

Orality and Written Khasi Literature : The Tradition of *Ka Longkur Longjait* or Clan Lineage as Reflected in *Ka Tiew Larun*.

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Introduction :

Literary scholars have emphasized the importance of oral traditions as sources of much of written literature. First, however, let us briefly see what is meant by 'oral traditions' or 'orality' before discussing these with regard to written literature. Orality, as generally understood, means by word of mouth and strictly speaking, refers to the habit of relying totally on oral communication. Some scholars have advocated the distinction between, at least, three components of orality, namely, oral communication, oral transmission and oral composition. Oral communication means to communicate by word of mouth alone; oral transmission is when oral traditions are recited to listeners and thus are further communicated and transmitted orally. Oral composition takes place when a poet or a story-teller composes creative works in his mind without taking recourse to writing. There may be differences in the way these components are described. For example, to some scholars, oral composition is taken to mean only spur-of-the-moment or spontaneous composition, while others accept any creative work as oral composition when it is composed sans writing and is communicated orally.

Before analysing the selected texts on the topic chosen here, it is felt necessary to note the relationship between the oral and the written forms. The two should not be taken as always representing different periods of history. There are times when the written form is generally taken to have started when the oral ended or that the written form replaced all of oral forms. This is not true in many instances. The two can co-exist side by side, supplementing and complementing each other. The case of language provides a good example where the oral form not only co-exists but performs many

functions alongside the written form. Thus, oral forms do not end with the preliterate period of society but they continue to flourish and to strengthen different aspects of a people's culture. Nevertheless, the written form has a very important role in transmitting and disseminating information more rapidly and to greater distances.

Written Khasi Literature has its beginning in the 19th century but the Khasis have always had a very rich oral literary tradition. This is seen in their traditional poems called *Ki Phawar* which are used during religious, festive and other important occasions. In addition there are also folktales, legends, myths etc. which have been handed down by word of mouth through generations of the people. Written Khasi literature started with the advent of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission to Khasi Hills in 1841. Prior to their arrival, William Carey's Serampore Mission had attempted to put Khasi language into writing by using the Bengali Script. The attempt was later abandoned. It was the Calvinistic missionary, Thomas Jones who devised the present script and his experiment with what is generally called the 'Roman Script' was highly successful and after a few modifications, it became a very useful tool for writing Khasi language.

This event proves to be a landmark in the history of the Khasis for with the written form at their disposal, they were able to document and codify their traditional knowledge, folktales, folk poetry, myths, legends, folk customs and practices. Inevitably, those who learned how to read and write took up the task from the missionaries to collect and document folktales that were narrated throughout the land. One of the pioneers who took on this path-breaking work seriously was u Rabon Singh. At the turn of the 20th century, he published some of these folktales in his two books entitled *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* and *Ka Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam*. These tales provided a rich literary source for succeeding authors in subsequent periods of Khasi literature. Prominent Khasi authors such as Soso Tham, H. Elias, P.G. Gatphoh, S.J. Duncan and D.S. Khongdup, to name just a few, artistically exploited these tales as sources for their literary masterpieces. It is not possible to examine the social relevance of all

these works but one of them will be taken for discussion here in order to examine the tradition of *Ka Longkur Longjai* or clan lineage, a very important aspect of Khasi culture. This aspect forms the basis of the selected texts. The fact that this particular tradition was selected as the theme of this folktale could not have been accidental. Probably, our ancestors who created and transmitted this tale did so with the purpose of instructing and establishing firmly this tradition in the collective consciousness of their descendants.

Clan Lineage as reflected in *Ka Tiew Larun* :

Rabon Singh's *Ka Tiewlarun* tells about a brother and a sister who survived a plague which affected almost half the population of a village. The brother, Het Rande, was much older than his younger sister, Shatai Rande. The story says that he was old enough to understand the value of land, property, gold and other material possessions. When he realized that all the members of their clan were dead, he gathered all their valuables and chose the biggest house to dwell with his sister as well as to keep all their treasured possessions. In spite of his fear and grief, he resolutely made a decision that he would take very good care of his young sister because he knew that 'she was the sole means by which his clan would once again be perpetuated' (*in tang long jait long phniang sa tang ine keiñ*). He was determined to care for her till such time when she was ready for marriage and he could marry her off to a suitable young man. He worried to leave her alone in the house with all the gold, silver lest someone would harm her, so he worked hard in nearby fields. That was his practice for five to ten years until he felt that she was old enough to stay at home by herself.

One day she insisted on accompanying him to a far-off field and in the heat of the noon-day sun, became extremely thirsty. She asked her brother for water but there was none to be found. Finally, Het cut some portions of *sylli*, (a small type of bamboo) which contained water. Parched with unbearable thirst, she swallowed all the water that was in the bamboo. Unknowingly, she also swallowed a tiny baby snake along with it. The snake grew

larger and larger within her stomach and this made her brother suspicious that she might be pregnant by some man unknown to him. One day he pretended to go to the field as usual but instead waited for any unwelcome visitor outside the house. After a while he peeped inside the house and saw a big snake coming out of his sister's mouth while she was sleeping. He killed the snake and threw its carcass under the Larun flower plant. Later, he cautioned his sister not to go near the plant as the bones of the snake were extremely poisonous.

When the flowers started blooming, they smelled and looked so delightful that Shatai could not resist the temptation to go and pluck some of them. While stretching out her hand to do so, the snake's bones pricked both her feet. Overwhelmed with excruciating pain, she managed to crawl back home and collapsed on the bed. When her brother returned home in the evening, he found her very ill in bed and, to his horror, saw the flower beside the bed. He immediately knew what she had done. He was struck with sorrow and grief because he thought that his sister would not be able to survive the venom that must surely be coursing down the girl's blood-stream. With this came the realization that her imminent death would result in his clan being forever obliterated from the face of the earth. In Rabon Singh's narrative, Het cried out in despair: *'Wau ngan nai im shuh ha pyrthei kat kane ka khein burom ka bym ju don shuh, im rat im shuh; Ja! La dum ka pyrthei jong nga.'* (Alas, it's better for me not to live in this world anymore. A loss such as this I cannot bear. She will surely die. My world is in ruins). To Het, there is no greater disgrace than for his clan to face *ka iapduh* or clan extinction. In deep anguish, he left his beloved sister whom he had earnestly hoped would carry on the family name. Before he left her, he took out all the costly attire, the gold and silver and spread them around her and then bade her goodbye: *'Katto Hep to iap, to um bad la ka iing ka sem ka spah ka hajar, ngan leit kylla pukir noh kat sha ba poi.'* (Goodbye, my dear sister, die and disappear with all your wealth and your house. As for me, I will wander the earth wherever my feet takes me to).

Fortune, however, destined Shatai's life otherwise. The chief went hunting in a forest near Shatai's village at that particular time and became extremely thirsty. He sent his attendants to search for water and they chanced upon Shatai lying alone and in great pain. They then went back and reported to the chief about what they had seen. He immediately sent for a well-known medicine man and Shatai was given help and recovered fully from her illness. Interestingly, thirst for water which was the source of Shatai's suffering was also the way through which her suffering was removed. Later on, she and the chief fell in love with each other, were married and had a baby daughter. Nevertheless, the memory of her bitter and estranged brother always made her sad. One day, she confided to her husband about all that had happened to her and he devised a way by which they would find her brother. Placing a likeness of Het carved in wood and dressed in the man's own clothes at a much-used thoroughfare where travelers always pass through, the chief knew it would be a matter of time before Het would reach that place. True to his prediction, Het reached that place and saw his own clothes on the carved wooden effigy and he became rooted to the spot. He thought to himself that that was the final proof that his sister was dead. His tears trickled down his face and the chief men who were hiding nearby caught him and brought him back to his village. Brother and sister were finally reunited and the story had a happy ending with Het's dream of the clan's continuity fully realized.

S. J. Duncan transcreated this folktale into a play and published it in 1968. In his Preface to the first edition, the dramatist stated very clearly that he had based his play on Rabon Singh's presentation of the folktale. Duncan was one of the most prominent writers during the 1960's and his skilful use of the Khasi language still ranks among the best in Khasi literature. Duncan enlarges the original story by putting more characters and episodes in the play. He also lightened the tragic strain in the play with his own creative style of wit and humour. More importantly, Duncan projected even more emphatically the importance of clan posterity in his play. As in the folktale, this

theme forms the basis of the whole play. It is shown to be the reason behind the two orphans' struggle for survival as it offers a beacon of hope and a meaning for their existence in the plague-ridden village.

Duncan's play started with Het's soliloquy:

*Ban duh longing kam lah ban long, nga ong
Nga don I Hep ban seng thymmai l'i kur*

... ..

*In khie, in san ha ka akor, ha ka burom,
Ban khraw ka longing, ban heh u tnum u tyndai,
Ban sah ka kyrteng ki longshuwa pateng pateng ...*

(It's unthinkable for our family to die out, I say,
I have my dear sister to start our clan once again ...

... ..

She'll grow and bloom, gentle in manner, refined in behaviour.
For the family to flourish, to fill the land
Our ancestors' name to last through generations ...)

Struck with the tragedy of losing not only his parents and close relatives but all clan members and fellow-villagers, Het believed that God had mercifully spared them for a purpose. He was especially encouraged by the fact that his little sister survived the terrible plague for then he could still hope for the survival of his clan. The matrilineal system of the Khasis is based on the tradition where clan perpetuation is possible only through female members. H. Lyngdoh in his celebrated treatise *Ka Niam Khasi* (2nd Rep. 1970: 133) has this to comment on this tradition: *'Te kat kum kane ka rukom khein kur khein jait, i kur ne i jait im lah ban duh lano lano ruh katba dang don kynthei ha ita i kur ne i jait, bad ynda ym don kynthei shuh bad la sah sa tang ki shynrang suda, ita i kur ne i jait i duh noh ne i "iapduh" namar u shynrang um lah ban seng kur ne ban seng jait.'* (Thus, according to this custom of tracing clan lineage, a clan can never die out while there is a female member. When female members no longer remain, that clan dies out because a male cannot perpetuate the clan).

The fact that clan lineage is traced through the female member does not mean that the role of a man in Khasi society is insignificant. He is the protector and defender (*u nongda nongker*) of the family and of the clan. In Duncan's play, Het reflected on this role with a deep sense of responsibility:

Nga u rangbah ngan da kamon kadiang

L'i kur i jait ka shong ka sah kan biang

Ngan trei shitom, ngan ni sumarkyndong.

(I, the man, will protect the family on all sides

So that the clan can dwell in peace and prosperity

I'll work hard and take good care of them.)

He also pondered deeply on the task at hand to ensure the welfare of future generations of his clan members:

Sa tang manga u khlieh ka iing i Mei

Ngan khieh ngan ksar ban suk i Hep.

(I'm left the head of my mother's family

I'll work tirelessly for my sister's well-being).

Het took his responsibility as *u kñi* or the maternal uncle very seriously because he knew the future posterity of his clan rested on his shoulders. He realised that, as head of his mother's family, he would have to face a difficult life to provide for and to protect his sister so that his mother's house would once again be filled with people, it would resound with joy and laughter and abound in prosperity.

With such hopes, he was determined to work hard to achieve his goal. One could only imagine his bitter disappointment and despair when he found his sister stricken with the snake's poison and facing what he thought was her certain death. Shatai later narrated to the chief how her brother cried out in grief at that point of time: '*Katto ka la kut ka jingim i Hep. La sep ei ka jingim jong nga, ngan leit kylla pukir noh.*' (This is the end of my dear sister's life. Everything is in vain now. I'll turn into a homeless mendicant).

Both writers, U Rabon Singh and S. J. Duncan, have placed special emphasis on Het's utter despair and grief. Why was this so?

Was it solely a brother's expression of grief at his beloved sister's imminent death? Or was it more than that? His own words at the end of the story point to deeper reasons, reasons that are tied to Khasi matriliney. When forced by the King's men to return to his own village, he resisted and cried out: *Ka shnong nongiap, ka iing iapduh, ngam leit*. (The village of death, the house of the extinct clan, I'll not go). It is very clear that it was not only a sister's death, that left Het a broken man but especially the thought that his whole clan had become extinct. H.O. Mawrie points to the way the matrilineal system is woven into the composite whole of the culture of the Khasis in his book *Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi* (4th edition 1994:46-47) when he says: '*U Khasi um juleh ia kiei kiei lane seng iaei iaei khlem leit sha ka tynrai Haba u shim jait na ka kynthei u da tip ia kaei kaba u leh. Haba u leh ia kane ruh um shim kyrpang tang ia ka hi hynrei u shim ia ka tang kum kawei ka bynta ka ban tei ia ka jinglong jong u tylli kum ka jaitbyniew baroh kawei. Dei na kane ka daw ba ka jingshim jait jong u na ka kynthei ka don ka jingthain lang bad ka niam, ka imlang ka sahlang, ka khih ka dang bad ka synshar ka khaddar*'. (A Khasi does not do anything or start anything without deliberating carefully on the basis of which he has chosen to do it ... When he chose to trace clan lineage from a woman, he had a reason to do so. He did not do it in isolation but as part of the totality of his cultural life. For that reason, the act of tracing clan lineage from a woman has a bearing on his religion, his society, his earning a livelihood and also his system of governance).

Besides *ka iapduh* or clan extinction, therefore, there are also other important cultural issues that must be considered in the Khasi matrilineal system. These are:

(1) Religious rituals especially those concerning funeral rites culminating in *ka thep mawbah* or the collection and deposition of bones after cremation in the clan *cromlech*.

(2) Traditional political system where *U Syiem Longsyiem* has to be a member of the Syiem family and where *Ka Syiem Sad* (the queen mother) is the custodian of all religious rituals of *Ka Hima* or a Khasi traditional state.

(3) Social stigma and clan ostracisation in case of *ka shong sang*, the absolute sin of sexual relationship among clan members.

It is the third point which is still upheld and feared most by Khasis, and clan identification through the mother is crucial for them to know whom they can marry. This is applicable to all Khasis irrespective of their religious affiliations. Perhaps this is the main reason why clan lineage is still traced through the mother so that *Ka Shongsang* can be avoided at all cost, even if it has the misfortune of happening unintentionally.

The Khasi clan system at present :

Both Rabon Singh and S.J. Duncan have highlighted the tradition of matriliney among Khasis in the *Ka Tiew Larun*. It is also a fact that matriliney with regard to the clan system is still widely practiced among the majority of the Khasis even to this day. Many clan associations (*Seng Kur*) have emerged in the society to reinforce and strengthen this aspect of the Khasi matrilineal system.

It has already been noted earlier in this paper that those traditions that a community sets great importance by are selected by our ancestors to be orally transmitted through folktales. This was done in order to inculcate and instruct younger generations about these traditions. Tracing clan lineage through the mother is seen to be very important as shown in the story of *Ka Tiew Larun* above. Nevertheless, there is always a possibility that such traditions may undergo certain changes due to social, political and cultural reasons. We can see some changes currently taking place in Shillong and its suburbs where some children take after the father's clan in a few families. Furthermore, *Ka Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai*, an organization formed to promote a change from the matrilineal to the patrilineal system of tracing clan lineage has been very active during the last few decades. It is yet to be seen how far and for how long the tradition of tracing clan lineage from the mother continues to be practised in Khasi society in the future.