

A study of Khasi folk beliefs from folkloristic perspective

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Abstract: Meghalaya is a homeland of three major tribes: Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. The Khasi is also known as “Hynñiewtrep” (the seven huts), since Khasi is a generic term for the seven sub-tribes; Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Marram, Lyngngam and Diko that inhabits the Khasi and Jaintia hills district. Culturally Meghalaya is multifaceted and varied with a diamond paned array of folklore, beliefs, festivals, social custom and material culture which comprise the traditional way of life of the Khasis. All three tribes are having folk beliefs. This paper is an attempt to observe the Khasi folk beliefs from folkloristic point of view.

Key Words: Meghalaya, Khasi, Folk belief, folkloristic perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Meghalaya is a home to two matrilineal tribes namely the Khasi and the Garo. The Khasi is also known as “Hynñiewtrep” (the seven huts), since Khasi is a generic term for the seven sub-tribes; Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Marram, Lyngngam and Diko that inhabits the Khasi and Jaintia hills district.

Culturally Meghalaya is multifaceted and varied with a diamond paned array of folklore, beliefs, festivals, social custom and material culture which comprise the traditional way of life of the Khasis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Though many secondary sources are available but works on Khasi folk belief on folkloristic perspective. For the theoretical background of this paper researcher took help from the book *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art* by Thomas A. Green. Other books consulted are as follows: *The Khasis* by P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Philosophy and Essence of Niam Khasi* by J.Kersingh Tariang and *U Khasi Bad La Ka Niam* by H.Onderson Mawrie.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

All cultures maintain beliefs that can be classified as folk beliefs, or common beliefs that are not necessarily grounded in scientific fact but are widely accepted as truth by most members of the group. Folk beliefs appear in many different ways within a culture. Some are private and are known within a group and others take more public expression. The khasis hold an array of folk beliefs. They maintain many kinds of folk beliefs, even though technology and science have become important parts of contemporary life, many people still rely upon and employ folk beliefs in their daily life activities. These can be seen regularly and are expressed in topics ranging from the weather to childbirth, to healing practice and agriculture. Some of these beliefs take the form of light-hearted axioms, but others comprise important social rules, which if broken, constitute a serious breach of respect and even threaten the group's well beings. These beliefs are often deeply embedded, and although the actual practice relating to the belief may have decline, its verbalization remains.

Folk belief is not confined to culture outside the mainstream; there is copious evidence to suggest that folk beliefs and associated behaviours are widespread throughout the population- at all income and educational levels, in urban and sub-urban environments, and in technological fields of endeavour. Folk belief is a broad genre of folklore that includes expressions and behaviours variously called superstitions, popular beliefs, the supernatural, folk medicine, folk religion, weather sign, etc.

Folklorists have long recognized the need for a neutral term to designate traditional beliefs in order to avoid ethnocentric bias in studying human behaviour. A.H. Krappe wrote “Superstition, in common parlance, designates the sum of beliefs and practices shared by other people in so far as they differ from our own. What we believe and practise ourselves is, of course, Religion”

The term religion is originated from the Latin noun “religio” that was nominalized from one of the three verbs; “relegere” (to turn constantly/observe conscientiously), “religeri” (to bind oneself), and “reeligeri” (to choose again). (McBrien 1994)

Religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems and world views that relate humanity to supernatural and to spirituality. The word religion is used interchangeably with faith, belief system or sometimes set of

duties; however in the words of Emile Durkheim, religion differs from private belief in that it is “something eminently social”

4. FINDINGS DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

According to H. Onderson Mawrie in his book “*U Khasi bad la ka Niam*” the term ‘*niam*’ is a combination of the two words ‘*Nia*’ (reason, argument) and ‘*Im*’ (living, alive). A Khasi based his relationship with God on the ground of ‘*Nia-Im*’. He communicate with God by ‘*ka- nia*’, therefore he called his religion “*Ka Niam Khasi*”. The Khasis believe in the supreme being whom they call ‘*U Blei*’, of which the english equivalent is (He) God, with a prefix ‘*U*’ signifying a masculine gender singular in meaning. They never symbolise God by means of an image; they worship Him in spirit only.

Mr. J.N. Chowdhury in his book “The khasi Canvas” said “With reference to their (Khasi) religion it may be observed that they believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, the Creator of the world. The minute affairs of the individuals and even the greater and more important matters of nation, they supposed to be under the superintendence of divine agents and spirits, who are likewise Gods. These spirits delight in sacrifices and all affliction is attributed to their wrath; their character is wicked, they are evil spirits and are always engaged in exerting their evil influence over those who do not pay them the attention they deserve; they can however, be pacified by the sacrifice of a fowl or other animals”.

Dr. Lyngdoh, in his book, “*Ka Niam Khasi*”, wrote: “If we carefully analyse the conditions of the covenant in the religion and rituals of the Khasis which remain unsullied up to these days, we will find that the belief in God is that there is only one (God). That it was He who created the world and human beings and the animals, the birds, the fish, the trees and bamboos, the grass and the herbs and all vegetation; (He) who is in heaven and on earth; who is the Master of everything, who has brought forth the cognates and agnates, who bestow wealth and who rules the whole world. Therefore , they call Him ‘God, the Master’; ‘God, the Creator of human being’; ‘God, the Bestower of wealth’; ‘God, the Giver, the Planner’; ‘God, who brings forth and makes firm’; ‘God, the Decree giver’; ‘God, the Supreme Ruler’. All these names show that, in the Khasi thinking and wisdom God is the source of all powers which create and sustain, which causes them to grow and mature and which cause the world and human beings to grow and prosper”.

The Khasi indigenous faith or “*Ka Niam Khasi*” influences the life of a khasi in every form; influence their social system and political organisation from the law of inheritance, administration system, etc. and the observance of the fundamental tenets are restricted to the family and clan.

Folk medical beliefs or folk cures or faith healing are traditional ways of dealing with health problem. It is an area in which folk medicine and folk religion overlap since religious beliefs is the foundation for the curing process.

The khasi believe that besides creations that are tangible to man, there are also intangible spirits inhabiting this earth roaming the hills and the valleys known as ‘*ki ksuid lum ksuid wah*’, literally meaning, the spirits in the hills and the rivers. The Khasi believe in free will and as such, the option is open to anyone to choose whether the good or the evil way of life. It is believed that besides the spirits mentioned, the spirits of those people who died, who were cruel and who had committed evil deeds in life for which there could be no condonation from God, would not go and reside in the abode of God but would forever roam the hills and the valleys on this earth looking for opportunities to create trouble for the people living on this earth. But the conception is that the evil spirits are not capable of doing harm to any one by themselves unless one has alienated oneself from God by one’s own lapses and moral transgressions, thereby laying oneself open to the wiles of negative forces or evil spirits. The khasis in many parts of the Khasi land attributed the causes of many sicknesses to have been the work of evil spirits. For example, there was, ‘*U Rih*’, a malaria fever devil, ‘*Ka khlam*’, a demon of cholera, ‘*ka puri ka diaw*’, which caused mental disorder and so on. When a person was afflicted with sickness, an attempt was made to find out, by means of divination whether the cause was “*ka daw iing*” (internal or domestic), that is, whether there was any sin of commission and omission in the family itself, or “*ka daw lum*”, (external forces), that is, one which was caused by external negative forces or evil spirits. If it was found to be external, the diviner appealed to the creator to intervene and chastise the spirit and send it on its way. For example, if one person have stomach ache, a Khasi curse the spirit “*Phuit ka lei lum ka lei wah, ka ksuid ka khrei, kaba shong ha thliew dieng thliew siej, ha krem ha kroh. Wat pynjynjar pha ia u khun bynriew, pha la ka lynti ngi la ka lynti. Khie lei phai sha ba pha shong pha sah. Phuit phuit khie phet noh pha*” and the person is healed.

In the book “*Ka Niam Khasi*”, Dr. H. Lyngdoh wrote that in course of time, man felt the need to get some more help from God. So, the forebears of the Khasis devised a means by which man could beg for a sanction from God, designated as “*Ka Blei ka Nonghukum*” in this instance, to allow him to harness the power of “*Ka Iawbei*”, the first ancestress of the clan, “*u Suitnia*”, the first uncle of the clan and “*u Thawlang*”, the first ancestors of the clan to also assist God in maintaining and promoting the well-being of the living members of the clan in all aspects of their life. When God had so consented, they expressed their thanks to Him by sacrificing a fowl and a goat. Then, they sacrificed a pig in thanksgiving to the first ancestress and the first uncle and informed them that God had given His sanction that they also should assist Him in the work of looking after the well-being of the living members of the clan

from their world, in the same way that they used to do when they were living on this earth. They also informed the first ancestor that God had also assented that he would be the 'Thawlang' who would assist 'Ka Iawbei' in looking after the well-being of those who descended from him. In this way, the Khasis honoured the dead ancestors and asked for their blessings also when they performed the ritualistic prayer for the living, like in naming a new born child and in marriage and when interring the bones of the dead in the clan ossuaries."

The Khasis revere the memories of the deceased ancestors and also adore them by means of offerings periodically and when thought necessary as in times of trouble. In some part of the Khasi land particularly in Ri Bhoi district, when a child is inflicted from an unknown sickness, the khasi believed that the deceased relative caused the sickness, as a sign to express his/her wish to become the guardian or protector of the child, locally known as "Wan Kyrteiñ", literally meaning 'name coming', the embodiment of the deceased relative into the child. The deceased relatives can be a grandfather, grandmother, aunty or uncle and this is usually happen with a new born baby. When a child is sick, the parents or family member took the child to a doctor or a traditional medical practitioner, but even after visiting many healers and after trying various means to cure the child, the child sickness in not perishing, instead it become worse. The parents of the child is at their wits, but the older member of the family who have more knowledge (through their experience of life) suggest that the child should be taken to "U Jha" or any person who have the knowledge of divination. The diviner then (mostly uses rice as a tool for divination) by perception and interpretation of sign finds the causes of the child sickness. When he found out that the child's deceased grandparent or uncle or aunty want to be a "kyrteiñ" (guardian angel) of the child, the parents pray to the want-to-be guardian that they are happy for his/her intention and want his/her blessing for the child, that the child will get well once again and healthy. Then the parents of the child and the representative of the guardian angel (in this case it can be the wife of the guardian's wife/husband, children or mother/father) exchange new cloths (the cloths should be white and made of cotton). After this process, the sick child is well again.

Having born and brought up in Ri Bhoi district, it observed that many boys and girls who have "U kyrteiñ" ('U' is masculine) or "Ka Kyrteiñ" ('Ka' is feminine). A one and half year's old boy name Aibanshemphang Mallai, son of Mrs Deeptiful Mallai and Mr Rikwes Maiong, is one of among many Childs in the Ri Bhoi district who have "U kyrteiñ". His mother told that, when Aibanshemphang was one and a half months old, he was inflicted from an unknown sickness. So, she took him to the local hospital, but at the hospital, the doctor tell her that her son have no sickness. When she look at her son, it is clearly visible that there is something wrong with the child's health. She decided then to take him to Shillong in a better hospital. Even after they have stayed at Shillong for a few days, her son's health is not improving and the doctor tell her that they couldn't find the cause of his sickness. When Deeptiful's aunty (Mother's sister) visited the boy at the hospital, she insisted Deeptiful that she must visit a diviner because she said it may be there is someone from the family who want to be "U kyrteiñ" of the boy. When Deeptiful's mother visited a diviner, the diviner explain to her (after doing a rice divination) that the boy does not have any sickness, but the cause of his weakness, his loss in weight is because the eldest son of Deeptiful's aunty (who have passed away 8 years back) want to be "U kyrteiñ" of the boy. After knowing this, on the instruction of the diviner, Deeptiful's uncle went to the hospital and brought with him a bottle of water and rice (the rice that the diviner used for his divination) to be given to the boy. After this, Deeptiful and her son discharge from the hospital. When they reach home, Deeptiful bought a white cotton shirt on behalf of her son (to be given to her aunty), and her aunty (the mother of Aibanshemphang's kyrteiñ) buy the same for the boy and they exchange their gifts at a small get together, where all the family member are present. From that day, the boy started to show a sign of improvement. Deeptiful told me that the Aibanshemphang's voice and way of coughing is similar his kyrteiñ.

5. CONCLUSION:

After all Khasi people of Meghalaya is retaining their folk belief in their tradition and it is percolated in all spheres of folk life. Here cited few examples only.

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