YANGLI FESTIVAL OF THE TIWAS OF NORTHEAST INDIA: A GRAPHIC NARRATIVE
Saiki Chamsal
Former Student, Centre of historical studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT
In the Northeastern region of India different groups of people with different ethnicity, culture, religion, customs and traditions have inhabited from very ancient times. Tiwa or Lalung is one of the tribes belonging to the Northeastern states of Meghalaya and Assam. They are an Indo Mongoloid tribe and descendent of the Bodo family of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan speech family. In Assam the Tiwas reside in the plains of Nagaon and Morigaon districts primarily but concentrations of Tiwas or Lalungs living in community form are found in Dimoria region of Kamrup district, in Titabor of Jorhat district and in Dhemaji of Dhemaji district. There is a large proportion of Tiwas living in Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya and in Hamren subdivision of KarbiAnglong district and Dima Hasao district.

Tiwas have played important role in the history of Assam as well as in molding the Assamese society and culture. They are gifted with many rich festivals with distinct identity and tradition which they observe with great enthusiasm. The festivals being the life span of their folk tradition and syndrome of social cohesion, affects the form and substance of their social life. One such festival of the Tiwas is Yangli which is a seasonal agricultural festival. Yangli is the festival of worship of Goddess 'Lakshmi', the Goddess of wealth. The purpose of the festival is welfare of both private and public life, for good harvest of crops. The following paper is a graphic narrative of the Yangli festival held in Balikhunji village of KarbiAnglong which is a result of intense field work done in the village during the festival time.

Key words: Tiwa/Lalung, History, Culture, Festivals, Traditions, Yangli festival

INTRODUCTION
Balikkhunji, a picturesque hilly village inhabited exclusively by the Tiwas of central Assam, is nestled in a hillock in the Hamren subdivision of KarbiAnglong district. The current Tiwa population of KarbiAnglong and Dima Hasao is 18251, according to 2011 census. From the foothills of Nagaon and Morigaon districts Balikkhunji could be approached through a serpentine road from Nellie which lie on NH-37 at a distance of around sixteen kilometres from Jagiroad. As one climbs up the KarbiAnglong hills through the life line road from Nellie to Ulukhunji one has to take a detour from Na-mile or Nine Mile. From Na-mile to Balikkhunji there is no road for even two wheelers. Leaving aside all trappings of modern modes of transportation one has to simply trek through dense forests up-hill for about seven kilometres. It is at this village - “Yangli”, the traditional cultivation associated festival of the Tiwas, is regularly held every three years. Yangli lies at the core of the life worlds of the Tiwas though it is nowadays restricted to only a few hilly hamlets like Balikkhunji, Bor-Rongkhai, Amchai and Bormarjang in KarbiAnglong and Magro in Meghalaya. In the plains it is celebrated only in Gova, one of the key principalities of the Tiwas, located in the foothills of KarbiAnglong, Meghalaya and the Sonai Kuchi hills of present day Morigaon district of Assam. However, in order to have a close observation at all the rituals, music, dance and energy associated with Yangli, one has to unmistakably take the pains of travelling to a continually inhabited hilly village like Balikkhunji.

YANGLI FESTIVAL
Yangli is a pre-sowing festival closely associated with the shifting or stepped cultivation practices of the Tiwas living in the hills and plains of KarbiAnglong, Nagaon, Morigaon districts of Assam and parts of adjoining Meghalaya hills. With the advent of modernity and changes in the political and socio-economic spheres of the Tiwas living in the plains of Assam, celebration of very old and
traditional festival like Yangli has become untenable except in Gova. Yangli festival begins at the premises of the village headman known as ‘Loro’. At the Loro’s residence traditional Tiwa clan heads like Dalai, Maji, Phadare etc. all arrive at the Loro’s residence after dusk on the scheduled day of beginning of the Yangli. The Tiwas traditionally believe in afterlife and resurrection of spirits after deaths. In tandem with this tradition before the start of the festival any member belonging to the above clans are required to give a pair of cocks. The Loro also makes each household head of the clans to make a pledge of offering the pair of cocks for Yangli for three generations of the households. The Loro also entrusts groups of officials divided into “khels” different tasks and responsibilities for smooth conduct of the Yang-li. The four groups of officials are- Charang (Sanitari), Charibisai (four officials), Oja (four musical instruments like Pangsi, Khram and Kit), cooks (two male and two female). Following the distribution of works, specific number of trays of fresh betel nut and paan (“tamul-paan”) are offered to propitiate traditionally believed gods, goddesses and spirits of clans. For instance, to appease the collective goddess spirits revered as Satbonis (seven sisters) specifically seven bamboo trays of betel and leaves are to be offered and prayed through chants. Similarly, twelve trays are offered against twelve clan spirits and eighteen trays are offered to appease eighteen gods. A huge pyre with dry figs and branches of trees and bamboos is lit in the front yard of the Loro’s residence. Use of artificial lights, any modern or non Tiwa attire is forbidden in Yangli. Till the other day even a device of photography is not allowed. Everyone is dressed only in their traditional Tiwa attires. Following preparations, the Loro first instructs the Tiwa traditional artists called Ojas to play flutes known as Pangsis seven times in a soulful manner in memory of past expert Pangsi players. The Ojas then play the Ludang- khram (long shaped barrel drums) along with Pangsis. To the tunes of Ludang- khrams and Pangsis, clan heads of Dalai, Maji and Phadar dance seven times in a circular manner around the well-lit fire. Another spectacular sight is the colourful dresses worn by the Panthais(young able-bodied youths) who assemble under a shed made of thatches and tree leaves in the yard of the Loro. The pieces of such colourful attires worn on the occasion by the young group of dancers are called Thena, Tagla, Thenas, Tangali and floral designed turbans beautified further by colourful feathers of beautiful birds known as the ‘Bhim’ locally. One of the striking features of the colourful assemblage of the agile youths (Panthais) is that one of them is beautifully dressed as a maiden wearing red bordered dresses. This Panthai maiden covers her face like a bride and is traditionally referred as ‘Lakhimi’ (symbolic of female goddess associated with a bountiful harvest). The Lakhimi is led by Panthais to the place of performance of traditional dance before the bonfire. Along with the Dalai, Maji and Phadar, the Ojas (instrumental artists) play Pangsis and Ludang- khrams. The officials while dancing also propitiate the Lakhimi with burning incense and cool her with beautifully weaved Thenases (long Gamucha or towel) and sing song to the tunes of the flutes and the drums (khrams). After this dance and song performance around the Lakhimi by the clan heads, comes the turn of youthful artists (Panthais) who begin their powerful performances with long whistles along with the loud war beatings of the Yanglikhrams. This dance performance by the Panthais go on all through night around the fire surrounded by enrapt spectators. At the regular intervals the vigor of the youthful male dancers (Panthais) and musicians are inspired by the regular supply of Zu (traditional rice beer) by spectacularly dressed (with kasongs and Phaskais) beautiful damsels (khorolas) of the community. 

The next morning, the Loro and other officials keep fast. The khrom players resume drummings. The officials fan the Lakhimi and escort her to the Yanglisal (the venue). The Yanglisal is located in an open plain nestled amidst the hills and is about half kilometer away from the Loro’s residence in Balikhunji. The venue of the Yangli is cleared, cleaned and prepared beforehand. In the middle of the Yanglisal lies a giant tree. Beside the tree a small bamboo pole is firmly fixed on earth before it. The bamboo stilt is known as “Agorchang” (stilt in the front) and the bamboo pole is known as “Agorkhunda” (front post). In one side of the plain venue a small house with thatch and large leaves are erected. On another side, rows of earth beds are constructed to carry out auspicious rituals and animal sacrifices associated with Yangli. The Lakhimi like the previous evening is led
to the thatch roofed hut. Then the Loro, Dalai and other specified priests prepare to conduct worship rituals. The “Panthais” (group of young and energetic male dancers) start dancing in rapid movements around the big tree carrying swords and shields to the loud and war-like drumnings of the YangliKhrams (Yangli drums). On the open festival venue that day villagers from nearby areas gather and create a colourful atmosphere. The special group of women visitors bring with them packs of “chiras”(flattened rice) and Zusa (locally brewed rice beer) to encourage the young band of dancers. Under the stunningly beautiful natural backdrop, equally beautiful young Tiwa damsels adorned in colourful “kasongs” and “phaskais” contribute further in creating an aura of romance and liveliness. Three sows, seven goats, two cocks, one duck and a pigeon are sacrificed by the Loro to propitiate the customary Tiwa gods and goddesses. The sacrificial bed of soils also act as the site of sacrifices of three white goats (to placate favourite gods of the Tiwas- Badalmaji, KamthaBorai and HumkhoBoro), three black male goats (to appease Satboni, Mahadeo and Narsing, the Tiwa god and goddess) and one black female goat (dedicated to goddess Sangpali).

These animal sacrifices are part and parcel of the folk belief of the Tiwas and are integral to Yangli celebrations. Besides the mentioned animals one female sow (dedicated to goddess of earth calledBasmota) and two male sows (dedicated toMasuatanthua, the Rat God) are sacrificed to please the demonic and dark spirits. While the sacrifices are on, Dalai, Maji and Phador etc. officials oversee the significant and auspicious ritual of tying up two strands of rice plants to be planted later in the stilted bamboo platform known “Agorchang”. Before dusk descends the Lakhimi is led by the Loro and Dalais amidst accompanied beatings of Ludang- khrams, and songs to a nearby hilly pond. In accordance with the folk ritual associated with Yangli a boat made of tree leaves is placed in the surface of the water. The boat is gently rowed with a light reed. This rowing of the boat is symbolically linked with the Tiwa god Mahadeo’s epic journey through the seas and recreates how he brought the Lakhimi or “Satboni” to eradicate hunger of the people on the earth. That origin story of fertility and harvest are musically produced with songs and as a part of augury, a pair of cocks are sacrificed beside the pond. Upon completion of this important ritual, the entourage return to the ‘Yanglisal’ and further sacrifice a duck and a pigeon before the “Agorchang” and pray to please the gods and goddess. With dusk begins the ritual of seven round of dances of the Lakhimi and thereby halt dance and song programmes. The aunts who bring rice beer also participate in dance and offer them to the tired bands of Panthais (young male dance troupe) and the assembled officials. Then several big bonfires are lit and participants are offered ritual dinner with parts of meats of sacrificed animals, rice, meat powdered rice curry, meat prepared with “dhekia” herb(fiddlehead fern) etc. as standard fares of the dinner. Other than salt and turmeric no other ingredients are allowed in preparation of the meat curries. After dinner with the rice strands in hands the Lakhimi is led back to the Loro’s yard amidst songs and play of pangsis. After entering the premises of the Loro’s residence, the officials led the Lakhimi back to her thatched hut known as the “Churibasa”. Keeping the rice strands on two stilted bamboo platforms, the contingent perform prayers and a black goat is sacrificed again. The young band of dancers continue to dance into the midnight while the elderly members retire. On the next day the yard of the Loro is opened for everyone. No animal sacrifices or prayers are conducted on the third day. Only dances, songs and fine instrumental performances are conducted to the pleasure and enthusiasm of the congregation. In the evening the young male dancers come back and unlatch the Samadi (Tiwa boy’s dormitory cum workshop). According to strict traditional rule the Samadi or boys dormitory is kept locked during the Yangli festival with no activities conducted inside. During the next few days the village households receive an auspicious rice strand and dried meats of animals sacrificed during the festival. When that auspicious band of rice is mixed with other old rice (preserved as seeds for future cultivation) then it is believed to bring blessedness and growth to rice cultivation the next season.

Thus, every three years the festival of Yangli create a unique spirit of spirituality, celebration and an urge for future prosperity and since time immemorial it has become an integral part of the life world of the Tiwa tribe of Northeast India.
REFERENCES