



Indigenous Folktales and Culture of Khasi Tribes
in Sing Nongkynrih's Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends

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Abstract:

The spoken stories and legends of a specific group of people or tribes, it may be the part of a village or a society in large, have traditionally and ethnically been penned down to show the historical importance of indigenous folktales of the people of the past cultural society or community. Folktales, legends and other models of orality in a particular society can customarily be originated or created in the literary sources of ways of human beings, wild animals and other animate objects in the literary way, cultural ways, legendary ways as well as other ways of lives. Indeed, K.S.Nongkynrih narrates skillfully more than few indigenous Khasi tribal folk stories (legends) illustrated in his fiction called Around the Hearth: Khasi legends (2006). Khasi tribes in Northeast Meghalaya communities are very affluent clans; so are very fond of local oral stories, fables, legends, sagas, fairy-tales and supernatural folktales from generation to generation. He by birth belongs to Meghalaya Khasi tribes in Northeast zone has mentioned numberless oral and non-verbal local Khasi folktales including the stories of their seven clans, the lost manuscript, saga of animal festival/fair, fairy tales of river nymph, story of U Thlen (man eating serpent), the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, local orality of the child-voracious stone, and finally the legend of Ka Lidakha. Among these rich indigenous folktales and legends the present paper will delineate the few local folktale of the Khasi indigenous society in Meghalaya. This now is the exploration of Khasi tribal society that traditionally believes in and relies on the animal festive, fair, nymph, human eating serpent, several legends, and other folk stories. The Khasi tribe like other NE tribes are very indigenous tribes, affluent in culture, unique lifestyle in folk life and legend, traditional belief in orality, songs, dance, myth, story and other superstitious events. The Khasi tribes consist of "all the seven sub-tribes- Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lynggam and the now never heard of Diko" (Nongkynrih, Prelude vii). The Khasi tribes in North-East India are usually, by their origins, very fond of local story telling – listening as well as sharing to other tribes, indeed. This research chapter will analyze specially the indigenous folktales and cultural legends of the Khasi tribes from Nongkynrih fiction Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends.

Key Words:

Khasi tribes, folktales, folk culture, supernatural belief, ancestors, orality, and society.

Introduction:

Primitive local folk story of Khasi tribes:

Before coming of the white people on the primitive land of NE territory, these Khasis are not at all nomadic or barbarians, even not to travel for their living here and there monkeys like animals. They know how to produce their own food; so they never hover to the other places like savages for rations. They also know and are much practiced how to cultivate the wasteland or unfruitful place, to implant or sow an assortment of seeds and corns. These tribes are very dexterous how to harvest and make useful things out of natural things. The writer Nongkynrih illustrates the nature and ways of life of the Khasi tribes:

The Khasis, by which I mean all the seven sub-tribes- Khynriam,, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lynggam and the now never heard of Diko- of the Khasi tribe of North-East India, are a great storytelling people... the Khasis, before the white man came, were not a band of barbarians roving the hills for heads and scalps. They did not live up trees like monkeys, nor hunt for food like savages. They knew how to till the earth and sow their crops. They knew how to make things out of wood and iron; they knew trade and commerce- and yes, industry.
(Nongkynrih vii)

Origin of Khasi Community:

For that reason, the local folktales of The Khasi tribes, as per their ancestors, tell ever that the creation of Khasi community comes “from the one living truth, their God, U Blei” (viii). Their folk stories also tell that “Man and beasts and stones and trees spoke as one...” (viii). There was a folk legend among the Khasi tribes about the creation of the myths, one of these ancient ancestor myths tells that their forefathers had lost a folk manuscript containing all sorts of their religious, cultural, customary teaching, advices, principles, and philosophies. The lost folk tale notifies that the first Khasi tribal man kept his legs “with God at the summit of a very tall mountain” (viii). Later he was recognized with the tribal historical legend of Khasi community which is, even today, based on “certain religious rites and moral principles which were to govern the spiritual, moral and even daily activities of his community” (viii). In accordance with the folk legend, this first man met first with “Surma” (viii) as a spokesperson. These two persons lived mythically on water, mountain, river, and other space. They both held with them the lost Khasi manuscript given “by God Himself, to make the propagation of His teachings easier” (Viii). Nongkynrih writes down in his book:

The great storytelling tradition of the Khasi goes back to the time of their creation myths. One of these myths tells us about how one of our ancestors had lost a manuscript, made of a very delicate material and containing our philosophical and religious teachings...the man was returning from a communion with God at the summit of a very tall mountain... and moral principles which were to govern the spiritual, moral and even daily activities of his community. With him was a representative of the people from the plains of Surma.

Both were carrying with them precious manuscript s bestowed by God Himself, to make the propagation of His teachings easier. (viii)

Indigenous cultural belief of Khasi Tribes:

The Khasi tribes in NE state zone are culturally and usually very much frank, generous and well-natured people; they, for that reason, like customarily to live in peace as well as easily be friend staying togetherness with other human beings. Their ethnic culture is entirely unique and rich than other cosmic collective cultures in terms of worshipping gods, goddess, man, animals, deities, and other animated objects. The tribes of Khasi community, in their traditional beliefs, show equal love, respect, worship and dignity to all kind of creations of God. They, in their primitive standpoints, think and believe that all the creations of the creator in this human world are equivalent to each other. The author Nongkynrih puts in writing:

Theirs was a culture that worshipped God through respect for both man and Nature, and indeed all animals and animated things, as creations of God that were equal to each other. (Nongkynrih viii)

They understood the ideas of God, goddesses, deities, and concepts of religions, good and evil, views of customs, cultures, village systems, and so forth. As per the folk stories of Khasi tribes, these different legends created the rich folk myth which the tribes of this community used to tell “khanatang, or sanctified stories” (ix). This is the way of Khasi society comes to the map sketch of the world society.

The symbolical works of such folk stories are nothing but to set forth Khasi cultural beliefs and social practices in every way of khaki community. All the folktales are searched out with the symbolical importance and meaning. As per the orality of Khasi people, as so it is notified, the tribes of this community inhabited to trek between the divine and living earth by way “of Ka *Jingkieng Ksiar* (the Golden Ladder) located at *Lum Sophet Bneng* (the Mount of Heaven’s Navel)” (ix). In their endogenous language, the golden ladder means “a golden heart, a virtual soul” (ix) which makes a boundary connection between Man and God. At the time of telling of “the Mount of Heaven’s Navel” (x), the indigenous tribes of Khasi clan merely long to explicate their cultural belief and traditional practices that so they from generation to generation believe that bonding between Man and God is as pure linkage as mother- child. It is a new part of quest to make out the all said illusory folk tales of the Khasi culture. Nongkynrih embodies the cultural belief and social stories of his tribal community in his *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*:

The indigenous folktales of Khasi tribal communities have not traditionally been incarcerated with the ritual or religious and philosophy, but also all the cultural believing things. As per the Khasis mythical stories, the stories of the local folk of Khasi have generally concocted for everything. They are, by birth, very fond of story narrating. The hearth or the fireplace or fireside around is their school or learning place because after completing the day’s laboring duties, they are used to get together around the hearth or fireplace for entertaining the traditional daily folk stories narrated before by their indigenous people. That’s why the author

narrated “The old Khasi had to invent many, many stories indeed. In fact, there are thousands of stories floating in each Khasi *hima*” (x). The Khasi tribes share or hand over verbally or orally these legends or local stories from one generation to next generation, from forefathers to parents, from parents to youngsters. These tribes, in a cultural way, share and tell “among them *khana pateng* (legends), *purinam* (fairy tales), *puriskam* (fables), *khana parshi* (parables)” (x). The writer Nongkynrih explains the root cultural milieus of his Khasi society in his notable book named *Around Heart: Khasi Legends* (2006):

Indigenous Folktales of Ren and River Nymph among the Khasi tribes

Whilst human beings and animals, long years ago, in the oral belief and custom of Khasi tribal ancestors, verbalized the analogous language with each other. The creator God as well as river nymphs or fairies of nature lived together calmly and decorated the beautiful human world with their lovely presence. As the tribes of Khasi in NE frontier zone traditionally and customarily do as they are told by forefathers and believe mostly in the existence of earthly supernatural creatures (nymphs, fairies and other living objects. This is an indigenous folktale of Ren and River Nymph told by khasi ancestral tribes, which the author has written in his book entitled *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*. The khasi tribes have orally said to the writer the folk story of Ren and Fairies is still verbally ongoing story in the mouth of the khasi people. They believe by heart and frequently talk that there is a smart tribal man named ‘Ren’ (58) verbally and professionally recognized as a legendary fisherman, lives in the smallest village named ‘Nongjri’ (58) near by the primordial town ‘Sohra’ (58). The writer, hence, writes after listening orally the folk story from his khasi tribes:

Many, many years ago, when Man and beast spoke the same language, and God and the fairies still frequented the human world, there lived a handsome fisherman known simply as Ren. His home was in the small village of Nongjri, some precipitous kilometres to the east of the ancient town of Sohra, or Cherrapunjee, as it is known to the outside world. (Nongkynrih 58)

The fisherman Ren together dwells with his own aged mother, whom he loves, looks after and respects very much and does anything what she wants in her life. Being professionally a big fisherman, he gets up in the early dawn or rises before the sun and every day, he does very hard work by catching fishes from the river located nearby his small village. After fishing, he sales his caught fishes at his village market known as ‘haats’ (58) mostly in the evening period. The people of Khasi tribal community love the fisherman Ren for his generous, honest and lovable manner for each one in the society. Besides looking after his aged mother and fishing professionally in the river, he reciprocally likes to do works and pass time with his tribal youths. The written folk story mentions that he is only a dream tribal man for every tribal young girl in his village society. He is not only well-known and versatile fisherman among the village girls and boys in the society of Khasi, but also among all over the North-East state for his multi-dimensional musical, dancing, singing, story-telling and folk story-making and folk practice performances. He loves to court his tribal village girls with his indigenous folktales, singing songs, dancing, storytelling as well as reciting local poetry. While he returns home after his hard works out at the end of the day, he resides at his home with his mother by ‘playing beautiful music on his two-stringed duitara’ (59). He is fond of fishing habit and practice and his most lovable spot

place is village pond and large pool nearby the river where he wants to catch as daily profession with his village youths. It is also orally well message for in the mouth of his tribes that he never comes back to home without empty-handed or fish. Ren's magical fishing practice becomes now the folktales of his society. His youth comrades frequently expose that some blessing fairies are beside him and bless always him with ample of fishes that is, so called good luck or lucky tribe. Nongkynrih writes:

Everybody liked him, but he was too busy trying to feed his mother and himself to spend time with the village youths. And although he was the dream of every village girl, he never felt inclined to accompany his friends on their night trips to the dwellings of these lovely maidens, to court them with stories, songs, and poetry, as was the practice... Ren usually stayed home at night, playing beautiful music on his two-stringed duitara... his strange gift becomes the talk of the village. His friends joked that some good fairy had taken a liking to him and blessed him with his extraordinary good luck. (Nongkynrih 59)

Regarding the indigenous folktales Ren one day without his young friends, alone goes to the native river to catch fishes and suddenly, finds miracle vision that stands in front of him and after seeing the miracle vision, he becomes first startle with great fear in face, but later he realizes that this beautiful miracle figure, good looking face, and smiling present is the river fairy nymph. While she (fairy nymph), in front of him, speaks deliberately with sweet tone, he becomes relax and fearless. He, like others human beings, now gets mesmerized, puzzled, spellbound and fascinated by her magical charming beauty. Ren is quite in no doubt or positive that 'she was a puriblei, a divine fairy; for the elders had told him that evil could not show so lovely face' (59). On the river bank, he looks at her outlandish vision with his splendor hope whilst she first introduces herself to get the fisherman rid of fear. This fairy nymph is the mythical queen of all water spirits, and head mistress of river waters, she is considered in all over the water places. But she herself confesses that she does not appear to him as a queen at all. By the way, she is very tall, charming face and having long silky brown black colour hair falling down to her over ankles. Ren has never found before such a good looking girl in his entire life. She puts on uncommon white attire on his body. Apart from these, she wears a long tight belt embroidered with spellbound diamonds as well as trinkets of different sizes, shapes, and colours. She also wears ear rings both sides of her ears and signet ring made of pure gold. She does not put the crown on her head as she has acknowledged before that she does not appear to him as a queen. Now he is quite conscious of nothing but of her heart-touching beauty. He falls head over heels in love with the river queen nymph. Finally, he too gets introduced himself and keeps busy in banter with her. The author literarily portrays the indigenous folk stories of his khasi tribes relied on oral traditional custom, belief and culture given below:

One day, soon after his friends were gone, at the hour exactly between day and night, there rose from glittering pool the river nymph herself. There she stood in her shimmering glory, smiling at the terrified Ren. But she spoke with such sweetness, that his fear vanished, and like any other, normal young man, he became spellbound by her beauty. He was sure she was a puriblei, a divine fairy, for the elders had told him that evil could not show so lovely a face...

there he stood, marveling at the strange vision even as she introduced herself Spirits, mistress of these waters.: ‘ I am Queen of the River Spirits, mistress of these waters. But it is not as a Queen that I have come’. She was tall... she was as beautiful as no other woman he had seen before. She wore a strange white robe of pure white silk. Instead of a jainsem, she wore a belt studded with diamonds and gems of all shapes and colours. Her only other ornaments were her ruby earrings, and a golden signet ring. She did not even have a crown on her head, for, as she had said, she had come not as a queen... However, Ren revived soon after and, remembering his manners, introduced himself and eagerly engaged her in conversation. (Nongkynrih 59-60)

Both Ren and the fairy queen start their love story each other about their upcoming love life with deep feeling and emotion in the top most secret way. She also shares with him her intimated affinity for him from the water of river by telling and making sure him that it was she who gave him dozens of fish everyday while he came to trap the river fishes that is why, He never went empty handed. The river nymph states confidently: ‘Yes it was I who wooed you with fish by dozens every day, just as your friends said, although they had spoken in jest’ (60). They say promise in keeping their hands on hand that they would never betray each other in any way of lives. They will meet at the same place and same time next day. Now they spend the days happily and wish to stay together evergreen. Before taking oath, Ren wants to be very clear that he will never give his old mother up for a single day. He even will not follow her footsteps into magic dept water. She will live always with him on the surface level of earthly dry land; so she must leave the magic and enchanted world of water. And dwell in the land of human world. Finally, the water fairy queen comes to her beloved’s words and chases him to his earthly home but one condition, i.e., ‘The hut must be spotlessly clean, for we cannot live in filth. The broom with which you sweep that dirt must nowhere be in sight’, she said (61). He too consents with her terms and conditions whatever she states. As hurry as possible he informs his mother that he will, very soon, bring her home his newly beloved wife (river fairy nymph). Her old mother welcomes warmly her newly daughter in law to her house and cuddles her newly daughter in law fairy nymph with love, affection, respect and dignity. She also appreciates nymph’s black love lock and gives her law wooden stool for seating as per the culture and custom of Khasi community. In return, the nymph is too pleased and cheerful in getting such a lovely and friendliness mother-in-law to see her amiable, polite and liable manner and behavior for her. But the nymph is angry upon her husband and mother-in-law due to find dirty, dust, unclean place of the corner of the house; but later realizes her angry and miss-manner towards them, she asks them to pardons her for her miss-manner. Ren also weeps for bringing such a fairy wife from the water world. So she finally leaves the human world to get entry to her river world. In such pathetic state, his mother urges her son that he cannot live many days without wife after one time marriage as per Khasi custom, religion and ethnic culture. She, hence being a mother, supplicates Ren to chase and get back his wife to home. Now he gives his home up to run after his wife fairy nymph. He, before detaching from her, proffers her mother one solace that ‘Mother’, he said, as he looked at her one last time, ‘listen to the river. As long as it roars, you will know that I live....’

(63). Finally, Ren leaves the human Khasi world and adheres fairy queen his wife in the spellbound water world of the river which is recognized as the 'River Ren' (63) from that time. Old mother, while, hears the roaring sound of the river, it seems to her that her son is close to her. With the passage of time, she becomes old and may take last breath very soon. No tribes of Khasi community now think of and care of Ren's existence; just mesmerizes the indigenous folk stories of khasi tribe so called Ren. From this indigenous folk story of Khasi legend Ren, it is clear that Khasi tribes still believe and pursue traditionally, culturally and spiritually the folk story, history and legend of fairy nymph and Ren River and perform the folktales in their ritual, occasion, marriage party and other socio-cultural event as the symbol of Khasi socio-cultural heritage as well as ancient ethnic practice. As per Khasi cultural ritual, they even today practice a ritual called 'broom' (63) based on local folk story of their ancestors. The author states:

With these words, Ren left to join his fairy queen in the enchanted watery depths of the river, which became known from that time as River Ren...every time she heard the sound, she knew her son was near. But she was old and she died soon after. Now nobody cares about the sound of Ren's live. From the story, the Khasis learnt the secret of driving away spirits with the broom- a ritual which is practised even today. (Nongkynrih 63)

Conclusion:

To conclude, K.S.Nongkynrih narrates skillfully more than few indigenous Khasi tribal folk stories (legends) illustrated in his fiction called *Around the Hearth: Khasi legends* (2006). Khasi tribes in Northeast Meghalaya communities are very affluent clans and though primitive but rich in new lifestyle, cultural dress, customary lore, verbal lore, material lore, religious, rituals, and other ways of life; so are very fond of local oral stories, fables, legends, sagas, fairy-tales and supernatural folktales from generation to generation. He by birth belongs to Meghalaya Khasi tribes in Northeast zone has mentioned numberless oral and non-verbal local Khasi cultural folktales including the stories of their seven clans, the lost manuscript, saga of animal festival/fair, fairy tales of river nymph, story of U Thlen (man eating serpent), the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, local orality of the child-voracious stone, and finally the legend of Ka Lidakha. The khasi legendary tribes frequently interchange the words about the Thlen which has been ethically zero power creature in the eyes of 'the Syiem clan, because Suitnoh, his destroyer was himself a Syiem, or king, a ruler among gods, servants of the one God' (72). This mysterious indigenous folk story is very popular and well-propagated among the entire Khasi tribal community. The most evil superstitious practice and customary ritual phenomenon in the name of man eating Thlen, even today followed and kept active from generation to generation by the Khasi native tribes. Among these rich indigenous folktales and legends the present paper has delineated and shown the few local folktale and cultural elements of the Khasi indigenous society in Meghalaya to spread a new message and cultural elements to other Indian society and beyond its.

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