



KHASI MYTHS AND MATRILINY

*Peacefully Kharkongor**

ABSTRACT

The present study entitled KHASI MYTHS AND MATRILINY is a reflection of the Khasi matrilineal system as seen in their myths. The Khasi are rich in mythology and possess different types of myths related to their origin, creation of the world, natural phenomenon, origin of the Syiems or kings etc. But a close look at all these myths shows that so much importance has been given to women. All important elements of the Earth like water, wind, fire are considered as *Ka* or she that is as females and the moon which shines with lesser glory than the sun is considered as *U* or he that is in the male gender which clearly stresses matriliney. In other words, Khasi myths reveal that the Khasi society very much centres on women and their custom and tradition is completely matrilineal. Giving importance to women does not mean that men are inferior to women even if lineage and descent is traced from the female line, residence is basically matrilocal as reflected in the myths, a woman runs all the affairs of the family but there is a good understanding between men and women and she is respected by the male members of the society. Therefore myths also act as an element of social control.

Introduction

The tales in this article throw light about the imagination of the Khasi people. The tales are a genuine product of the Khasi creativity and imagination. In a region

* Dept. of Anthropology, St Clare College, Ziro, AP.

where there is no fixed deposit of doctrine, no sacred books to carry tradition from one generation to another, the repository of knowledge are human beings exposed to their inspiration of dreams and fantasies.

Myth is a traditional story, fiction, legend or tale of historical events that serves to unfold part of the worldview of a people or explain a practice, or natural phenomenon. Myths relate the events, conditions and deeds of gods or super human beings that are outside ordinary human life and yet basic to it. These events are set together in a time altogether different from historical time, often at the beginning of creation or at an early stage of prehistory. A culture's myths are closely related to its religious beliefs and rituals.

Myth is therefore a narrative and is generally reserved for tales that are sacred or religious in nature. Myth is concerned with the origin or creation of some phenomenon, which may be natural, supernatural or sociocultural. We should also distinguish the anthropological sense of myth from the popular use of the term to refer to a false belief. When social scientists refer to myth it has to do with a belief or a belief system. To them myth always carries an explicit negative connotation as in Ashley Montagu's book in which race or racism is referred to as man's most dangerous myth.¹

There are various types of myths. Some myths narrate about the beginning of a people or community; some explain why things are what they are, others are about nature etc. Still there are other myths relating to moral principles, rituals and beliefs of the people. It can be said that myths are tales or stories handed down from generation to generation. They are tales with supernatural character in them usually of how the world and mankind began or tale about ordinary person or object.

The Khasis are rich in mythology and possess different kinds of myths, which influenced their belief, cultural and social life, and thus they make up their own rituals and ceremonies.

The Khasi is a strong matrilineal group settling in the Khasi hills of Meghalaya. The matrilineal custom and tradition of the Khasi is strongly reflected in their myths as some of the Khasi myths will be looked at. The myth about the origin of the Khasis as given in *the legend on mount Sohpet Bneng* shows that the Khasis traced their descent to a root ancestress; the tale concerning *the creation of the world* shows that all the important elements of the earth like the sun, water and fire are referred to as *ka* which refers to female gender; the story regarding *what makes the eclipse* tells about the protection that the sun which is the personification of a woman gives to those who are helpless; the legend with reference to *U Woh Ryndi and Ka Lih Dohkha* tells about the origin of the syiems or kings of Jaintia hills and also about

the matrilineal residence of the Khasis; The story as regards *the creation of beauties* shows that the sun which is personified as a woman gives light, life and joy to the world. In fact the very word Khasi has two interpretations *Kha* means born and *si* refers to a primeval mother. Hence, the literal translation would be born of the mother. There is a Khasi saying *long jait ha ka kynthei* which means 'from the woman sprang the clan'. The name Khasi refers to the various sub-tribes inhabiting the Khasi Hills.

It is often reckoned that the Khasis belong to the matrilineal group of Mon-Khmer speaking people. This group that is the Khasi Jaintia includes two groups of people namely the Khasis and the Jaintias. The Jaintias are also known by the name of Pnars or Syntengs. The Khasis are further subdivided into four groups. They are the Bhoi in the north, the Lyngam in the west, the War in the south and the Khyntiam in the central plateau of the Khasi Hills.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explain matter according to the knowledge of the ancient Khasis and to find out how myths help in interpretation of their culture and history.
2. The study also aims at seeing the significance that myths or folklore constitute as an element of social control.

Mythical Stories of the Khasis

Like other communities of the world, the Khasi are also known to have their own myths. Their myths are about creation, natural phenomena like eclipses; nature like rivers and mountains. Some myths are associated with heroes and heroines while others with gods and goddesses. According to their myths, they make up their own rituals and dances thus establish their own way of life. Myths have their own nature, but in the present study, we will see how matriliney is clearly reflected in some of the Khasi myths.

1. The Legend on Mount Sohpet Bneng

The Khasi believe that from the time of the creation of the world, there was a tall tree reaching the sky on the top of mount *Sohpet Bneng* or heaven's navel. This tree was used as a ladder to ascend and descend between heaven and earth. There were sixteen families who stayed in heaven but always came down to cultivate in the neighbourhood of mount *Sohpet Bneng* for profit. It so happened that one day only seven families came down and nine were unwilling to come down to earth.

There was one of the heavenly beings who was very ambitious and was unwilling to be the subject of his creator. He secretly left his brethren, took his axe and cut down the tree of communication so that the seven families could not go up to their heavenly abode again.²

Thus, the Khasi believe that mankind came to settle on the earth through the seven families called *Ki Hynniew Trep*, *Hynniew Skum* or seven huts or families and from these, nations have sprung. This is the myth of the Khasis about the divine origin of mankind on this planet, which clearly speaks about the origin of the Khasis.

The Khasi believe that the *Hynniew Trep*, *Hynniew Skum* were their progenitors and look upon the *Trep* as a *Kur* or phratry. A *Kur* traced its descent to *Ka lawbei Tynrai* or root ancestress. There was intermarriage between the *Kurs*, as a result of which those *Kurs* or phratries in course of time were multiplied. With the multiplication of *Kur* and growth of population, the members of some *Kurs* migrated in search of new lands for agriculture, better means of livelihood and other facilities. This led to formation of *Ka Jaid* or clan. The *Jaid*s claimed to have descended from a common but younger ancestress in the *Kur* called *Ka lawbei Tymmen* or old ancestress. Here it should be noted that a number of *Jaid*s or clans make up a *Kur* or phratry. In this way, a *Kur* is thus divided into a number of *Jaid*s. A *Jaid* is again subdivided into *Ka Kpoh* or womb, which claims descent from *Ka lawbei Khyrrow* or young ancestress. Each *Kpoh* is subdivided into *ling*, which means houses or families. Thus, it is clearly seen that the Khasi is a matrilineage group where the links are traced through the females only by the name of a common female ancestress. This people belong to a hierarchy of lineages. That is they first trace their descent back to an ancestress of a minor lineage, then to the ancestress of a larger and more inclusive major lineage, and so on.³

2. The Creation of the World

In the beginning, God created *Ka Ramew* or mother earth and her husband *U Basa*. They bore five children namely *Ka Sngi* or the sun; *U Bnai* or the moon; *Ka Um* or water; *Ka Lyer* or the wind; and *Ka Ding* or fire. All were females except the moon. On the prayer of mother earth, God sent seven families to settle on earth that cultivated, lived happily and multiplied. They could come and go as they pleased until the ladder was severed. The five children lived happily. One day *U Bnai* or the moon fell deeply in love with his elder sister, *Ka Sngi* or the sun and started expressing his feelings towards her. At this juncture, the sun, being the elder sister, who for many years had taken so much care and nursed the moon, took ashes from the hearth in her hands and angrily rebuking him for his intention threw ashes on his face. The moon felt very much ashamed from that day left the house and walks only at night when the sun is not visible because of his deep remorse.⁴

From this story it is evident that there is a belief among the Khasis that the moon walks only at night when the sun is not visible. This is because the moon is ashamed of the sun since the moon's face is covered with ashes when he tried to lure the sun. This is also an interpretation of the folk wisdom of the ancient Khasi that the moon is covered with ashes.

It is also evident from the story that the sun, being the source of light and life and endowed with greater power than the moon is addressed as *Ka* or she that is in the feminine gender. The moon, however, having lesser power has been referred to as *U* or he which refers to masculine gender. Apart from the sun, other important elements of the earth like water, wind, fire are all addressed as *ka* which means that they are all considered to be females. This clearly shows that the Khasi community is a very strong matrilineal group in which all the important elements of the earth are taken to be females, thus, stressing on matrilineal tradition.

3. What makes the Eclipse

Once, there was a very beautiful female child whom the parents called *Ka Nam*. She lived with her parents in the border of a great forest. Her mother was afraid lest somebody might cast an evil eye upon her, so she tried to bring her up in as much seclusion as their poor circumstance would permit them. But her husband said that she must treat her daughter like other normal children and bring her up naturally like other children. One day, while *Ka Nam* was fetching water, a tiger carried her to his lair to eat her up. But when he saw that she was too small, he decided to keep her until she grew older. Every day the tiger brought home some delicacies so that the girl would be nourished and eventually she began to feel quite at home in the beast's den. When the girl grew up, the tiger found that it was the appropriate time for the girl to be eaten. So one day, he muttered to himself that he would invite all his friends the next day so that the damsel would be eaten. It so happened that a little mouse overheard the tiger's mutterings and wanted to help the girl. On knowing the plans of the tiger, the girl requested to help her in her distress to which the mouse consented. The mouse advised *Ka Nam* to go to the den of *U Hynroh* who was a great magician. He was a terrible monster, but the peril that the girl faced gave her courage to face him. When he saw her, he beheld how fair she was and when he learned that she was the victim of the tiger, his own rival, he consented that he would help her. Therefore, he clothed her in a toadskin. When the mouse saw her, she felt terribly pity for the girl for she knew that *Ka Nam* would be a slave of the toad. So she led *Ka Nam* to a magic tree so that she might be transported to the sky. *Ka Nam* asked the tree to grow tall and was transported to the Blue Realm of the sky; the tree then dwindled into the former size. *Ka Nam* wandered with the toadskin but none gave her shelter. At last, *Ka Nam* appeared before the palace of *Ka Sngi*, the sun which took pity on the girl, and allowed her to live near her

palace. One day, the girl put aside her toadskin and rested herself but was accidentally seen by the son of *Ka Sngi*. He was overwhelmed and enchanted by her beauty and was deeply in love with her. When the sun saw *Ka Nam* putting aside her toadskin, she took the toadskin and burnt it and thus the girl got back to her natural form again. *Ka Nam* was released forever from the spell of the giant toad. When *U Hynroh* came to know that his magic skin was destroyed by *Ka Sngi*, he became very angry and climbed up into the Blue Realm to devour *Ka Sngi*. There was a fierce battle, which the whole universe had witnessed. Seeing this, mankind began to beat drums and uttered cries until the whole earth was full of sound and clamour. *U Hynroh*, who was a real coward at heart, thought it was an advancing army against him, released his hold upon *Ka Sngi* and finally retreated from the Blue Realm. It was mankind who delivered *Ka Sngi* from *U Hynroh*. *U Hynroh*, however, makes periodical attacks upon *Ka Sngi*. These attacks are called eclipse, which the ancient Khasis knew it to be the giant toad trying to devour *Ka Sngi*. Until today, it is customary to beat drums whenever there is an eclipse.⁵

This story is related to a natural phenomenon called eclipse, which the ancient Khasis believed to be the struggle of *Ka Sngi* against the giant toad, *U Hynroh*. In the Khasi language, the word *Ka* always refers for female. In the above-mentioned story, the sun is referred to as female. The sun could destroy the magic skin of *U Hynroh*, which indicates that matriliney is practiced and is very strong among the Khasis, whereby a woman decides over important matters. She also takes any decision to guard and save those who need her protection and who are helpless.

4. *U Woh Ryndi* and *Ka Lih Dohkha*

Once there was a man from the *War Umwi* named *U Woh Ryndi*. Once he went for fishing in the *Umwai* river and caught two fishes. When he returned home, he ate one but kept the other at a swinging shelf above the hearth. Later on, he had totally forgotten to eat that remaining fish. When he went out for a walk the next day on returning home, he was surprised to see that the house had been looked after, and the food had already been cooked. The same thing happened on the following day also and he was very curious to know the secret of all that. There was a day when he returned home quite early when it was still cooking time and found a woman at his place. He asked her who she was to which she answered that she was the fish that he had forgotten to eat. She told that she had many relatives in the river from where she was caught. *U Woh Ryndi* went along with her to the stream, *Ka Lih Dohkha* jumped to the river and got many relatives along with her and all of them went together to the house of *U Woh Ryndi*. His mother was not pleased and placed a broom at the threshold showing her displeasure so that all went back to the river. In a dream, *U Woh Ryndi* saw that *Ka Lih Dohkha* had gone to a village by the *Umwai Khyrwi* river. He went in search for her and when he found her, they

married each other. Both of them went to live by the banks of the *Umwai Khyrwi* stream and lived happily ever after.⁶

The origin of the kings or *Syiems* of *Sutnga* is associated with this story of *U Woh Ryndi* and *Ka Lih Dohkha*. The peculiar species of bamboo with their joints and leaves upside down on the banks of the *Umwai Khyrwi* stream descended from the fishing rod of *U Woh Ryndi* that he left behind when he caught *Ka Lih Dohkha*. Matriliney is stressed in this story. *Ka Lih Dohkha* with all her relatives went back to the river when the mother of *U Woh Ryndi* showed her displeasure at their coming. Finally, *U Woh Ryndi* on marrying her went to live with her leaving his own house and mother. This shows that among the *Khasis*, after marriage, the husband goes to live in the house of the bride. This shows about the matrilineal structure and matrilocal residence among the *Khasis* where by after marriage a man leaves his parents' house to reside in the abode of the wife.

5. The Creation of Beauties

It was believed that the peacock was an ordinary grey-feathered bird, but he was given to pride and vanity just because his tuft was more erect than those of other birds were and that his tail was longer than those of his companions. Seeing his pride, all the birds told him that they had decided to send him as an ambassador to the palace of a beautiful maiden *Ka Sngi* or the sun, to which he consented. The peacock was very much elated and said that he would not just go as an ambassador but would win her too. At his absence, the birds enjoyed much secret fun for they had not seen him flying high and they doubted him to be able to do so. At last, the peacock flew to the blue realm to go to the palace of the sun, knowing his intention the sun was very happy for she had longed for a companion for quite sometime. The peacock had no worries when he stayed with the sun and she rendered whatever service she could because of her love for him. The peacock absorbed her time so much, that she could no longer warm the earth. All the animals sought counsel of mankind and learned that it was because of the peacock that the sun could no longer give warmth to the earth. They went to a woman named *Ka Sabuit*, who was a cunning woman so that they could counsel together in order to lure the peacock back to the earth from the blue realms. There was a terrible famine and *Ka Sabuit*, a cunning woman thought of a plan for she had suffered terribly because of the famine. She along with the animals agreed to plant some mustard seeds and shape the crops like a beautiful maiden. When the plants flowered, they look like a beautiful maiden dressed in gold to which the peacock was charmed at. The peacock decided to leave the sun at once, however, she tried to stop him but he did not listen to her at all. When the peacock left the sun, she was broken hearted and she wept mournfully, her tears fell on his feathers transforming them into seven colours of rainbow. From that time, the sun begins to shine, gives light, life and warmth to

the earth. The peacock regretted after finding that it was only a trap for him for he had thought that it was a beautiful maiden that he could marry but alas! It was only the flowery mustards. He tried to go up to the sun but could not go up to her again.⁷

From the story, it is evident that the sun is the source of creations on the earth. It gives light, warmth and life and without it, the earth would be a desolate place to live. It makes even the peacock turns into a beautiful bird; it also makes the earth a live planet by giving life, warmth and beauty to those living on it. The story as a whole speaks about the creation of life and beauty. The sun here is personified as a woman as it is called *Ka Sngi* in the Khasi language, which in the Khasi tradition shows that a woman is the source of light, life and joy; everything would be lifeless without her care and warmth. Hence, all look up to her for the tender touch of her loving hands and rest assured in her love.

6. Origin of the Syiems

Once there was a beautiful woman who lived in a cave. Many tried to catch her but could not owing to the narrowness of the cave. There was once a young man who enticed her by showing her a flower called *u tiw jalengteng*. The damsel came out to catch the flower but the man kept holding back his flower until at last she came out into the open space until the man managed to catch her. He brought her into his house and married her. Because he enticed her with a flower, the woman came to be known as *Ka Pah Syntiew* or enticed with a flower. After giving birth to sons and daughters, she went to live back in the same cave. No matter how much her husband and children prayed her to stay back, it was of no avail. Her children grew in stature and wisdom. They were able to show their good character that all people loved them deeply. Knowing about the wonderful origin of their mother, the people appointed them as *Syiems* or kings and they were considered children of the gods. The people believe *Ka Pah Syntiew* to be the daughter of the god of Shillong; her children came to be known as *Ki Syiem Blei*.⁸

This story narrates about the origin of the *Syiems of Khyrim* who were considered as the children of *Ka Pah Syntiew*, the daughter of the god of Shillong and she is considered to be the first forerunner of the *Syiems of Khyrim*. Here it is also seen how important a woman is, that from her sprang the clan and lineage is traced from her line, which clearly shows that matriliney is indeed very strong among the Khasis. During the *Nongkrem* festival, *Ka Pah Syntiew* is offered libations besides the god of Shillong by the state-priest with the assistance of the chief-priestess.⁹

Other Stories regarding Women and Matriliney as Reflected in Khasi Myths

In relating to women, however, very different from the Khasi myths there are also some old and widespread traditions from the myths of middle India that men lose their customary position of dominance and live as slaves or victim of magic. There are also stories by Strabo about the Amazons' mutilation of the left breast so that they could hold the spear better. Diodorus says that in Libya people live under the rule of women; there were men in the country but of an inferior race. About the middle ages, the Arab geographers described a great town in an island of the western ocean entirely free from the rule of men where the women are visited by slaves at night and male children were killed. Adam of Bremen describes an exclusively women's community on the shores of the Baltic. In recent times the missionaries Chalmers found tales of a land of women current in New Guinea, and there is a Papaun tale of two Gingala men in the land of women where they cut a male child out of the mother's body and buried him. Similar legends are said to be current among the Polynesians Moaris and the Mantawei Islanders.¹⁰

In the Khasi myths, on the other hand, though much importance has been given to women, and women are revered and look upon as the progenitors, yet nowhere it is found that they are given to pride and prejudice and there is no female bigotry. Khasi women respect men and live in perfect peace and harmony with them. Men and women alike play their different roles and it is like a cohesive force that bind up the fragments or parts in society thus, making the Khasi community a very strong matrilineal group. Hence, the Khasi myths have shown a very loving and caring nature of the woman who works heart and soul for the joy and contentment of everyone that needs her care.

Hence, to summarise from what is reflected in the Khasi myths it can be said that the Khasi is a strong matrilineal group. Among the Khasi, it is understood that women hold a very important position in social life. That is the reason why in all the stories the sun is referred to as *Ka* which in the Khasi language is addressed to the female. This shows that it is the woman who runs all the affairs of the house. It is her duty for rearing the kids and doing all the household chores. Every Khasi woman is a hard working person and has a great responsibility towards her family. She has to see that everything is going smoothly under her guidance and supervision. In olden days among the Khasi, a husband was taken merely as a begetter in the house of his wife and often termed as *u khun ki briew* or the son of other people by the relatives of his wife. Most of the roles are played by women but nowadays it is seen that in most families important decision has to be taken by the father and he

is regarded as the head of the family. Women are also highly respected and esteemed by the male members of the family as well as community.

Descent and lineage is traced from the female line, when talking about descent, the Khasi always talk about their primeval mother as seen in the myth regarding the origin of the *Syiems* or kings. The children generally adopt their mother's title or mother's clan. In fact, the very word Khasi speaks about matriliney. In the Khasi language, the word *kha* means born and *si* refers to a primeval mother. There is also an ancient Khasi saying *long jait ha ka kynthei* which is interpreted 'from the woman sprang the clan'. This shows about the matrilineal descent, which is adopted by the Khasis.

After marriage, the groom leaves his mother's house and goes to live in the house of his bride if he gets the youngest daughter as in the legend of *U Who Ryndi and Ka Lih Dohkha* or near his mother-in-law's house if he gets other daughters other than the youngest one or *Ka khadduh*. The social group of the Khasis is therefore of matrilineal structure with matrilineal rules of descent and inheritance and matrilocal residence.

Inheritance of property is given to the female. It is assigned that it is the woman and not the man who inherits the property of the mother. The rule among them is that the youngest daughter should inherit the property and it is she who should perform the religious ceremony of the family. The youngest daughter is known as *ka bat ia ka niam* which means she holds the religion. Her house is called *ka iing seng* because it is here that all the family members witness her performance of family ceremonies. Therefore, the largest share of property is assigned to her, the other daughters, however, on their mother's death receive some portion of mother's property but the largest share goes to the youngest daughter, which the Khasi called *Ka Khadduh*.

Spots of Matriliney

It is not only the Khasi that follow the matrilineal custom but the neighbouring tribe of the Khasi, that is the Garo, also led their life in matriarchy. They claim descent through the common ancestress or the mother. The proposal for marriage comes from the women's side. Property goes from mother to daughter. The youngest daughter is generally given to the son of her father's sister who after marriage comes to stay in the wife's place.¹¹

Traces of matriliney can also be found in other places. In the Lakshadweep, the common matrilineal unit is the Taravad, a group of individuals of both sexes who

claim descent from a common ancestress. Birth in a Taravad gives a member the right to share in the Taravad property, which consists mainly of land trees, boats and buildings. This right passes through female members. The predominant mode of residence is duolocal, cases of matrilocal and neolocal residences are found in older age groups.¹² Spots of matriliney may also be traced in the strong patriarchal communities like the Tharus in the Himalayan region, the Santhals, Oraons and Gonds in middle India, the Bhils in western and the Chenchus in south India. The inheritance of property for the wife from her parents by the *Gharjimai* (son-in-law) if viewed in the light of matriliney is common among patriarchal tribals specially when there is no male issue.¹³

Other tribes practicing matriliney are the Kaders, Pulayans, Kurudriyas, Kanikkars, Mannans, etc., living in Kerala and on the borders of Tamil Nadu. The matrilineal system is popularly known as *Marumakkathayam* in Kerala.¹⁴

The matrilineal organization on Chuuk (Truk), a group of small islands in the Pacific, illustrates the great pattern of authority in matrilineal system. The Chuukese have both matrilineages and matriclans. They trace descent from a common ancestress.¹⁵

Even in matrilineal societies, which seem to be oriented around women, men usually occupy political positions. For example among the Iroquois of what is now New York state, women had great control over resources and are a great deal of influence, but men not women held political office. The highest political body among the League of the Iroquois, which comprised of five tribal groups, was a council of fifty male chiefs. Although women could not serve the council, they could nominate, elect and impeach, their male representatives. Women also could decide between life and death for prisoners of war, forbid men of their household to go for war and intervene to bring about peace.¹⁶ Another example of matrilineal system is found in the Trobriand Island, New Guinea.¹⁷

Conclusion

In the present study about Khasi myths two steps have been implicated, they are identification and interpretation. To identify is to examine accurately and fully the myths which are dealt. The study about Khasi myths helps us to know about the different types of myths that exist among them. It also helps to know about their belief in the divine origin, creation of the Khasi world, customs and traditions, natural phenomena and the over all life pattern of the Khasi. But most of all it helps us to understand how myths help in interpretation about their matrilineal culture

and history and the study also shows the significance that myths or folklore constitute as an element of social control in the Khasi society.

Study of Khasi myths has helped to understand about the impact that myths have on the Khasi people, also why they believe differently, behaves and follows different customs and rituals. Thus, study about Khasi myths helps to know and understand more about the Khasi people and their society.

After a close look at the Khasi myths, it is seen that they reveal a lot about the matrilineal custom and tradition of the Khasi of Meghalaya. Though the Khasi is a matrilineal group yet there is a good understanding between men and women and it never occur in the minds of the Khasi that men are being exploited by the women. Much more, it would be a great error to think that the Khasi society is a female domineering society. As a matter of fact it is a completely egalitarian society though it follows matrilineality as strongly revealed in their myths.

Endnotes

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