



**TRIBAL
LITERATURE
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

EDITED BY
BADAPLIN WAR
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
2009

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ERODING TRADITIONAL VALUES: THE ROLE OF U KŊI (THE MATERNAL UNCLE) IN PRESENT DAY SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN KHASI SHORT STORIES

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Traditionally, in a Khasi society, a man holds dual roles: as 'U Kŋi' (Maternal uncle) of the clan and as 'U Kpa' (a father) of his children. 'U Kŋi' (Maternal Uncle) holds a very important place in the family. As a maternal uncle, he holds the responsibility of advising his clan members regarding the management of property, of completing all rituals during marriage, in a funeral and other important events in the family. No decision regarding property can be taken without his consent. Even the youngest daughter or sister of the family who is the custodian of the ancestral property cannot go against the decision of the maternal uncle when taking decision on landed property. U Kŋi (maternal uncle) was the counselor, advisor and guide to his family members. H. Kelian Synrem states:

*Na kata ka daw u sa da sneng da kraw ia la ki kur ki pyrsa
ban bha ban miat ...*¹

*[Therefore he instructs and teaches his nephews, nieces so
that the family could prosper]*

In the marriage of his nieces or nephews, he is the mediator or 'u ksiang'. H. Kelian Synrem is of the opinion that:

¹ Synrem, H. Kelian: "Ka bynta jong u rangbah kum u kŋi bad kum u Kpa" in *Ba ioh ngi Klet*, Seven Huts Enterprise, Marbaniang Printers, Shillong, 1994, p.28.

Dei ma u uba ieng kum u ksiang haba iapoi kha ki para ki pyrsa.

*Dei ma u, u ban sakhi ia ki arliang kha u ban kylli pyrthew ioh don Ka sang ka ma, ioh don ka wit ka wai.*²

[In the marriage of his brothers or sisters, nephews or nieces, he takes the role of the mediator. He has to mediate between the two clans, to enquire properly lest there should be 'ka sang ka ma' (the absolute sin of sexual relationship among clan members), 'Ka wit ka wa' (reasons that forbid marriage alliance)]

H. Kelian Synrem further states:

*Dei u kŋi u ban leh ia ka niam im bad kumjuh ia ka niam iap.*³

[The maternal uncle has to perform rituals concerning the living as well as the dead]

As said earlier, the maternal uncle traditionally holds a very important place in the Khasi family. However, times are changing and the well-defined role of 'U Kŋi' has now undergone a radical change. The traditional value of u Kŋi (maternal uncle) is now slowly eroding with the passage of time. S.J. Duncan, a prominent short story writer projects this very important point through his short story "U Men Mali" (The Old Gardener) in his book *Phuit! Ka Sabuit! Bad kiwei de ki khana*. This is a heart rending story of 'U Kŋi' (maternal uncle) who was humiliated by his own younger brother and sister who sold off the landed assets of the clan without the consent of u Men Mali, the oldest maternal uncle of the clan.

This paper, however, focusses on the following issues as projected by the author in his short story:

I. The eroding traditional value of the position of u Kŋi regarding landed property: U Kŋi (Maternal Uncle) holds a very important place in the family. As a maternal uncle, he holds the responsibility of advising his clan members regarding the management

² Ibid: P. 28

³ Ibid p. 28

of property. Even the youngest daughter or sister of the family who is the custodian of the ancestral property cannot go against the decision of the maternal uncle when making decision on landed property. The central character of this short story 'u men mali' was once the revered 'U Kñi' (maternal uncle) of a family who took the responsibilities very seriously. As the elder most Maternal uncle of the family, he is expected to be obeyed and respected by each and every member of the family for it is customary to do so. 'U men mali' as a maternal uncle cared for his family very deeply and he looked after all the landed assets for the family for many years. However, a time came when the members of the family wanted to sell off some plots of land in order to have easy money. As was his wont, 'u men mali' tried to retain the ancestral property within the family. So he advised them to rent out some plots of land to the tenants, thereby retaining ownership of the land. But his family members were duped by his younger brother's wives who wanted a share of the proceeds from the sale. He even insinuated that 'u men mali' did not want to sell the property because he wanted to keep all of it for himself. Regarding this, H. W. Sten states:

*Kumta ki kohnguh ia uta u para jong u, bad ki la die noh baroh.*⁴

[So they listen to his younger brother and they sold off the entire land.]

Against the advice of 'u men mali', the entire property was sold off. The story says:

*Haba u iohi ia ki kur ba kim sngap shuh ia ka ktien jong u, u sngew rem sngem jem rngiew la ka jinglong kñi rangbah, u pait ka dohnud bad u mih thiaw na shnong khlem da leit shuh artad.*⁵

[When his clan members would no longer listen to his words, he felt bereft of all honour and respect, stripped off from his position as a maternal uncle. His heart broke and he left his village never to return back again.]

⁴ Sten H. W.: *U Prew*, Don Bosco Press, Shillong, 1994, p. 160.

⁵ Duncan S.J.: "U Men Mali" in *Phuit! Ka Sabuit! Bad kiwei de ki Khana*, North Eastern Hill University Publication, 1994, p.104.

II. **Alienation:** When the entire property was sold off against the will and advises of u men mali (the maternal uncle), he was deeply hurt. He felt had had been totally stripped off all respect and position in the family and society. The wanton act hurt him so deeply that he felt he could no longer associate himself with any of his family members. Unable to bear the shame and ignominy of losing the entire ancestral property, he left everything that he held dear to his heart and came to Shillong as an outcast and started his life as a gardener. When he came to Shillong, he lived in total isolation from other members of the society. He was not sociable; neither did he want to be in contact with any one. What made him do so? Was he ashamed of what had happened in the past? The authority, power and position that he once had, was snatched away from him. People and things that he held near and dear to his heart were the ones who stripped him off his position. He was no longer the same man that the family and society obeyed and respected. All this caused him to feel lonely and isolated. The story says:

*... hynrei ngim ju iohi ba don kiba leit kai wan kai ha iing jongu; Te u ruh ngim ju iohi ba un leit rung ha iing jong kiwei pat.*⁶

[We never saw anymore visiting his house nor does he visit anybody's house.]

III. **The fear of relying on others:** A few years after he came to Shillong, there was a niece who came to stay with him but she left him soon after and this made him stay alone all over again. He had his own land and a small hut where he lived all by himself when he came to Shillong. The garden surrounding his hut was full of variety of fruits and vegetables. It looked as though the old man has spent all his entire mind and soul in this garden. The story says:

*Ym pat ju don kper lehse kum ka jong une u tymmen ha shnong.*⁷

[There is no other garden in the village that could match the old Man's garden.]

⁶ Ibid: p. 98

⁷ Ibid: p.100

Later, he sold off his entire property that is, his hut and his garden to his neighbour next door and he disappeared not knowing where he was going. This old man felt a sense of fear to rely on others. His niece who came to stay with him also left him all alone. It is customary in the Khasi society that an unmarried male member of the family is supposed to be look after by his own younger sister. With the passage of time, there are a few changes. If the male member desires to live with any of his sister or niece he can do so. What happened to u men mali? His niece who came to stay with him also left him. Now, to leave his entire property to his clan members was the last thing that this man would do after what they had done. This was what the old man express himself in the story:

*“ To mynta nga dang im, kam ju ia wan wad wan kylli, lashai ynda nga la iap kan sa iawan iam briew, kan sa iakam ei khoit, Bak ngan sa leit sha ba kim ia tip shuh, ngan kit lut, ia ki shyieng jong nga ruh kim iohi.”*⁸

[“Now that I am alive, no one bothers to come and visit me, later when I die everyone will come crying and will carry off all my possession. I’ll go away to another place where nobody knows, I’ll carry every thing, they will not even see my bones/remains.”]

IV. The power of music to express one’s own feelings: After he came to Shillong, U men mali worked as a gardener in one Officer’s bungalow. He also has his own garden full of fruits and vegetables which attracted children. There was something very unusual in him that the children noticed and which frightened them. He was usually very quiet, he wore very dirty clothes and he was always alone. But songs and music always came out from his hut every night. Once these children were caught stealing fruits from his garden and after being shouted at by this old man he later caught one of them and told him to come to his hut that evening. To their surprise, they were offered fruits and then the old man played on the harp, narrating tales and stories as he did so. The sound of the harp was what the children used to hear every night. Almost every evening they would spend time with

⁸ Ibid: p. 106

the old man in his hut where he would tell them of his unfortunate life story to the tune of the soul stirring music from the harp. The following are a few lines from his song:

*[“Phi la hun keiñ mo ko para, ko pyrsa
Ba phi la dei la ka mynsiem?
Ka ktien jong nga, te mo, ka para, ko pyrsa,
La kum ka khyndew ba phi iuh ha pohjat,
Khubilei, Khubilei, lehnohei ka long kiñii”]*⁹

*[You’re satisfied brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces,
That you’ve sold your soul?
Words uttered by me oh brothers and sisters, nephews and
nieces,
They’re worthless like the dust and the earth that you tread
upon,*

Thank you, Thank you, it is worthless to be u kni].

Evening after evening they would listen to his stories until one day this is what he sang to them songs that touched their feelings and emotions:

*[“Nga wan marwei, ngan leit marwei,
Ngan leit sha ba ym don shuh ba tip,
Ngan leit sha ba ym don shuh ban wad,
Ngan sa leit, ngan sa leit,
Khu-bi-lei ki jingim
Khu-bi-lei, ngan sa leit, ...”]*¹⁰

*[Alone I came, alone I’ll go,
Far to a place where no one knows,
To a place where no one comes searching,
I’m going, I’m going
Goodbye life,
Goodbye, I’m going, ...]*

⁹ Ibid: p.104

¹⁰ Ibid: p.107

The above are a few of the issues that the author has projected as to how the erosion of traditional values has affected the family, the society and individuals as well. Traditional values and customs are part and parcel of each and every community and tribe, but time is the factor that brought about many changes in these traditional values and customs.

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