohs who take management decisions while in Kerala it is the temple committee which is in charge. The difference in the role of the forest department who are greatly involved in the latter but have no say in the former³. This could be due to the different constitutional arrangement for the two areas, with Meghalaya falling under the Sixth Schedule which gives certain powers to local traditional governance. In fact less than 10% of the forest in Meghalaya are under the jurisdiction of the Forest department.

Notwithstanding the difference in the traditional management of sacred groves is rarely found in the modern day due to several reasons. The areas under groves had been used for coffee plantation for temple fund raising³. The rapid change of socio-economic through migration put sacred grove under pressure with population pressure converting the groves into the settlement for human and areas of plantation^{3&4}. In Sierra Leone sacred groves are seen to be misused by collecting some medical plants and over-collecting samples for research which starts ruined the sacredness of the grove⁵.

In the case of Meghalaya, according to Nongbri⁶, spreading of education with western orientation, converting their religion from tradition to Christianity and replacing scientific knowledge and stories from western classic and fairytale not only wean from their culture and tradition, but also infused them with value that are often antagonistic to the stability of the ecosystem. The modern lifestyle and the so-called development change everything, even the management of sacred groves. In the ancient time, though sacred groves are usually protected, dedicated to God and are not used any further. But in the present day, the sacred groves are usually used to hold festivals, plantations for temple fund raising and tourist sites for promoting tourism.

In 2015, Mawphlang village, located 25 km from Shillong, played host to the Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM) Festival that brought together 140 indigenous food communities from 58 countries. This

international event was a collaboration of the Indigenous Partnership for Agro-biodiversity and Food Sovereignty, Slow Food International and North East Slow Food and Agro-biodiversity Society (NESFAS) to celebrate the rich cultures of Indigenous Peoples and showcase their resilient food systems and sustainable practices. A walk through the sacred grove was a part of the festival where accompanied by guides, visitors are shown the benefits of traditional management that has kept this island of trees intact amidst the landscape dominated by grassland. The selection of Mawphlang for the event is due to its identification as one of the last bastions where traditional management is still being practiced. Mawphlang sacred grove is considered to be a symbol of the endurance of indigenous culture under assault from the forces of modernisation. Apart from ITM, other festivals like the Monolith festival that take place during winter are also celebration of indigenous culture.

This intrusion of non-traditional functions has brought attention to these traditional spaces of conservation but it also has the potential to damage the fundamental basis of the conservation practice as well, i.e., dilution of the sacredness of the forest. In such an event, the Mawphlang sacred grove will become just another commoditized object for economic consumption. In this trying to build alliances to resist modernisation it has in fact become a part of it. The present study tries to assess the changes that have been brought to the sacred landscape of Mawphlang due to the intrusion of non-traditional practices, and the capacity of the local inhabitants in the whole process. Are they willing participants or reluctant members? And in the process what happens to the sacred status of the forest? The present study tries to answer all these questions.

Study Area and Methods

Till date, more than 90 sacred groves have been documented all over Meghalaya with more than 40% being recorded only in the

East Khasi Hills district⁷. This is not surprising considering the fact that the district is the most populous and most important in terms of administrative (central and state government offices) and educational activities (Central University and host of schools and colleges). In fact, Shillong, the capital of the state is located in the East Khasi Hills district. The biggest sacred grove recorded, Maw Kyrngah in Umwai covering an area of 1200 ha, is also found in this district. The sacred grove selected for the present study, Mawphlang, though does not cover a huge area. In fact with an area of 40 ha it does not even make the top 25 in terms of area. Located at a distance of just over 20 kms and an hour drive away from Shillong it is one of the most accessible sacred groves. This proximity is in fact one of the reasons for its national and international recognition.

Located at an altitude of 1700 m, Mawphlang is a 400 years old forest which is characterized by tropical evergreen vegetation. More than 230 species of plants are found within its 40 ha area with numerous epiphytes, orchids, mushrooms, ferns and climbers. Because of the moist and damp underground and presence of water bodies, amphibians also abound in this grove along with birds and smaller animals. Apart from the rich variety of plants and animals, the groves also provides for the water requirement of the surrounding area with streams coming out of the forest. The sacred grove in fact performs a wide variety of ecosystem services for the people of the surrounding area, which could have been the initial reason for its designation a sacred site.

The sacred grove has been maintained by the people of the surrounding villages who still have a high proportion of people following the indigenous faith, *NiamKhasi*. It is the Lyngdoh clan, priestly clan among the Khasis who hold management powers and they perform periodical rituals inside the grove. Altar stones surrounded by monoliths are found inside the forest with offerings still visible from the coins found inside the ritual bowls.

In spite of not being the largest, Mawphlang is important as a symbol of indigenous resistance to modernization as is evidenced by the many festivals celebrating indigenous culture being performed around the site.

The study began during a visit to one such festival, the Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM) held from 3rd to 7th November, 2015 in Mawphlang. This festival was celebrated in tandem with the annual Mei-Ramew (which translates to Mother Earth in Khasi) festival which was introduced by North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS). Attended by delegates from more than 50 countries the festival provided a unique opportunity to indigenous culture activist and their practitioners to share ideas and formulate strategies to protect and promote traditional knowledge. Cultural performances from various indigenous communities both local and international were some of the main highlights with the main focus being on the traditional cuisines. The following year, the Monolith Festival was held from 31st March to 2nd April, 2016 in Mawphlang. This time the focus was much more on the local culture, i.e., Khasi-Jaintia and included activities like display and sale of handicrafts & handlooms and bamboo products; cultural performances; ethnic fashion show; indigenous wine festival; indigenous food festival; indigenous music.

One of the researchers (Laldinpui) attended the Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM) festival and talked to the delegates and the host community. Contacts were established with the organisers from the local community. After establishing a rapport with the local community, field work was undertaken after the end of the (ITM) festival and before the start of the Monolith Festival. A total of 30 respondents were interviewed through a structured schedule. The performance of the rituals in the sacred grove, their frequency, changes that have occurred in their pattern over the years and the benefits that the various festivals have brought to the area were the main issues that were enquired during the interview. Gender parity was ensured by giving equal

representation to both the sexes with women slightly edging the men. The interview also took the views from the various age groups as well, young (less than 25 years) and old as well. The household survey was thus inclusive and tries to understand the changes that have occurred in this traditional landscape by taking views from the whole spectrum.

Results and Discussions

Performance of Traditional Rituals

Being a symbol of spirituality the sacred grove is very important for the followers of indigenous faith especially in terms of performance of their rituals and

ceremonies. It is here that the grand sacrifice called KaKniaPhodsohlang is being held during September or October after the exact date is fixed by the Hima's (erstwhile princely states') Durbar (Council). Apart from fixing the date the meeting also collects 'U Syniang u bynhei' (Subscriptions) from the 12 clans of the area. But the preliminary rituals first begins at LumRyngkewMawiong (Ryngkewmawiong Hill) which is about a Kilometer away and is concluded in the sacred grove. The ritual is held to offer prayers to God in order to ward off any natural calamities. However not all functions are held in the sacred grove.

Table 1: Whether the sacred grove is the main place for holding the rituals for the practitioners of the indigenous faith

| Age group | Is sacred grove the main place for ritual ceremony? (% of respondents) | |
|--------------|--|------|
| | Yes | No |
| Less than 25 | 42.9 | 57.1 |
| 25-50 | 17.6 | 82.4 |
| More than 50 | 16.7 | 83.3 |

Before the arrival of the British the traditional religion *NiamKhasi* was not formally organized and most of the rituals were conducted by the household members themselves. It is the maternal uncle who takes the lead in it and family rituals like naming of the new born child is held in their own home. In order to protect and preserve the traditional faith from the onslaught of Christianity, SengKhasi was established which was the first attempt at formalizing the ancient religion. New festivals were invented like *Shad Suk Mynsiem* which is annually held in Weiking, Mawlai. Other festivals are held in the *IhengSengKhasi* which are halls under the SengKhasi located in the various strongholds of indigenous faith. But many rituals are also still performed within the household itself.

The respondents in Mawphlang confirm the same with more than 3/4th of the respondents

stating that the sacred grove is not the main place for ritual ceremonies. However, what was interesting was that when analyzed in terms of age group almost half of the respondents below the age of 25 thought that the sacred grove is the main place for the different rituals. This is a very strong indication of the decline of traditional knowledge among the younger generation. Two things can be inferred from this—the younger generation is not interested in learning about their traditional culture and are instead more interested in absorbing the gifts of modernization; and the elders have not been able to maintain and strengthen the knowledge transmission process which has become much weakened. For practitioners of indigenous faiths, there are problems at two fronts, disinterest of the youths as well as the inability of the elders.

Table 2: Difference between rituals performed in sacred grove and other locations

| Age group | Difference between rituals in sacred grove and other locations (% of respondents) | | | | |
|--------------|---|--|---------------|------------|---|
| | Elders' guidance in the sacred grove | Animal sacrifice necessary in sacred grove | No difference | Don't know | Sacred grove not a place to worship anymore |
| Less than 25 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 71.4 | 14.3 | 0.0 |
| 25-50 | 29.4 | 0.0 | 41.2 | 23.5 | 5.9 |
| More than 50 | 50.0 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 0.0 |

The lack of knowledge among the younger generation is further highlighted when they were queried regarding the difference between the rituals held in the sacred grove and other locations. More than 40% of the respondents suggested that there are no differences between the rituals performed in the sacred grove and elsewhere. Around 1/3rd of them of the respondents however mentioned that there are differences in terms of the role of the elders and sacrifice of animals between the two locations. During the rituals that are performed in the sacred grove the elders of the community take the leading roles but in the other locations, it is the head of the family who take the responsibilities. Just over 3% of the respondents feel that the importance of animal sacrifice in the rituals carried out in the sacred grove is the main difference. Animal sacrifice is not required in the rituals undertaken in other locations. This however is not true with animal sacrifice especially that of the cock being an integral part of rituals performed at home as well. The remaining 20% of the respondents

stated that they do not know if there is any difference between the rituals done at the sacred grove or other locations.

It is not a surprise that more than 70% of the respondents who didn't know of any difference between the rituals performed in different locations were below 25 years. But even more revealing is the finding that more than 2/3rd of those who cited of having no knowledge between the difference between in the rituals in terms of locations come from the age category 25-50 years. Majority of those above 50 years, on the other hand, knew the difference. This suggests that the process of weakening of the traditional knowledge system has been going for some time now and it is not a recent phenomenon. The Mawphlang village itself has residents who are practitioners of *NiamKhasi* as well as Christians. With the growth of Christianity the traditional faith has suffered greatly not only in terms of loss of followers but whole knowledge system itself. This explains why majority of the youth have lost or are losing their traditional practices.

Table 3: Gender difference regarding the response on the differences between rituals performed in sacred grove and other locations

| Age group | Difference between rituals in sacred grove and other locations (% of respondents) | | | | |
|-----------|---|--|---------------|------------|---|
| | Elders' guidance in the sacred grove | Animal sacrifice necessary in sacred grove | No difference | Don't know | Sacred grove not a place to worship anymore |
| Male | 46.2 | 7.7 | 23.1 | 15.4 | 7.7 |
| Female | 17.6 | 0 | 58.8 | 23.5 | 0.0 |

There is one more factor for the lack of knowledge regarding the differences and this has to do with gender roles. Almost 60% of the women interviewed were of the opinion that there is no difference between the rituals performed in different locations. A further 20% have no knowledge whether a difference exists or not. In contrast more than half of the male respondents knew of the differences. In spite of the Khasi society being matrilineal the status of women is superior to men in many areas, especially regarding traditional affairs. Women are not

allowed to take part in the deliberations of the village *durbar*. The most discussed right to property for the youngest daughter is actually custodianship rather than ownership. It is the maternal uncle who wields the most power. Similarly female are not allowed to perform the rituals which again is an all-male affair. This explains why female and especially younger ones have very less knowledge about the rituals. The problem of loss of traditional culture therefore, has a gender dimension as well.

Table 4: Changes in the timing and frequency of rituals performed in sacred grove and other locations

| Age group | Has the timing of rituals change over the years? | | Has the frequency of rituals change over the years? | |
|--------------|--|------|---|------|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| Less than 25 | 42.9 | 57.1 | 42.9 | 57.1 |
| 25-50 | 64.7 | 35.3 | 70.6 | 29.4 |
| More than 50 | 66.7 | 33.3 | 50.0 | 50.0 |

With the accelerating loss of knowledge the timing and frequency of rituals also have undergone changes over the years. There is almost a unanimous consensus that both the timing and the frequency of rituals have changed with

uncertain timings and fewer rituals becoming a norm. The timing of the rituals are inherent uncertain because of the uncertainty of the events they celebrate itself. For example, the child naming ceremony is very much dependent child

birth which cannot be controlled. But according to the respondents the most important reason for the change is related to changes that have taken place among the members themselves. Many have attributed this to the conversion of many of the indigenous faith followers to Christianity. With conversion they give up the traditional practices and discard the rituals altogether.

Along with the loss of adherents there is also loss of elders who performed the rituals. The expertise is disappearing with younger generation unwilling to learn the take up the responsibility. This is further highlighted by the changes in the attendance of the traditional ceremonies itself. There has a decline in attendance over the years.

Table 5: Pattern of attendance over the years during the rituals

| Age groups | Has the number of people who took part in the rituals change? (% of respondents) | | |
|--------------|--|------|--------------|
| | Yes | No | I don't know |
| Less than 25 | 28.6 | 71.4 | 0.0 |
| 25-50 | 35.3 | 52.9 | 11.8 |
| More than 50 | 50.0 | 16.7 | 33.3 |

The younger members of the community have not seen the changes and therefore more than half of them do not believe that there has been a drop in attendance over the years. The elderly members of the community however responded that there has been a decline in participation over the years. This contradictory finding actually hints to the process of both loss and revival of traditional cultural practices. Inevitably the number of traditional faith adherents were more in the past. Their present number is lesser than that and as a result, the elderly members view the attendance from that perspective. On the other hand, interest regarding the traditional knowledge has increased in the recent years with many events like the ITM and Monolith festival being organized which brings in many visitors. Their response maybe viewed from this increase in interest. This rise in interest though does not seem to have encouraged them to learn more about the traditional practises which as previously discussed is not adequate. It is in this regard that the question of the changes in the sacrosanct landscape of the sacred grove becomes very

important. Have the non-traditional events in any way helped to maintain the sanctity of the landscape and perhaps revive the cultural practices, or has it done it opposite—making it less sacred.

Non-traditional Activities in Sacred Grove

Mawphlang sacred grove has become a very important focal not just as a symbol for indigenous resistance to the forces of modernization but also for holding various festivals. Apart from the International Terra Madre and Monolith festival other festivals like Lasubon have also been organized near the sacred grove. Similar to the Monolith festival this event is to promote the local culture with the main activities being folk dance, art and craft, cuisine of Meghalaya. This event is sponsored by the Tourism Department of the state and has become a regular feature of the festival calendar of the government. Thus Mawphlang's reputation is being exploited not only for protection and preservation of the traditional culture but to market the state as a tourist destination itself. This means that the number of activities will only

accelerate in the future. This can bring many problems, the most important being the potential disruption in the traditional programmes.

At the moment this does not seem to be a concern as an overwhelming 90% of the respondents have stated that these activities have not affected the traditional programmes. However, about 10% complained of the increase in pollution and garbage near the sacred grove. This is a very important observation because the ones who made it were the ones who were well-

educated and respected in the community. Also sacred sites have the attribute of being kept cleaner compared to the surrounding areas. As the number of people visiting the sacred grove increase, the problem of waste management will ultimately become very critical. Mawphlang is also quite famous as a picnic site and people regularly arrive for having their festivities. The increase in garbage does diminish the sanctity of the sacred grove in a spiritual sense with neglect being an indication of loss of reverence for the forest.

Table 6: Community Involvement in the Events Held Around the Sacred Grove

| Age groups | Community involvement in these events (% of respondents) | | |
|--------------|--|-------|------------|
| | Little | A Lot | Everything |
| Less than 25 | 14.3 | 71.4 | 14.3 |
| 25-50 | 23.5 | 70.6 | 5.9 |
| More than 50 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 0.0 |

A positive aspect of the various festivals and events that are organized around the sacred grove is the strong participation of the local community. All the age groups have stated that there is a lot of community involvement in the various events that are held. However, a significant portion of the younger generations (>10% and <30%) complained that their involvement is very little. This suggests that the inclusion of the community in the various decision making process is highly skewed towards the elders. Younger people are also involved but lower down at the hierarchy and not involved in the major

deliberations. This is the reason why some of them feel left out. Many of them are women which points to a gender bias. In fact the acceptance of Christianity has not improved the status of women in terms of political participation. Women till-date are kept out of the village durbar even in Christian villages. This shows that the introduction of a new religion has failed to alleviate the status of women among the Khasis. The converts may have left the rituals and changed their gods but they still adhere to the many principles of their traditional culture.

Table 6: Kind of benefits brought by non-traditional activities

| Age group | Kind of benefits brought by non-traditional activities (% of respondents)* | | | | |
|--------------|--|--------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | Don't Know | Social | Economic | Cultural | Political |
| Less than 25 | 14.3 | 28.6 | 42.9 | 42.9 | 14.3 |
| 25-50 | 5.9 | 47.1 | 58.9 | 35.3 | 0.0 |
| More than 50 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 50.1 | 50 | 0.0 |

* The sum of percentage does not add up to 100 because of the various combinations of the variables which counts a single variable more than once.

There are many kind of benefits that people perceive to have been brought about by the various festivals, social, economic, cultural and political. More than half of the respondents believe that the most important benefit of the various festivals and event is economic. During the different festivals, people from the surrounding area would put up stalls to sell various items which brings some income. Also by being engaged as volunteers young people are able to earn some money as well. The festivals in fact act as a market day allowing people to engage in economic activities. The second most important benefit is cultural—the various festivals provide an opportunity for the people to showcase their culture through a display of traditional attire, dance, and cuisines for people visiting the festivals. More than 40% of the respondents cited it as the most important benefit of the festivals. The social benefits that accrue from the festivals and about 30% of the people found it to be the most important. Such events allows the people to build friendships and starting partnerships. These festivals attract people from not just the state and country

but abroad as well. But maybe the most important social function of these events is the promotion of solidarity and unity among the community. Coming together and working in the events reinforces the bonds that bind the different members of the community. Members of the different age groups hold similar views regarding the benefits discussed above. A very small percentage (14% of the respondents below 25 years) have also mentioned it to be a political event. The elders didn't mention it though but such events does have a role in galvanizing the idea of Khasi nationalism. Pride regarding one's cultural identity which these festivals promote is the first step of ethno-nationalistic tendencies. The Khasi like the other tribes in the North-east have displayed their own ethno-nationalistic tendencies in the recent past. The festivals thus, have brought benefits to the people of the surrounding area. What is interesting is that though significant proportion of respondents have identified both economic and cultural benefits being important, the economic aspect is deemed more important.

Table 7: Expenditure of money collected from the management of sacred grove

| Age group | How do the management spend the money that they got from sacred grove? (% of respondents) | | | |
|--------------|---|---------------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| | Maintenance of sacred grove | Depends on management committee | Development of village | Don't know |
| Less than 25 | 28.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 71.4 |
| 25-50 | 47.1 | 11.8 | 5.9 | 35.3 |
| More than 50 | 66.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33.3 |

However, the economic benefits from the sacred grove is not shared by all in the village. Because of its reputation, Mawphlang receives a lot of visitors from both within the country and outside. There is a management committee which has framed rules and regulations for the visitors and

provide for guide for the tourist charging Rs. 200/- per hour. However when asked when happens to this fund, more than 70% of the respondents under the age of 25 years had no idea. This is understandable considering that the youths (especially women) are not involved in the decision making processes

and would undoubtedly have little information regarding the receipt and spending of village finances. Majority of the respondents from the age groups, 25-50 years and above 50 years informed that the fund is spent on the maintenance of the grove which includes salaries for the workers. But still around 1/3rd of them also accepted that they did not know how the money was spent. Less than 10% of the respondents who are between 25-50 years think that the money is spent on the village—for making dustbins, hoardings and signboards. This clearly reveals that the benefits from the sacred grove do not reach the whole village but is concentrated only to the select few.

The Meghalaya government has constructed a heritage village on the opposite end of the sacred grove which is meant to give the visitors a feel of the traditional Khasi lifestyle. The huts are designed in a traditional manner and it has an amphitheatre for performance of cultural events. Everyone agreed that the heritage village is beneficial not just for attracting tourists but also providing employment for the youth from the surrounding area. However, when asked about if the respondents held any position in the management or functioning of the heritage village none, except only one, responded in

the affirmative. This again confirms the above finding that the economic benefits are enjoyed only by a few in the community. But when enquired if they would like more projects in their area all, except one, agreed. They believed that with more projects the infrastructure in the village, e.g., roads, check dams for storing drinking water, would improve and people would get employment opportunities. Though the benefits till now has mostly been enjoyed by a few, they hoped that more people would benefit if more projects were to come.

More projects would mean more incursion into the sacred grove and its surroundings. There are very strict rules for those that enter the sacred grove. People cannot go in unaccompanied and require a guide. While they are inside the sacred grove, they are not supposed to bring out anything, not even a twig. Everything must be left within the forest. There are stories of how some people who tried to violate the rules met with unfortunate incidents. There is a particular story of a man from Mumbai who took some orchids from the forest to grow in his apartment. However, not very long rashes started appearing in his body which could not be treated. Only when someone told him to return the orchid and have some ritual performed that he became alright.

Table 8: Response to the query regarding the construction of a road to Tyrsad

| Age group | Are you happy for having a road to Tyrsad? (% of respondents) | |
|--------------|---|-----|
| | Yes | No |
| Less than 25 | 100.0 | 0.0 |
| 25-50 | 94.1 | 5.9 |
| More than 50 | 100.0 | 0.0 |

A road has recently been built through the village of Mawphlang which road leads to Tyrsad which is a village beyond Mawphlang and an important market centre. It was built to improve accessibility since people would have to go round a long way otherwise. Everyone

seemed happy with the road because according to them which according to the people it has been constructed along the side of the sacred grove and does not touch the sacred grove. However, when an inspection was done by one of the researchers (Bhogtoram Mawroh) it was found that the

road though did not pass through the middle of the grove did touch the sacred grove and had led to the cutting down of many trees. There has clearly been a violation of the rules but people do not seem to mind it. Also people could enter the grove unattended

from this side without anyone noticing. People have reported increase number of crimes especially theft in the area and some have blamed the increased openness as being a factor. The sacredness of the forest has clearly decline for the people.

Table 9: Decline in the sacredness of the sacred grove

| Age groups | Has the sacredness of Mawphlang sacred grove decreased in recent years? (% of respondents) | | |
|--------------|--|------|------------|
| | Yes | No | Don't Know |
| Less than 25 | 14.3 | 85.7 | 0.0 |
| 25-50 | 41.2 | 58.5 | 0.0 |
| More than 50 | 16.7 | 66.7 | 16.7 |

But the people in general do not think so. Majority of the respondents in the various age groups do not think that the sacredness of the sacred grove has decreased. But a small minority among those under 25 years and above 50 years do concede that the sanctity of the place has declined over the years. However, a very significant proportion (more than 40%) of those between 25-50 years did agree that the sacredness has declined because of the various activities that have been taking place in the sacred grove and its surrounding. This shows that the people also realise that not everything is alright. With more activities in the future this will only accentuate. However, with people at the same time welcoming more activities there is very less than can be done to stop this process of de-sanctification of the sacred grove. When the spiritual needs and the materials needs of the people come into conflict, it seems the material needs would always triumph.

Conclusion

Mawphlang has become very important as a symbol of resistance for those that are struggling for the protection of traditional practices and value systems against the onslaught of modernism. The grove is still strictly maintained by the Lyngdoh clan, and activities which could harm the forest like

forest firing, grazing, harvesting of firewood, and cutting trees for commercial purposes etc., are strictly prohibited. People could enter into the sacred grove, but have to follow the rules and regulations that the Mawphlang Lyngdohship has published⁸. But if only prohibition is used as a criterion for declaring the place as sacred or not there is no difference between a sacred grove and a reserved forest. Sacredness demands reverence.

Opposite to it is the idea of commodification which is the most notorious aspect of modernization. In its attempt to fight the forces of modernization and create awareness regarding preservation of traditional culture Mawphlang was forced to open up to the world. And when this done, it become a commodity where economic benefits rather than cultural became paramount. The events that were organized to showcase the traditional culture itself became a product whose returns however were not enjoyed by all in the village. New developments came up in the vicinity of the sacred grove, heritage village and especially the road to Tyrsad, which the people readily welcomed. In fact they are demanding more of the same. At the same time they

also realise that all this may have actually diminished the sanctity of their 500 year old sacred grove.

The Mawphlang sacred grove is fast losing its sacred identity because it is no longer protected for the purpose of worship

but for commercial purposes. The management committee of the sacred grove are opening it up for visitors and researchers for promoting tourism in the area. It is now a commodity to be consumed for pleasure rather than be revered for its sanctity.

PLATES



Plate 1: View of Mawphlang Sacred grove



Plate 2: Way to Mawphlang Sacred Grove



Plate 3: Ryngkew Mawiong, the hill where the sacrificial rituals begin



Plate 4: Mawphlang village, pdengshnong locality



Plate 5: A new road construction near to the Sacred grove on the way to Tyrsad



Plate 6: Construction of a new bridge near Heritage Village



Plate 7: Heritage Village



Plate 8: Preparation for Monolith Festival



Plate 9: International Terra Madre near the Mawphlang Sacred Grove

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