

A Curious Case Of Patronymic Tradition In A Matrilineal Society: A Case Study Of Nongtalang, Meghalaya.

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Abstract

Surveying The Culture Of A Society From A Macro-Level Perspective Is Convenient Yet Insufficient. Every Society Is Much More Diverse And Complex. It Is Imperative To Delve Into The Microcultures In Order To Address These Nuances For A Holistic View Of A Society. The Objective Further Extends To Facilitate Record-Keeping Of These Intangible Traditions That Are Disappearing Day By Day. The Khasi Tribe In Meghalaya Is A Treasure Trove Of Intangible Heritage. Each Region In The Khasi And Jaiñtia Hills Have Their Own Unique Practices. The Scope Of This Paper Will Analyse The Unique Naming Tradition At Nongtalang Village In The War-Jaiñtia Region. The Research Was Carried Out In The Months Of December 2022-April 2023. The Initial Literature Review Of Similar Practices In The World Indicated That Unlike Elsewhere, This Patronymic Tradition At Nongtalang Is Situated In A Matrilineal Society. Usually, Patronymic Traditions Always Exist In A Patrilineal Society. Through Semi-Structured Interviews With The People Of Nongtalang, The Many Questions Surrounding This Naming System Are Addressed. With Globalization, People Are Abandoning Their Cultural Practice To Something More Conventional. Keeping A Record Of A Dying Practice On Paper Is One Way Of Preserving It For Future Generations.

Keywords: *Patronym, Patronymic, Nongtalang, Rimha, Shuwan, Microculture, Macro-Culture*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is the way of life — morals, values, belief systems, craftsmanship in the form of paintings, structures, handicraft, intellectual features like literature or oral instructions shared by the people of a community. It encompasses both the intangible and tangible aspect of a society. An element of culture can be similar with other communities while at the same time unique to itself. This is so as culture is influenced by its surroundings and is a response to the environment in which they exist and live. For that reason, culture is also dynamic as it constantly evolves to adapt to changes. Culture is taught and learnt since it is passed down from the older generation to the next. Sometimes this learning is conscious and sometimes it is not as it is ingrained in the system, for instance our mother-tongue. This shared learning experience between generations and between individuals is what holds the community together.

When exploring about a culture, often one observes it from a macro-level. Usually, the country an individual belongs to represents a culture as a whole leading to generalization and stereotypes. This oversimplification denies the diversity of many communities and their culture. These lesser-known cultures are called micro-cultures but are still situated within the dominant macro-culture. However, in some ways at the micro-level due to their shared history, experience and environment, they are distinct from the mainstream culture. These microcultures can be in terms of geographical regions, race, ethnicity, religion, language, dialects, etc.

Microculture is not to be confused with subculture. The entire existence of a subculture is that it is subversive to expected norms, often criticizing the standard of the society. The people marginalized by the society actively join hands forming a separate identity. Ken Gelder further describes it as a group that opposes societal norms like class, capitalism and other aspects of an ordinary everyday existence to deliberately rebel in the form of a new way of living. Hence, it can be interpreted as a form of resistance.

In the north eastern region of India, many share similar macro-cultural traits in terms of food and architecture but each of these eight states are different culturally from one another. The state of Meghalaya itself is inhabited by the Khasi and Garo tribes. These two tribes while both being matrilineal are still distinct from one another in terms of language, attire, belief system, etc. Further, the Khasi tribe also *Ki Hynñiew trep ki Hynñiew Skum* is divided region wise as *Khyntiam* (East Khasi Hills), *Bhoi* (Ri-Bhoi district), *War* (Southern tracts of Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills bordering Bangladesh), *Maram*, *Lyngngam*, *Nong-Muliang* (Western part of Khasi Hills)

and *Pnar* or *Jaiñtia* (Jaiñtia Hills). They may be the same but differ at the micro-cultural level. For instance, the naming ceremony may differ in terms of religion and region. It is imperative to address these complexities in order to understand a community, group or a tribe holistically.

II. NAMING TRADITION IN NONGTALANG

Names are not just letters grouped together. They define our identity. Our personal names reflect our culture, community, familial and historical connections. Due to this, choosing a name is a consequential process especially amongst the Khasi tribe.

Nongtalang is situated in the southern tracts of West Jaiñtia hills district. As such it is inhabited by the *War-Jaiñtia*. It was established by four *kurs* or matri-clan, namely, *Talang*, *Rymbui*, *Myrchiang* and *Bareh*. The clan Lamin arrived later and from it the clans *Pohsnem*, *Pohlynjar*, *Pohduna* and *Pohchen* branched out. These five clans consider themselves *shikur* (in a cognate relationship as they descended from the same ancestress, *ka iawbei*). Subsequently, the clan *Pohti* branched out of the clan *Bareh*. This was followed by the arrival of the clans *Pohrmen* and *Padu*. The word *poh* is an abbreviation of *Kpoh* (Womb). Hence, *Pohchen* would mean from the womb of *Chen*. Together these twelve clans formed a council that looked after the welfare of Nongtalang. In the course of time, the number of households increased and inter-marriages led to the arrival of other clans such as *Nonglamin*, *Tariang* and many more. (Pohchen 3rd April 2023)

It is here where the first child is named after the *kur* (surname or matri-clan) of the father. In some rare cases, it is not the first born that is given such a name. It can be the middle or the youngest child. For instance, if a mother's name is *Iba Myrchiang* and the father's name is *Bok Bareh* then the personal name of a child will be *Bareh Myrchiang*. Sometimes, only a syllable of the father's *kur* becomes a forename such as *Chiang* for *Myrchiang*, *Chen* for *Pohchen* and *Min* for *Lamin*. As in any oral society, there are no records regarding the beginning of such a practice. Although the earliest written records are around 100 years old, the practice predates that period. It is not compulsory for the parents to name the first born like so. (Mohrmen 15th March 2023)

As a mark of respect, the first child is named after the *kur* of the father. Such forenames are epicene, therefore in order to address a girl, she will be designated as *Ke Bareh Myrchiang* and if it is a boy then he will be addressed as *U Bareh Myrchiang*. Earlier, it was a common phenomenon whereby there will be several people in the village who will have the same forename. As the population increased and the society became more complex, this led to a confusion. In recent times, it has been observed that an affix is attached to such given names so as to differentiate them from one another, for example, *Barehlin* or *Phibareh*. This naming tradition has no restriction whatsoever if a man or a woman from Nongtalang settles in another village as a result of marriage, or when men or women from other villages settle in Nongtalang for the same reason.

III. WHETHER IT IS A PATRONYM OR A METRONYM?

A patronymic naming practice is when the children adopt their father's forename as a surname, resulting in a different surname generation to generation. This was very much prevalent in many European countries. In the contemporary era, most patronyms have evolved into surnames. The forename of the father is affixed with *sen*, *ap*, *son*, *mac*, *ovich* which means son of so and so and *dattir*, *dottir*, *ovna* (daughter of so and so). Some common surnames of today like Johnson (son of Johnson), Macdonald (son of Donald), Williams (son of William) were all patronyms. The two countries that still practice patronymic traditions are Russia and Iceland. In the case of Russia, patronyms are middle names. In the Arabic tradition (Middle east, North Africa and some parts of South and Southeast Asia) affixes such as *ibn*, *bin* (son of) are used. There are cases in which no prefix or suffix are used as in the case of Ali Ibrahim Omar which means Ali son of Ibrahim son of Omar. In India it is very common for the forename of the father to be the middle name of the child. In the southern part of the country, the initial of the father's forename is followed by the name of the children. Despite all these diverse types of patronyms, the common factor is that it is based on the ancestral linkage of the father. The same is observed in a metronymic system.

The naming system at Nongtalang is distinct from the aforementioned patronyms. It is not a pure patronymic tradition because even though the forename of the first child is based on the *kur* of the father, that *kur* is in fact a matriname or a matri-clan. Secondly, it is the surname that transitions to a name and not the other way round as observed in other parts of the world with the exception of Russia, Arabic traditions and some parts of India where the forename of the father does not have to be a surname for the children. It can be a middle name or an initial before the forename of the children. Thirdly, in other patronymic traditions in the world, all the children adopt the name of the father but in Nongtalang it is reserved only for the first child — though there are rare cases at present.

These characteristics of this naming tradition are what makes this naming practice unique. The naming practice at Nongtalang does not seem to neatly fit in the established patronymic or metronymic system. It is a combination of both patronymic and metronymic traditions where the patronym is the father's surname, inherited

from the female line owing to its matrilineal system. It can be defined as a Pat-metronymic naming system as it represents both aspects.

IV. WHETHER IT IS A CULTURAL OR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE?

Before the arrival of the British, all the people followed the indigenous belief system, *Ka Niam Khasi* though it is called *Niam chnong* in Nongtalang. Now the population consists of Christians, Unitarians and *Niam chnong* which are the majority of believers. Many of the people who still name their first born after the *kur* of the father are mostly followers of *Niam Chnong*. Due to this, it gave the impression that it was not a cultural practice but one that is embedded in religion.

Some were of the opinion that it obeyed one of the three commandments of *Niam Khasi*, which is *Tip Kur tip kha*. This commandment decrees that a person should respect his maternal and paternal relations by acknowledging the consanguinity of their *kur* (*Tip Kur*) and respecting the progeny relationship with the father and his relations (*Tip Kha*). (Mohrmen 15th March 2023; Bareh 27th March 2023)

On the contrary, some were of the opinion that this practice is purely cultural and in no shape or form associated with *Niam chnong*, owing to the fact that no solemnization is required unlike *Rimha* name and *Shu wan* name. *Rimha* is a ceremony where the parents inform God the creator that the child is born. For a girl child, the deity *Ka Syiem ka Synchar* is informed to bless the child. If it is a boy then, the deity *Biskurom* is informed for his blessings. A hen is sacrificed for a girl and a rooster is sacrificed for a boy. In case the family cannot afford it then they can use eggs. A fowl should strictly be sacrificed for this purpose. It was never the custom to butcher other animals for feasting as *Rimha* was always a private affair. In recent years it has turned into a public affair where a feast is prepared. The *Rimha* name will be according to the traditional market days as accorded by God the creator and by that reason they are sacred. These eight days of a week are *Hat, Khyllaw, Pynsiñ, Mulong, Musiang, Muchui, Pyngkat, and Kyr deng*. The days are calculated in the traditional manner wherein a new day starts at sunrise after the rooster crows. If a child is born on the 4th of April which coincides with the market day *Pyngkat*, then the *Rimha* ceremony will be held after sunrise on the 5th of April. This day coincides with the market day *Kyr deng* and so the *Rimha* name of the child will be *Kyr deng*. Even though it is customary for *Rimha* to be conducted the day after the birth of a child, it is not strictly followed. It is the responsibility of the parents to keep a record of the days so if a *Rimha* is conducted ten years later, it will be held on the market day *Kyr deng*. It is compulsory to have a *Rimha* name as it will be used for all religious purposes. (Pohchen 3rd April 2023; 6th April 2023)

Another naming tradition that is associated with *Niam chnong* is *Kyrteng Shuwan*. Ninety-nine out of a hundred believers also have this name. The spirit of the deceased relative desires for the child to adopt his or her name. In some cases, it can be *Ki blei* or guardian spirits. When a person is unwell, it is an indication that a spirit has paid a visit for this very purpose. They have to inform a priest who after supplication before God and the guardian spirits, will advise the concerned person to be kept under observation for a few days. If the condition improves then they will solemnize the name. No animals are sacrificed for this ceremony. Instead, they use other appurtenances, a *jaiñ kyrshah* also called a *diakypoh* (*Traditional cloth draped by a female*) and *jaiñ spong* (*Traditional turban worn by a male*) depending on the gender of the person. The spirit may visit a week a month or years after the birth of a child. (Pohchen 3rd April 2023; 6th April 2023)

Thus, amongst the *Niam chnong* believers, it is certain that they will have two names: *Rimha* name and *Shuwan* name. Of the two, *Rimha* name is significant. It is up to the parents if they want the religious names to be adopted legally or not. If a person has another legal name, his *Rimha* and *Shuwan* names are only used for religious purposes. Additionally, they can have a third name which is the *kur* of the father. The *Rimha* name is sometimes affixed with the *Kur* of the father. If a person's *Rimha* name is *Kyr deng* and the parents wish to pay respect to the father, his given name will be *Barehdeng* or *Kyrdengreh* or *Kyrdeng Bareh*. The same is applied for a *Shuwan* name.

V. CUSTOMARY LAW

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council passed a bill to codify the customary laws of the Khasi tribe. The Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Act, 1997 states that a Khasi shall be deprived of a Khasi status if they do not observe the matrilineal system. Recently, some of the Khasi offspring bear both the *kur* of the mother and the father which has led to confusion in terms of cognate and agnate relations in turn impacting *ka shongkha shong man* (marriage). The naming system at Nongtalang is not to be confused with the current trends. In the case of the name *Kyrdeng Bareh Myrchiang* or *Bareh Myrchiang* the question arises if it breaches Section 10, Subsection 1 Clause (c) of Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Act, 1997. This naming practice does not violate the customary laws because the *kur* of a father in this case *Bareh* will convert into a name and will no longer function as a *kur*. The *kur* of the child will still be *Myrchiang* which is inherited from the mother.

VI. CONCLUSION

This unique naming tradition is declining among all the different communities in Nongtalang. The reasons for this could be a lack of knowledge that has prevented the other religious communities as it was assumed to be associated with *Niam chnong*. The other reason is that the modern era of globalization has ushered in the need to mainstream oneself. This is observed in the way the people are naming themselves after Bollywood actors, actresses and nonsensical English names like Hilarious and Full moon. That is not to say that the majority have such names. Meaningful Khasi names and English names also exist. There is hope that this practice will not disappear as long as a respect and regard for traditions still lives on amongst the people.

This micro-cultural approach on the different practices amongst the Khasi has brought to light such unique traditions that are slowly disappearing. Each of the sub-tribes have such rich heritage and unique traditions like the naming tradition at Nongtalang. It is so distinct that there are no similar cases in the world as yet. It is a sense of pride not only for the people of Nongtalang but to the entire tribe as a whole. This awareness of one's culture can help safeguard such traditions.

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