

Society, Oral Tradition and Folk Literature

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Abstract : *The Khasi language as we all know is an oral language. The Khasis had no written literature of their own in the past but they had many wise sayings, proverbs, incantations, fables and folk songs which were in oral form. These forms are transmitted from father to son so as to have the great vision and thought; it is also kept in the memory of the listener.*

Though the society has changed and become advanced and modern, yet folk literature can still be applied to such developed societies.

The paper will also focus on folk life and society. It will explore the possibility of the myth of U Thlen or the man-eating serpent and its relevance to the modern society. The images of fear and snakes as expressed by Golding remind us of what our forefathers have said about human society.

Keywords - *Folk Literature, Folk Life, Oral Tradition, Khasi Society, Oral History*

I. Introduction

By definition, pre-literate societies have no written literature; but this does not mean that they lack richness in tradition. They possess a varied oral tradition. In certain literate societies, oral tradition continues, particularly within the family. The Khasis had no literature of their own in the past but they had many wise sayings, proverbs, incantations, fables and folk songs which were in oral form.

Oral tradition is the messages or testimony which is verbally transmitted in speech or song and may take various forms; it is also the transmission of cultural items from one member to another, or others. Those items are heard, stored in memory, and, when appropriate, recalled at the moment of subsequent transmission. Each household passed every night to tell these stories in order to guide the youth in the rightful path. It is in this way that the society can sustain its rich cultural tradition across generations though they are without a writing system.

Story-telling is not only a means to entertain. But, as we generally know, since pre-historic times, instruction, principles, history and even knowledge have been passed on from one generation to the next through the oral tradition. According to the elders who narrate stories, an indigenous script was lost during an incendiary at Nongkseh, however, another story states that it was lost in a flood.

II. Oral Tradition

Jan Vansina defines oral tradition as:

“verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation” which “specifies that the message must be oral statements spoken, sung or called out on musical instruments only”

Joseph Ki-Zerbo in *Oral Tradition and its Methodology* says:

Oral Tradition may be defined as being a testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to another. Its special characteristics are that it is verbal and the manner in which it is transmitted.

According to Flora Devatine, oral tradition:

characterises a human society that does not write and that has no recourse for transmitting cultural traditions, or inscribing the reflections, thoughts and emotions of its members. Further, each member of such a society is responsible for perpetuating Orality and its memory.” It is also “the transmission of accounts about beliefs and tradition...Orality is also the foundation, the support, the construction and the boat that guides the navigation of one’s thoughts.

Orality is intertwined in the human society and it reflects the people’s way of living, food habits, mannerisms, ethics, attitudes to name a few. It is an expression of various multi-faceted feelings and emotions about any simple or complex issue and brings meaning to life. It is a ‘colourful expression’ with ‘multiple versions’ and is not static but involves change.

It is the generation of messages that an individual, the household and then the community as a whole receives which is all based on hearsay, memory, visions, dreams, and even hallucinations. The messages are narrated in different forms in order to bring the community together. All men are tied up in the feeling of

brotherhood and oneness without any distinction. The audience or group of individuals may be just keen listeners or those who sympathise with the tragic tales or even those who listen with a critical bent of mind. The story-telling/narration however, has some moral or ethical purpose to fulfill and also to set discipline and order in the society.

Experiences are interpreted by the individuals whereby the narrator reminisces his experience and comments upon it. Comments are also added up by the keen listeners. One thing that is important here to note is that the verbal art of expressing such experiences is good and sometimes it is accompanied by harps and drums. The body language of the story-teller is very important, and this includes his facial expression and gesturing. Sometimes the story-teller would even change the intonation of his voice so as to give more effect and also to portray different characters. So it is through this rich oral tradition that most of its history is sustained and recorded, otherwise it would be lost.

There are different forms of narration such as:

1.1 Wise sayings

The Khasi moral code of conduct, *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* was written by Radhon Sing Berry Kharwanlang which was published in 1902. Part One contains 41 stanzas and 255 couplets. Part Two has 68 stanzas and 374 couplets. According to Radhon Sing Berry, '*ka Akor*' (etiquette) gives dignity, self-esteem, tolerance, understanding both to the giver and receiver. His couplets mirror and reflect the 'essence' of the Khasi society and one can examine one's conduct. These moral codes of conduct help the Khasis to be helpful, considerate and sociable by nature.

The instruction begins with the word *wat* which means the 'don'ts' and 'never'. An example from Part One of *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*:

Number I

Ko pyrsa ko iing bad ko khun ko ksiew,
Ale! Shynrang, kynthei, ngan sneng eh rngiew;
Shong khop shiphang, peit beit baroh sha nga,
Baroh ia ki 'tien sneng wat ju bakla.
Baroh kumne phi long shipara ho,
Kynmaw ruh ban ia ieit lano-lano;
Ia kren, 'tien burom baroh shipara,
Wat ju mlien ban ong "mame" ne "mapha"

The above has been translated by Bijoya Sawain:

Nieces, nephews, children, grandchildren,
Come, I'll instruct you and your aura (rngiew) strengthen;
Sit quiet awhile, listen and contemplate,
With my instruction make no mistake;
Remember all of you are like brothers and sisters,
Never forget to love each other;
With respect always speak to one another,
Don't get used to saying 'ma me' 'ma pha'. (The polite and respectful word is 'ma phi')

Another example from Part II of *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*:

Number XVIII

Wat ju peit shin eh ia ka spah ki brieu,
Ba ha ka jingmut wan shoh kaba snieu;
Ia ka spah kiwei wat ju ia i'alap,
Ba i'u kylla tuh, kylla nongpyniap.
Wat shukor wat thok ba long-pap long-sang,
Ha u Blei ha u brieu, kynthei shynrang,
Wat ju marmlen aisut tangka basing,
Ba ka sut ia ka kamai ka bam krang,
Ka tyngka sut bad tyngka iakhalai,
Wat ju khleh ha ka khih ka kamai;
Ka tyngka sut ka tyngka iakhalai,
Ha ka kamai long byrsieh long bynrai.

Again the above ‘jingsneng’ has been translated by Bijoya Sawain:

Don't scrutinise other people's wealth,
Wrong ideas will make way into your head;
Don't discuss and talk about it too,
You may encourage someone to murder and loot;
Don't lie and betray for it is wrong,
In front of Man and in front of God;
Don't take interest when money you lend,
Interest depletes the borrower's funds;
Whatever you earn from interest and gambling,
Should never be mixed with your actual earnings,
For such money is always considered ill-gotten,
It sullies your wealth and reputation.

The teachings and admonition of the elders are still relevant till date and they are valuable to the Khasi society as they not only instruct but contain a lot of wisdom too.

1.2 Proverbs

There are also idiomatic phrases which are meant to instruct parents, children and the society as a whole. For example, parents are reminded of what they should do and what they should be:

“*Wat long miaw bam khun, kha hi bam hi ia ki khun.*” When translated it means: “Do not be like a cat who gives birth and devours its own offspring.” In other words, it instructs parents to live by a good example if they think for the welfare of their children and thus guide them to become good human beings.

Another idiom that is meant for children, instructs them thus:

“*Wat long khun kbeit shapuloit, lada ym ioh shuh klun tylli ia la ka kmie shapuloit.*” When translated it means: “Do not be like a kite when it does not get whatever it wants, it devours its own mother lark.” Here, the children are warned and instructed not to be ungrateful and demand for things beyond the parent's capability. Such ungrateful children may threaten or manhandle their own parents.

There are general norms too which are meant for the conduct of the society:

“*Wat ksan rympei rem dorbar.*” When translated it means: “Do not be a winner at home but a loser in public.” This mainly refers to a boastful person who is to have supposedly done a lot of feats, but in public, he is afraid. Such a person is arrogant and hypocritical.

Other proverbs that have emerged from stories are:

- ‘*Panshandi dem lor khah*’ refers to a woman who waits and hopes for the return of her husband, but the husband is least bothered or interested in her to return home.
- ‘*Bam ja khluit*’ refers to hasty decisions which lead to self- destruction.
- ‘*Bam kwai ha iing U Blei*’ refers to the deceased who has been welcomed by God in his Kingdom.
- ‘*Akher ka Sngi*’ refers to the Day of Judgement and reminds people to lead a good life in order to attain heaven.
- ‘*U Tiewlalyngngi-Pep-Shad*’ refers to people who constantly procrastinate and in the end does not get any work done or even misses an occasion.

1.3 Incantations

Incantation is a ‘formulaic use of words to produce a magical effect and to create an intensifying emotional temperature. The words may be chanted or spoken. It is very common in primitive literatures and is much used by sorcerers and witches, and also for ritual purposes as in a charm.’

The following chants are taken from Sr. Philomena Kharakor's *Ka Kolshor Khasi kumba paw ha ka Litereshor Khasi* to exemplify the words spoken by the chanters:

Ka nia babiang ngim dei ban klet
İa shanam war war ka pynshad stet.
And
Kamon kadiang U khmih u rwat,
Haba u ieng ka kheiñka shat.

1.4 Fables

Khasi fable is borrowed from other cultures. In a fable, man, animals and even plants are used as characters. The inanimate objects of nature are given attributes such as thoughts and feelings which enable them to act. Aesop felt that for fables, all persons must be impersonal. Therefore he used animal characters to impart moral values to the society. For example:

- “The Mischievous Dog”: Notoriety is often mistaken for fame.
- “The Crow and the Pitcher”: Necessity is the mother of invention.
- “The Milkmaid and her Pail”: Do not count your chickens before they hatch.

1.5 Folksongs

Dr. M. Sharma says:

A folksong is a lyrical, short, simple, less artistic but rhythmic song of a folk-community...It is transmitted, circulated and perpetuated spontaneously through oral tradition from person to person or from generation to generation.

Folksongs exist in ‘the repository of a folk-group.’ The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines it as: “primitive spontaneous music.”

Though it is an old tradition, yet it still continues to thrive in the society. It regenerates itself constantly and it change according to situations and time. The old song however is solely decreasing as many talented singers and poets have chosen other advanced forms of poetry. Folksong is a rich and wealthy form of cultural heritage which springs from the heart. Everyone is able to learn and sing the song as it involves the society. It has a social, moral, political role to play. It imparts knowledge on various fields like to improve the agricultural methods. It carries rules, belief, knowledge and a philosophy for the younger generations to learn.

The following folk song was collected from Bhoi Lasa, North Khasi Hills by Dr. Desmond L. Kharmawphlang :

Together, O together, *jrup*,ⁱ
Pounding rice together, *brup*,ⁱⁱ
Sticky rice, sticky grain,
Together in the aunt’s *tyngkong*.ⁱⁱⁱ

The moon is in full glow,
The stars also glitter,
The *duitara*^{iv} pulsates at the hearth,
Ari hoi hali...(Hoit).

Thuk thuk the strings sound
The poet keeps on singing
The *marynthing* and the *maryngod*^v
the spinning loom chimes in tune
the old deaf woman chews betel
till her heart becomes rusty.

The plough scars the earth
come and lend your strength
let’s plough the paddy field
Cut straight the mud columns
Hur hur to the right, *ti ti* to the left
Slowly draw to the middle.

1.6 Folktales

The Khasis possess a lot of folktales which help in imparting moral values regarding many walks of life. For example:

1.6.1 Conjugal life

In “*U Klew bad ka Sngi*” or “The Peacock and the Sun”, it teaches a moral lesson that “all that glitters is not gold.

1.6.2 Incest

In “*U Bnai bad ka Sngi*” or “The Sun and the Moon”, Incestuous relationship is a sin and is punishable; it is also a cause for shame.

1.6.3 Evil of telling lies

In “*Balei ka Tyngab ka iöng?*” or “Why is the crow black?”, one realizes that telling lies is abominable in God’s sight. One is instructed to be honest, sincere and truthful.

1.6.4 Obedience to one’s Parents

In the story, “*Ka Panshandi bad U Mangkara*” or when translated, it means: “The Tortoise and the Morning Star”, the moral being that one should never do anything without the knowledge of the parents.

1.6.5 The beauty of friendship

In “*U Kwai bad U Tympew*” or “Story of the Betel nut and Betel leaf”, one is reminded that true friendship does not distinguish between classes of society, in other words everyone is equal.

1.7 Myths

The Greek word *mūthos* means ‘anything uttered by word of mouth.’ Later the Greek word *mūthos* is used to mean fiction. In general a myth is a ‘story’ which is not true. As a rule, it involves super natural beings, or supra- human beings. It is always concerned with creation and how man and the whole world came to existence. In the Khasi society, myth and religion are intertwined. In H.O. Mawrie’s “Ka Theology jong ka Niam Khasi,” highlights the various myths and beliefs of the Khasis and narrates myths like ‘*U Lumsohpet Bneng*’, ‘*U Diengïei*’, ‘*Ka Krem Lamet Latang*’, ‘*U Syiar*’ and so on.

1.8 Epic

An epic is a long narrative poem, on a grand scale which involves ‘heroes.’ It speaks of the deeds of warriors and heroes. By nature, it is ‘polygonal’ as the ‘heroic story’ incorporates myth, legend, folktale and history. Basically there are two kinds of epic: one is primitive and oral and the other is in literary form. In “Ka Burom ba la Jah,” H. Warmphaign Sten, based the epic on folktales of the ‘*Hynniew Trep*.’ The devils like U Ren, U Rih, ka Njangriang, Ka Thabalang and others are the same supernatural elements that disrupt the normal Khasi life from the time of the demarcation of heaven and earth in U Sohpetbneng and the world lives in ‘*ka Pap ka Sang*’ or incest. The author writes in a profound and grave mood about many vices that inflict the heart of the Khasis and that is greed, jealousy, robbery, pride, hate, lust, infidelity and so on. He wants to impart values to a society that is slowly forgetting their roots.

1.9 Folk drama

In *Khasi Drama: Its Origin and Development (From the Beginning to 1950)*, Bevan Lionel Swer, tells us that ‘play-acting’ is ingrained in the blood of the Khasis. It is around the hearth that ‘drama’ initially begins and one is also imparted informal education, moral principles and so on. William J. Long states:

To act a part seems natural to humanity as to tell a story; and originally the drama is but an old story retold to the eye; a story put into action by living performers, who for the moment make believe or imagine themselves to be the old heroes.

In the Khasi religious rites and ceremonies, theatre and drama is involved. For example in the religious ceremony of “Thep-Mawbah”, khasi drama is manifested. P.R.T. Gurdon in “The Khasis” states that this ceremony pertains to the ‘collection of the uncalcined bones and ashes of the deceased member of the clan and their bestowal in the *mawbah*, or great cinerarium of the clan...’

Another element of Khasi drama is the dialogue form of *U Ksiang*, who is the intercessor or spokesman which is seen in an engagement ceremony of the Khasis. This is a verbal contract between the two parties of the intending bride and groom or between two clans in case there is a violation. It is still a practice among the Khasi-Christian Marriages.

1.10 Dance

Soso Tham says:

Ka khor ka khriam ka ksiar barieh

Ki sei ha rong ban shad mastieh.

All the fine clothes and jewellery that has been laid hidden for a year, is taken out to be worn and then dance the *mastieh*.

Folk dance brings the people of a community together. To mention a few:

1.10.1 Shad Suk Mynsiem

One of the most important festivals of the Khasis is *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem* or Dance of the joyful heart. It is an annual thanksgiving dance. It is held in Shillong in the month of April. Men and women are attired in traditional fineries and they dance gracefully to the accompaniment of drums and the flute. The festival lasts for three days.

1.10.2 Nongkrem Dance

Nongkrem Dance is a religious festival in thanksgiving to God Almighty for good harvest, peace and prosperity of the community. It is held annually during October/ November, at Smit, the capital of the *Khyrim Syiemship* near Shillong.

The Nongkrem Dance is celebrated in the month of May, and often in November due to the shifting of lunar position which determines the time for the next Nongkrem Carnival

The dance is performed in the open by young virgins and men, both bachelors and married. The women dressed in expensive silk costumes with heavy gold, silver and coral ornaments dance in the inner circle of the arena. While the men form an outer circle and dance to the accompaniment of music of flutes and drums. An important characteristic of the festival is the 'Pomblang' or goat sacrifice offered by the subjects to the Syiem of Khyrim, the administrative head of the Hima (Khasi State). *Ka Syiem Sad*, the eldest sister of the king is the chief priest and caretaker of all the ceremonies. The festival is conducted along with the *Myntries* (Ministers), priests and high priest where offerings are made to ancestors of the ruling clan and the deity of Shillong.

Thus the various forms of oral tradition are transmitted from father to son so as to have the great vision and thought and also to finally keep them in the memory of the listener. So each household passed every night in imparting ethical values to mould the young minds and also instill in them the sense of duty, responsibility, the love for adventure and it also aims for practicing these noble qualities through good deeds. Such story telling is ingrained with the human virtues so as to remove the vices from the society.

III. Folk Literature

Every known society in the world has literature in written or oral form. Such literature has withstood the ravages of time. When one studies folklore, one understands its value and also gets a clear insight into the tradition, customs and culture of that particular society. We can also say the folk literature is dynamic and adjusts itself to new situations and time. Though the society has changed and become advanced and modern, yet folk literature can still be applied to such developed societies.

The myth of *U Thlen* is relevant to the modern society. *U Thlen* is a kind of devil or 'Ksuid kynsha'. It devours only healthy Khasi people and not anyone who is ailing or physically challenged. It is believed that the 'nongshohnohs' or assassins pierce the nostrils of the victim and cut their fingers and toes and then drain the blood of the latter in a golden plate or *ka pliang ksiar*. Then the keepers of *U Thlen* beat the '*singthlen* kyndong shi kyndong', so as to call forth the beast from hiding. They also sing and pray at the same time ('ka dwai ka kypad , ka rwai ka kynud'). *U Thlen* then reveals itself and passes through '*ka salu saw*', a coarse red cloth which is a path for him to walk through to the golden plate. This ritual of singing, praying and beating the drum lasts till *U Thlen* has sucked up all the blood of the victim from the '*pliang ksiar*' or the golden plate.

Another belief is that the shadow of those who are murdered comes and reveals itself on the golden plate; they laugh and dance to the tune of the drum beat and as *U Thlen* licks their blood it seems to tickle them out of their wits. He swallows the shadow beginning from the toes to the forehead, slowly and gradually, but the head still seems to laugh out of pleasure till *U Thlen* devours it and sucks its life away.

It is again believed among the Khasis that *U Thlen* has various forms and that is the form of a snake (bseiñ), a fish (dohthli), and a cat (miaw). We cannot reason whether it exists or not. Though man is rational and scientific, yet he still has such beliefs that may be considered as an illusion or a superstition by another society. Those who are the keepers of *U Thlen* become prosperous by feeding the Man-eating serpent with human blood. If it is a demonic spirit without any bodily form, then it would be very difficult to fight against it. But, spiritual leaders have been able to do so. *U Thlen*, therefore represents evil.

The representation of the evil form as a serpent is also found in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The pig's head on a stake represents evil or the beast. Even the creepers are defined as something evil and the creepers are likened to a snake. This snake imagery becomes important in the novel. Piggy a rational character states expansively:

Life is 'scientific, That's what it is. In a year or two when the war's over they'll be traveling to Mars and back. I know there isn't no beast-not with claws and all that , I mean, -but I know there isn't no fear, either... Unless we get frightened of people.

Simon a spiritual character, on the other hand ‘became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind’s essential illness. Inspiration came to him.’ He says:

‘ What I mean is...maybe it’s only *us*.’

In “Lord of the Flies” the depth of man’s heart is in question. Golding feels that it is only “us” that we need to be afraid of, since man is evil too. Man can be considered to have both the good and the evil side: Dr Jekyll representing the good and Mr. Hyde representing the evil form.

When we make a close study of the beliefs and superstitions of the Khasis, one find that the beast is something which is universal. The beast here is in the form of a serpent which also reminds us of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The fall of man starts with the temptation of the snake. Therefore we find that the Khasis belief of U Thlen stands strong till date. Some may carelessly say that it is only superstition because of the western education that they received. However, there are traces that can be found which points to the myth as a reality.

Ka Khwan is so called in society because of her greed. She lusts for more wealth to the point of sacrificing her own beloved daughter. She ill-treats her orphaned niece and turned her into a slave. But, as fate has it, the girl falls under the arms of a very rich half-man and half-snake, *U Munj*. It was decreed by God that *U Munj* would turn into a human if he marries.

Ka Khwan being a covetous woman thinks that her daughter should also get married to someone who is as rich as *U Munj*. She asks *U Munj* if he has a brother, to which he states that he has a brother who is a snake, *U Sah*. But he warned her that *U Sah* would remain a snake. But, *Ka Khwan* went in search of *U Sah* and finally nets him in her fishing net. Bringing *U Sah* home, she lays him beside her daughter thinking that the marriage would make her rich.

Unfortunately, in the morning she spots a large hole in the bamboo wall of the hut. Calling her husband for aid, they went in search of *U Munj* to help them find their daughter. *U Munj* goes and rescues their daughter. He slits open *U Sah*’s belly with a golden knife and pulled the maiden out. Then he sprinkles water and fans her with his golden fan to revive her. Then he stitches *U Sah*’s belly. *Ka Khwan* remains ungrateful and blames *U Munj* for this mishap when the latter reprimanded the former for being greedy. Being furious she blames *U Munj* for asking her to commit her daughter to *U Sah*. *U Munj* warned her not to utter such untruths. However, *Ka Khwan* makes a statement that she would regret forever and that is if she is a liar, then *U Sah* would swallow her daughter again. She imagined that *U Sah* was probably dead. However, *U Sah* nursed his wounds day by day.

One day while *Ka Khwan*’s daughter was maintaining a keep over the paddy fields and sitting in a tree near her home, *U Sah* came out of the hole and carried the girl away. *Ka Khwan* cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her daughter since all the men were out of the village at that time.

Ka Khwan makes her way to *U Munj*’s house and pleaded with him for his help. But, *U Sah* rightly deserved her daughter since he went by her own oath. This shocks *Ka Khwan* and she fell sick and died a very lonely death.

Thus from the story of *U Thlen* and the folktale, *Ka Khwan*, one feels that society is being instructed to live a contented life. The more one greed for things, whether it is wealth, power or knowledge, one has to pay a price.

Thus orality can be considered to straddle over two roots and that is between tradition and modernity. The oral tradition gather, adopt, ingest, tolerate or even adapts itself to change. It may have been muted by diverse changes from the time when there was an encounter with different western societies; but such encounters initiated the transition into writing. So orality is still growing and progressing in different directions, and in turn will open up new avenues of knowledge to quench one’s thirst for knowledge. So by comparing the two folk stories to that of the modern writer, one can conclude that man will always remain selfish and greedy; unless he controls these vices, it will continue to live within “us”.

ⁱ Onomatopoeic for unison

ⁱⁱ same as above

ⁱⁱⁱ Verandah-like structure

^{iv} Musial instrument of the stringed variety

^v Same as above

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