

Matrilineality: Establishing The Khasi Identity Through Ka Tang Jait

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Abstract:

The fundamental concept of matrilineality is that the lineage comes from the mother's clan and women perpetuate the clan from one generation to another. The strength of matrilineality lies in the greatest respect that the society bestows on women, especially on mother and her clan. This ideology is so deeply rooted in the Khasi beliefs that the children traditionally belong to the descent group of the mother. The significant role of the mother in Khasi family thus entrusts on her the rights and responsibilities of the family at large. The paper discusses on the Khasi cultural identity as depicted in the performance of rituals and ceremonies which are associated with their socio-religious practices. The ceremonial performance that shall be used for the discussion is 'Ka Tang Jait', a ceremony performed during formation of a new clan.

Keywords: mother, clan, ancestors

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I. Introduction

The identity of the Khasi of Meghalaya as a community was not only in their polity and appearance but it also lies in the tradition, customs and practices based on *Ka Niam ka rukom* (the religious customs and ceremonies). The socio-cultural and religious practices are the main features which identify the unique identity of the Khasi people. A distinctive feature of the Khasi society is the matrilineal principles of descent and inheritance where the line passes from mother to daughter. In fact it may be said that their entire society was a conglomeration of clans which they call *Kur* or *Jait*. Before going into the main discussion of the paper, let us first look at what is an identity. An identity can be described as the set of characteristics that an individual share with other members of the same group. These characteristics could be beliefs, behaviours, religion, moral values and the like.

Baidyanath Saraswati (1996: vii) defined cultural identity as "The area of cultural identities is complex since it includes questions of the 'self' and the 'other'. The notion of the 'self' refers to the individual or collective, whereas the 'other' refers to the economic, social and cultural dimensions".

The term 'cultural identity' as a social construct refers to feelings of belonging of oneness and common shared culture. It is the (feeling of) identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as he or she is influenced by belonging to a group or culture. It encompasses observations upon gender, race, history, nationality, language, religious belief, ethnicity and aesthetics of a particular group. Thus, it is understood that 'cultural identity' is a wide term, comprises not only the symbolism of culture, but it deals with the study of social, political and cultural way of life of any particular community.

As mentioned in the beginning, the Khasi society is made by the conglomeration of several clans, it is therefore important for the discussion to understand what forms a clan. The institution of clan is found in all societies especially in tribal societies not only the Khasi society. It is an exogamous group, which comes next to family in the social structure. It resembles the family but differs from it fundamentally. The family is bilateral; either the individual belongs to matriarchal descent or to patriarchal descent. In other words, an individual recognizes his relationship either with a woman as his mother or a man as his father. Thus, clan traces its origin through one of the parents to the total neglect of the other. If a tribe is organized into mother clans, every child, regardless of sex, is considered a member of his/her mother's clan and takes the maternal clan's name, if there is one. In the same manner, if the tribe is organized into father clans, every child is a member of his/her father's clan and takes the paternal clan's name. In the Indian context, the tribal groups mostly follow both the patterns.

II. Khasi Matrilineality And Clan Formation

The origin of a clan of each tribe is very difficult to trace as there is no literature and history mentioned in detailed about the origin and development of clan of many tribal groups. They are to be found only in oral traditions and folklore of the people. Similar is the case in the Khasi context also.

The Khasi society is one of the few matrilineal groups of the world whose social structure is more or less intact. A distinctive feature of Khasi society is the matrilineal principle of descent, succession and inheritance. The line as said earlier, passes from mother to daughter in cases of descent and inheritance, but succession to political offices is from maternal uncle to sister's son. Another remarkable feature of the Khasi society was its extreme clannishness. Infact it may be said that the entire society was a conglomeration of clans which they calls *kurs* or *jaits*. (Dutta 1982: 7). Many of the clans traced their descent from an old ancestress who is known as *Ka ĩawbei Tynrai* which literally means root ancestress. Descent is traced from the mother. Since mother is the perpetrator of the clan, the children take her clan name. Every individual belongs to a particular clan traced from the mother. Hence, came out the popular Khasi saying '*long jait na ka kynthei*' meaning, from the woman sprang the clan or from the woman one traces one's clan (Gurdon 1981: 82).

The word '*kur*' refers to all groups of people both male and female descended from the same ancestral mother. They are all related by blood. *Kur* is the first social entity of the Khasi around which every social institution revolves. Each *kur* traces its descent to *Ka ĩawbei Tynrai* or root ancestress. The *kur* is subdivided into *jaits*, which claim their descent to *Ka ĩawbei Tymmen* or old ancestress. The *jaits* are further subdivided into a number of *kpohs* or wombs whose descent is traced to *Ka ĩawbei Khyrrow* or young ancestress. Each *kpoh* is again subdivided into a number of families.

The origin of these families is then traced back to the divine origin of the people who believed that they have been living here since the beginning of times and their land has been given by God himself. According to oral history, they are the descendants of the *Hynñiew Trep-Hynñiew Skum* (Seven huts-Seven nests) who came to settle down on earth from heaven. The tradition had that at the very beginning when the world was young; *U Blei Nongbuh-Nongthaw* (God the Creator) through *Ka Hukum Blei* (God's decree) created the world which is called *Ka Mei Mariang-Ka Mei Ramew* (Mother earth). He also created human beings of seven pairs which include of seven numbers of males and seven females. Besides these seven pairs of people and the celestial bodies who stayed with Him in the universe. While other living beings like animals, birds, insects etc and living things like plants, trees were already set up on the earth. When everything was completed and looked good, God sent *Ka Hukum* to inform the Mother earth to get ready and be prepared for welcoming and accepting human beings whom he will send to this earth. Then, *Ka Hukum* brought God's order and gave the instruction to all living things, living creatures and others to take responsibility in taking care of the human beings sent from the upper world. When everything was completely arranged as instructed, *Ka Hukum* came down and dropped the Seven families on the Mother earth. The seven families were received by the earthly beings with a joyous welcome. Then, *Ka diengkait* (banana tree) was the first to offer the responsibility of providing daily meal to these people. This is followed by *u khaw-u kba* (rice grain), and in this way comes a sequence of helps rendered by all these earthly beings to these families. It was said that this is the reason why the Khasi people take banana as the best food for their new born babies and thenceforth start feeding with rice at the age of five or six months old. The seven pairs are the *Hynñiew Trep-Hynñiew Skum* (Seven huts-Seven nests) who initially formed the seven types of clans among the Khasis. It was believed that from these seven pairs, God selected one pair to be *Ka ĩawbei Blei* or 'the first god mother' and *U Thawlang Blei* the 'first god father'. These two godly people who were the progenitress/ progenitor were believed to be the first ancestors whose worshipped was made by the Khasi people.

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs every clan traced its origin and name to a common ancestress. It is to be noted here that some clans' name were seen to have been named after plants and other vegetation etc. However, this does not mean that the ancestors of these clans were the plants or vegetables but for the reason that these clans have a close association with these beings as a result of their migration from one place to the other or separation from the family root.

This idea of giving name of plants and other vegetation to a clan is to show the relationship that the clan has with these objects. This clan attribution of plants or vegetation emblem according to Levi-Strauss is called a totemic phenomenon. In his study on the Ojibwa's concept and application of totemism in their clan formations, Strauss described this totemic system in two forms, that is the 'social' system which focused on plants and a 'religious' totemic system which focused on animals (Strauss, 1969: 129). He added that the Ojibwa clan's conception on the relation with plants and animals is revealed in different ways. These could be either to have full control over a specific plant or express their relation through rituals, or still further through prohibitions and prescription.

Some of the Khasi clans mention here for the discussion are the *Nongsiej* clan and *Pathaw* clan, have their own story that is associated with the name. It was said that the *Nongsiej* was a clan named after bamboos. As per oral traditional is concerned, it was told that once there was a village that was hit by a heavy earthquake

and killed many people beside destruction of their houses. Some of the villagers managed to escape from this great devastation by sheltering themselves under the bamboo roots. The bamboos were said to have protect these poor people with their firm roots where the terrible tremor could not harm the people. It was from that time that these quake survivors named their clan as *Nongsiej* and they considered it a taboo if they consume bamboo shoot. In the same way, according to oral account, *Pathaw* clan was named after an edible plant pumpkin. The story goes that once upon a time there was a flood and the people were trying to flee from the waves of the great flood by swimming to the other side for safety. Some of them manage to swim across to the safety side while many could not. Those who were on the safe side used pumpkin's stalk by throwing it to the water so that the ones who inside the water can take hold of the stalk to cross to the other side. The pumpkin's stalk has thus saved the life of many people at that time and it was said that henceforth these people named their clan as *Pathaw*.

III. Ka Tang Jait (Consecration Of A New Clan)

At present, there is the emergence of another way of forming a clan through the system of incorporation. This is due to the reason of the practice of inter-marriage between a Khasi man with a woman from other communities. The children born of a union between a such type of family at times, faces the status of clanlessness (*Khlem kur khlem jait*) of which is considered as a disgraceful nature in the Khasi society. This is so because, such offspring cannot retain the father's clan name as it is against their custom of tracing descent through the motherline especially when it comes to the practice of bone interment. The man's children cannot belong to the father's clan because after their death, the uncalcined bone cannot be deposited in the clan ossuary. On the other hand, the children of such union cannot gain their mother's clan name as well as this will affect their identity in the society. That is, they will not be accepted as Khasi in the first place; and secondly, it would be against the norms of the mother's socio-cultural practices which is patrilineal society. Thus, offsprings of such mixed marriage practices have to adopt a new clan name which could be either a combination of the parent's name or their own personal names (Mawrie 1970: 72). To distinguish themselves from the indigenous clans, such adopted clans are known under the general title, the *Dkhar*¹ clan. But to designate their identity among themselves, many of them use the prefix '*Khar*' before their acquired or adopted name. For example, clans of *Kharlukhi*, *Kharbuki*, *Kharkongor*, *Kharshandi*, *Kharpuri*, etc. Gradually, 'such individuals are inducted an assimilated into the Khasi cultural fold.

Another possibility of forming a new clan is through clan expulsion. For instance, if a man and a woman from the same clan commit an act of incest, the consequent punishment that they will get is clan excommunication (*Ka tait jait*) and banishment from the village. Such individuals may enter a new village pretending the appearance of wanderer or migrants, etc and many assume a new clan name for themselves and their children. Thus, in the Khasi society, clan is formed in many ways according to different circumstances as mentioned above in order to form a distinct identity in the society.

While following strictly the customs and practices perform by the Khasis of indigenous faith or traditional religion, the tradition had, that clan formation ceremony was started since the beginning of time. The instructions was given by *Ka Hukum* through the ancestors so that whenever there is a proposal of forming a new clan it is mandatory to observe a kind of religious ceremony to seek permission from God. The ceremony is known as *Ka Tang jait*² (consecration of a new clan). *Tang Jait* consists of two Khasi words, the word '*Tang*' is a short form of '*pynkyn tang*' (consecrate) and '*Jait*' meaning clan or the family name. The ceremony is usually done by the maternal uncle who at the same time is the diviner of the clan. However, in the present day context, this practice is in a diminishing state with the influence of modernity. Further, it is seen that today many families and clans do not have their own diviners perhaps due to lack of knowledge on the performance. In this case, many of them have to find the diviner from other villages to carry out such religious rites.

The lost of such ceremonial experts gave rise to a fear for the lost of religious practices among the Khasis who tried to maintain the present status of their religion and revive the traditional past. An organisation of the diviners known as *Ka Seng Bah Ki Nongshat Nongkhein Hynñiew Trep-Hynñiew Skum* was thus formed under the *Seng Khasi Seng Kmie* movement in the year 1983. The purpose of forming this organisation is meant for conducting religious ceremonies especially *Ka Tang jait*. At present, this organisation consists of around fifty diviners.

¹ The word '*Dkhar*' is used by the Khasis for non-Khasis, especially those people inhabiting the plains area.

²The process of dedicating clan formation is considered as a sacred act as it involves seeking permission from God through performance of rites. Agreement or disagreement of God is read through the omens of the ritual performance.

Regarding the ceremony of *Ka Tang jait*, the performance is formally conducted by the diviner as said earlier at the premise of the office of the organisation in the presence of the family members of the new clan to be formed. The members include the paternal grand parents (*Meikha-Pakha*) close relatives and friends. A temporary *trep* (hut) is constructed purposely for the ceremony signifying the new family. The ceremony is accompanied by some meaningful objects like *u klong*³- *u skaw*⁴ (a bottle-gourd), *u prah* (bamboo winnow), *ka lakait* (banana leaf), *u khaw* (rice grain), *ka um* (water) and *u kpu dung* (rice powder). The performer starts saying a prayer and calls God to witness his performance. Then he mentions the name of the new clan and seeks God's agreement through prayer. After that, he throws the pounded rice mixed with water to the gourd. It is believed that if the rice is stuck on the gourd, it indicates that this would be read as a positive sign from God. This will be followed by the invocation of a thanksgiving prayer to God and seek his blessing for the new family and its members.

The blessings from God signify the acceptance of a new clan formation and this clan will have the same identity as that of the indigenous clans. It is important to note that the acceptance of the new clan identity is supported by certificates issued by this organisation. Besides, it should be worth mentioning that the Government of India empowers the District Council to make law(s) with regard to the custom and tradition of the tribal people as prescribed in the Act paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The Council empowered by the Constitution enacted a law of *Tang jait* to allow for initiation of a new clan in the Khasi Hills. *Tang jait* is a tradition in the Khasi society and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) empowered by the rule passed a bill known as the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act 1997 to codify this customary practice of the area (Gazette of Meghalaya 2005: 1).

Hence, it is seen that clan formation plays a major role in constructing the identity of the Khasis. Therefore, *Ka Tang jait* as part of the socio-religious practices of the Khasi people have it is one among other ways where the Khasis can establish their identities in the contemporary society.

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³A bottle-gourd used for holding water or rice beer at the time of religious ceremonies. It stands for the religion.

⁴A small bottle-gourd used for holding water or liquor while performing ceremonies. It stands for the relationship of people where the same gourd serves for many.