

SPATIALISATION OF KHASI CULTURE: LAND, RITUALS, FOLKLORE AND DEVELOPMENT

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The RiKhasi is the land, the spaces of the Khasi of Meghalaya. They define their world in terms of space through this concept. The Khasi oral traditions refer to their process of migration, the geographical locations at which they rested and how they got to the place where they are now. This paper, using secondary as well as primary data, attempts to look into the Khasi expressions of their world through their folklores, myths and beliefs regarding their land and their produce, as well as their identity. Finally, development issues relating to the land have also been taken up. Using these aspects the paper has attempted to show how the Khasi land is spatialised by its culture being impregnated, invested or embedded within the matrix of the land or the spaces within which the Khasis live. Eventually, the paper shows how development interweaves with these issues to create the present reality.

Keywords : *Khasi tribe, Land, Rights, Beliefs, Symbols*

"You never reach the promised land. You can march towards it" - James Callaghan

"The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes" - Marcel Proust

Introduction

The *Khasi* area is known as the *RiKhasi* roughly translatable to the *Khasi* land and the people residing therein are the *Khun Ki Hynniew-trep*; the 'children of the Seven Huts'. Their origin myths make them out to be members of the sixteen families who resided in heaven, of which the seven families became installed on earth and the *Khasis* consider themselves the descendents of those seven families. They were given that world with certain instructions directing them so as they could join the nine families above or eat *kwai* at the Gods' house, the accepted state after their death.

In the love for their land they refer to it as *KaRi u Barim u Bajah* – country of the ancestors, *KaRi Ki Kpa Tymmen Jongngi* – land of our forefathers, *KaRi Um-snam u Ni-u Kong* – land washed by the blood of our ancestors, *KaRi Ki Blei* – land of the Gods (Mawrie, 2001, p. 17).

KaRiKhasi is the domain of the *Khasis* where land is for all to derive sustenance from. Earth as a productive resource finds expression in the *Khasi* name for earth as mother, *Ka Mei Rilung*, who nurtures, carries, dandles, provides rice, bananas, feeds them with the produce

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of the land, wild vegetables, medicinal plants and fruits and also gives freedom and comfort (Mawrie, 2001, p.84).

The *RiKhasi* is not so much the geographical space demarcated through history and the politics of the times, to the Khasi it is their mother. They express their gratitude to her through the rituals in the festivals, like the Nongkrem dance, the *Shad Suk Mynsyiem*, the *Bediengkhlam*, at the beginning of all these festivals God as the provider is invoked and thanked with, *Shi Hajar Nguh*, a thousand times, they then seek the blessings for the people and the land, to keep them in plenty and blessed. Though the *Shad Suk Mynsyiem*, is a special celebration to thank for the year gone by and blessings for the year ahead, all the other festivals too begin with the special invocation. As the Khasis have no special place or day of worship, nor any special religious specialist, it is in times of special festivals and special gatherings, during birth, marriages and death that the gratitude is expressed, by whoever is leading the prayers, to God the creator for giving them this land and all its bounties to sustain them,

It must be remembered that, "to them land is not merely an asset or property but means of livelihood around which they have built a culture and identity. So the practice cannot be written off by saying that they lack emotional attachment to it. It is their emotional attachment to land that makes them fight and lay down their lives for it" (Fernandes, 2004, p.16).

This paper looks into some of the most important works relating to land and social structure. The introduction section is followed by review of literature, statement of the problem, objective and methodology. The next three sections divide the observations from fieldwork that have been classified into three categories – i) the spaces of the creation myths demarcating areas and boundaries of the *Khasi*, then ii) myths, agriculture and festivals show how time and space are linked in practice, and finally iii) how memory and folklore demarcate the lands of the *Khasi*. The next section titled Development and Land is essentially the analysis or discussion which shows how these cultural factors give a different dimension to land rights and entitlement that may not be seen through theoretical practices or even by simplistic analyses of development. A concluding set of comments shows how these factors may be understood and where we should go from here with regard to development.

Review of literature

The ethnographic works on the *Khasis* were penned by Gurdon (1975), Choudhury (1976) and Bareh (1997), among others, who dedicated large sections on the land type and ownership patterns among the *Khasis*. They also include a lot of pertinent information regarding the use of

space and beliefs regarding land use, which was relevant to this work. Gurdon's work is pure ethnography with equal detailed emphasis on all aspects of social life of the Khasis, while Choudhury and Barehalong with the details of social life drew on the mythology and history of the groups, Lyngdoh (1991), Sen-Shadap (1981), drew on the history of the Khasi and Jaintias with pertinent details about folk beliefs, Kynpham Singh in his article in Roys' (1979) book brought out the folk understanding of ecology and the beliefs associated thereof, I could ascertain about the beliefs in the field and draw on beliefs regarding land and ecology by using this information as the starting point. Mawrie (2001) among others, wrote books that provided snippets of information regarding the beliefs regarding land as was also seen in the article by Roy (1936). This is further accentuated by the information on traditional beliefs gleaned from the folktales in Rafy (1985) and Nongkynrih (2007). Baroouh (2012) in her recent comprehensive compilations on the land ownership patterns and the administration of justice afforded a detailed understanding of these core issues through history.

The recent articles highlight the problems regarding land use and how modernity has slowly eroded the beliefs regarding land and its patterns of use. These issues and the problems of modernity are elaborated in the papers by Rodgers (1994), Nongkhlaw (2003-2004) and the Guardian News Bureau (2005). Monographs by Fernandes (2004), Chinai (2006) and Phira (2010) on land and its administration.

Statement of the problem

How the term *Khasi* came to be given to them was a matter for speculation among social scientists and indigenous thinkers. However, the name became established with the British administration. In the days before the introduction of the alien administration and their belief, they lived in their respective areas and referred to themselves either by their clan names, or, at the most, when they ventured into the territory of another chief, by their area name. However, when in contact with totally alien people, the people of the plains, with whom they had occasional and minimal interaction in the form of trade, referred to them as *Khasi*, they accepted the name by acquiescence. The term *Khasi* which, therefore, became the administrative referent is commonly used as a generic name for the *Khyntiam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War* and the *Lyngngam*, terms for people of the common stock inhabiting various geographical locations of Meghalaya. The *Khyntiam Khasis* are those inhabiting the central portion of Meghalaya. To the East were the *Pnars* who were also known as *Jaintias*, to the North the *Bhois* and the Southern slopes were occupied by the *War Khasis*. The *Lyngngam* occupied the Western portion, the area bordering Garo hills.

All this is but mere academic, political, if you classify a group of people. 'Who is a *Khasi*' and what makes a people so, is in how they think of their world as distinctive. The land they reside in and have demarcated through distinctive symbols, lores and emotions is the point in question in this paper.

Objective

The objective of the study is to understand the connectivity of the *Khasi* people with land, the closeness inculcated into their psyche and the changes in this connectivity through history.

Data and methodology

The study is the result of a long interaction in the field, which includes Shillong and its surrounding smaller townships and villages of Nongpoh, Smit, and Jongsha. For the study thirty in-depth interviews – 8 from Nongpoh, 10 from Smit, and 12 from Jongsha - in these villages were conducted. At Nongpoh and Smit, the focus was on key informants like the *Shong* (the village durbar) leaders, and those suggested by others. The first attempt was to collect a total list of the various hamlets through the community leaders at the *Shong* office. The leaders themselves were interviewed. The information from 100 conversations with people from all over the Khasi hills and at the market in Shillong formed the basis of the baseline data. This interaction in the field was done during the summers from 2010 to 2015. Having been born and brought up in the land of the Khasis and experienced these land ownership systems in action much before starting to actually work on this project, it was an issue close to my heart, and this was the preliminary piece of an ongoing work. The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide and a schedule. Content analysis of primary and secondary sources, like newspapers, magazine articles further substantiated the field data.

Findings and analysis

It is a common understanding that tribals are close to their land which has been illustrated in the case of the *Khasis* through delving into the common statements, beliefs and observances of the people. The changes in the system of administration, population equations, economics and the pressures of everyday life resulted in a lot of the changes in the connectivity of the *Khasis* with their land and the interweaving of the social structure with land.

The spaces of the creation myths

The creation myth of the *Khasis* lays down that God, the creator, in the beginning created *KaRamew* – the mother earth; and her husband *U Basa* – patron god of villages (Nongkynrih, 2007, p.1). In answer to

their prayers for children, *KaRamew* gave birth to five children of great power and accomplishment and they were, *KaSngi*, *U Bnai*, *KaUm*, *KaLyer*, and *Ka Ding* corresponding to the Sun, Moon, Water, Wind and Fire. As she watched with joy her children grow and shape the world with trees and flowers, she felt the need to ask God for a caretaker for all the bounty provided by her children. On seeing the developing war between the spirits residing in the earth, and the battle of the mountains, God realized the need to first send down an administrator for the animals in the form of the tiger. However, matters just got worse and God later on decided to send seven of the sixteen families residing in heaven. This was the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* (seven nests or seven roots) or the seven families who were the ancestors of the *Kynriam*, *Pnar*, *War*, *Bhoi*, *Maram*, *Lyngngam* and *Diko*.

The beginning of *Khasi* religion, too, may be traced to this origin myth. Along with the seven families, God sent down three commandments to the people of the seven huts, saying that if they followed those three commandments they would go to heaven to join the nine above (*Khyndaihajrong*) on death. From these commandments developed the belief system of one God *U NongbuhNongthaw*, the creator and protector, with each aspect of life and activity being ascribed to this God but assigned different names thereof.

This, therefore, was the *Khasi* land given to them by God to look after to the best of their ability. As the seven families expanded, different aspects of life were addressed. Land was responsible for two of the basic needs directly, food and shelter. In order to administer these needs for use of all, the land was classified into two types, *Ri Raid* – land under the joint control of the various clans or an individual institution, to be allotted to the members of the clans or used for the individual institution. The land for the use of the *Syiem* (chief) and *Lyngdohs* (state priests), village lands, sacred forests and such like community land fall under this category. As it was considered the duty of the youngest daughter of the family to look after the welfare of all in the family and by extension of the clan, all members are expected to have some source of sustenance, like cultivable land, if it was wanted. The person had the right of use and occupancy but no permanent heritable and transferable rights to this type of land.

The *Ri Raid* village lands were allocated to individual families by the village headmen in consultation with the *Durbar Shnong* (the village council) and generally every family of the village was allotted some amount of homestead land, at least. If a person takes a piece of land and keeps it unused for some crop cycles the land is taken away. *RiKynti*, on the other hand, is the land that a person has acquired and

has permanent heritable and transferable rights to it. This includes land of the *Bakhrar* or the leading families who came first and occupied or won those lands, land bought or land coming to a person or family from an extinct clan. The *RiKynti* land areas were demarcated with stones and natural landmarks (Roy, 1936, p.378). The *Khasis* paid no taxes on land and all the produce was their own.

The *Khasis* are agriculturalists and for them land is the source of their livelihood. There are twelve months in a *Khasi* year and these are now used in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. Originally, the year began on the first day after the longest night of the year, though according to some it began with the appearance of the Moon in October when the paddy started ripening in the fields (Lyngdoh, 1991, p.53). The months of the year were named according to the context. For instance, the time when pieces of wood have to be turned for January, when the land looked dry and barren for February, after a grass which grows for March, darkness of storms for April, for a particular flower which blooms in May, for June the term is 'deep', indicating deep and full rivers, streams and waterfalls. July is named as ill-smelling referring to the decay of vegetation after the heavy rains, August is named after a flower which blooms at that time, September is named after hard work as this is the time for ploughing, October is named after red as this is the time for ripening crops and fruits, November is the joyous month when the granaries are full and rice cakes are made or it also could refer to the clearing of forests for *jhuming*, December is named after winnowing baskets as this is the time for winnowing the paddy. Thus, one may see that the months are named after natural conditions and the activities which ensue thereof. The weekdays are named according to the market days of particular areas helping the people remember them so that they can attend them for their needs.

Agriculture, festivals and mythology: Keeping time through space

The *Khasis* practice both permanent and shifting cultivation. Women participate in the process of cultivation, especially the shifting variety. They mostly grow rice, potatoes, millets and maize. Most *Khasi* houses, even in the urban areas, have small-scale backyard plots, and scattered fruit trees like pears, peaches, oranges, passion fruit or local fruits and seasonal vegetables like squash and common vegetables for everyday use. Of course, fruit plantations are common, too and fruits like oranges, pears, bananas and pineapples are plentiful.

The festivals of the *Khasi* result in the coming together of the people to rejoice and to thank God for the blessings He has bestowed in the form of a good harvest and to appeal to Him to continue to do so

and also to keep away disease and pestilence. One of the main festivals is *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem*, held at the official residence of the *Syiem* of Khyriem, held to pay respect and honour to their ancestors and also invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, well-being and general prosperity of the people of the state. Another festival of importance is the *Behdeinkhlam*, celebrated by the *Prars* at Jowai principality. Held in the months of June or July after the sowing is done, the festival emphasizes the rituals for driving away disease and pestilence but an important component is the prayers offered to God with hopes for a bountiful harvest and the well-being of the people.

The festival of *Ka Sajer* in the *Bhoi* area is observed during the months of December, January or February before the sowing for the year starts and the harvesting is completed. This festival is connected with the agriculture and cultivation especially of rice. Here, the main emphasis is to thank God for his blessings for a good harvest. Another special festival connected with agriculture and cultivation occurs in the *Bhoi* areas, i.e., the northern part of Meghalaya in the month of March. The festival is called *Ka Lukhmi*. Prayers are offered to *Ka Lukhmi* or *Ka Leikba* the goddess of rice and agriculture who also symbolizes wealth and prosperity and is also the goddess of the house. This festival is celebrated in the month of March after the harvesting is done and before the sowing begins. The myth connected with the origin of this festival tells of how rice got to be grown in among the *Khasis* and it also lays down the moral codes for economic prosperity and well-being (Lyngdoh, 1991, p.92).

There are many beliefs regarding agriculture, some of which include the fact that they do not sow seeds when angry or sad, or when the moon is waning (Lyngdoh, 1991, p.49). Regarding fruit trees, there are beliefs like donning female attire on a male tree may assure its fruiting. Planting a tree or tomato plant in the front yard was seen to be auspicious.

Land and the works thereof are woven into the detail of life in an intricate way. During the naming ceremony, which generally occurs the very next day after the birth, the things placed next to the child while asking for blessings are a point in issue. If the child is a girl *kakhoh* and *u star*, a conical basket and strap commonly used for carrying baskets, referring to her role in carrying materials especially agricultural items, are kept alongside. If the child is a boy a quiver with three arrows is placed, referring to his role as a warrior or a protector or even hunter. These objects are also used during the death rituals in the same order for males and females. In many areas the house-warming ceremony is held only in spring where Mother Earth, who has just awakened, is invoked (Roy, 1979, p.178).

The spaces of memory in folklore

Every day practices have evolved new nomenclature to demarcate '*Khasi*' space to make out *Khasi*-ness. One of the ways is a typical *Khasi* method of using the knife away from the body. The smells of non-*Khasi* and *Khasi* areas are also claimed to be different. The kind of wood to be used, the variations for different parts of the house was knowledge used when making a house. Locations of the house, its settings, rooms and its spacing are particularly unique. Houses at tri-junctions are not allowed in *Khasi* practice. Myth and folklore imbue spaces with meaning unique to them, even those otherwise left empty or fallow. All of these demarcate a unique *Khasi* space from non-*Khasi* spaces. A pertinent statement made often in the passing, referring to their place as 'Ri Jong-i', i.e., our land, shows that the love for this land is palpable. The festivals accentuate this belonging.

Parts of the land are clearly gendered, though other parts are not. This leads to the creation of various kinds and types of analogies in metaphors used in everyday life. These metaphors later become symbols that allow many more meanings than were perhaps originally envisaged. So, land and spaces become transformed through mythical analogies into socio-cultural spaces for action and decision-making.

Development issues and land

Most of the conflicts in *Khasi* society are now often centered around land. In the pre-Independence era, the *Khasi* national *Durbar* (formed in 1923), the *Khasi* States Federation (formed in 1934), and the main political party (*Khasi* States Peoples' Union), have been emphasizing the codification of land laws and working the laws according to the traditional norms of the *Khasi* people, besides other political demands. The *Khasi-Jaintia* Federated State National Conference and the *Khasi* Constitutional *Durbar* formed soon after Independence also emphasized issues relating to land.

At this point, the issue was more the fear that the outsiders were going to overwhelm them numerically. However, often, *Khasis* from other areas as well as other tribals were also attempting to get access to this scarce resource and many wish to use property as a means of livelihood itself, either as realtors/owners for sale or hire.

However, as land became a premium it has become a marker for identity. A *Khasi* could be determined by the fact that the person has land in the *RiKhasi*, thereby making them a legitimate member of the group. Land was always important for the *Khasi*. However, with it becoming scarce and many from outside coming in and settling on their lands, it has become a premier issue around which the idea of identity and ethnicity has focussed.

This, therefore, became a source of unscrupulous practices by the people who came in later. To many a *Khasi* today, much like the people anywhere else, earning for their own has become an important consideration, rather than communitarian considerations. There is often a trend of *Khadduh* claiming to be the sole heir of the property with heritable, transferable rights besides disclaiming her duties towards her clan members. Due to geographical distances accentuated by economic considerations, the kin group attachment, feelings of trust and devotion have dissipated and along with this the responsibilities of the *Khadduh*. In fact, the very authority of the clan is gradually decreasing and along with it the considerations for the well-being of the members in general. This situation of questioning the land and property rights and its resultant dissatisfaction has been addressed by the passing of the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (*Khasi* and *Jaintia* Special Provision) Act, 1984 (Nongbri, 2003) and The *Khasi* Hills Autonomous District (Allotment, Occupation or Use or Setting Apart of Land) Regulation Bill, 2005 (Guardian News Bureau, 2005).

The changes in the gender and role equations have affected the intimacy of connectivity with the environment. At the manifest level, this may be observed in the diminishing role of the *Khadduh* as the one to oversee the welfare of the clan and its members through communication with nature. Seven of the men I talked to eulogized the patrilineal system:

'the patrilineal system is so good, the men are given respect, can own land, [here, on the other hand,] we have to wait for our wives or sisters whim. Even if we work very hard in the fields or are very good with our work in the land, we are just workers'.

All the seven had some other source of income besides their work in the land. Eight more were indifferent and said it was an individual thing and what I earn from my mother's fields is for the family coffers but I do get some returns. If it is substantial returns all the families are given, but especially in times of need we do get something. About 80% of the people interviewed, both males and females were pursuing other occupations. The majority were plying taxi services, jobs in connection with the Church, blacksmithing, daily needs small shops, local medicines, putting up houses and/or shops on rent. Most pursued their own occupations and many had migrated out of the natal territory, therefore, only those who actually worked in the land consumed the returns from it. The men also stated that unless it was really very important, they did not make very frequent visits to the mothers' houses as they were so often occupied within their family of procreation, and often had to juggle the needs of both the sides. In most cases a tense

formality in the relationship of the two in-laws' families was noticed, however, in times of need, especially deaths, a strong bonding was observed.

With so much of strain on the environment in form of the Uranium mining problem, the issue of the wettest desert of Cherrapunjee, the society which had a strong feeling for the environment could have acted as an eminently viable pressure group, forcing the government to go in for more environmentally beneficial practices. In the area of uranium mining too, though there have been some protests, it is clear that unless the society really absorbs the implications to their identity through the attack to their land and forest rights, the true picture would not emerge. However, the very fact that the environmental issues have been relegated to non-issues in the society and would act as a detriment towards serving as such a pressure group.

Some such examples are given below; at Ladrymbai in Jaintia hills where land is supposedly protected by customary rights under the Sixth Schedule, "in a rush for wealth, marginal landowners in the coal belt have sold out to those with larger holdings or to Jaintia businessmen living in Jowai. "Others have entered into became deals where the land remains in their name but control is ceded to the non-local who put in the capital for coal mining" (Chinai, 2006, p. 44).

Today, the situation at this coal mining area is such that people are aware that they are destroying their land and will have to soon move out and settle elsewhere as they, "envisage that a time will come when the water runs out and we will have to leave this area" (Chinai, 2006, p. 47). The breakdown of administration and the fear caused by the mafia dons is another element. The local religious authorities say that, "he is at a loss, how to mobilize the community and help them see the consequences of their exploitation" (Chinai, 2006, p. 45).

Others from local as well as far-off areas who have settled in for long periods feel threatened. They collaborate with others to attempt to steal off *Khasi* lands by fraud, pilferage, theft and other forms of harassment. This includes burning off or destroying betel cultivation which is a cultural identity-marker. Others are using different methods to take off more land from the *Khasis* which are protected under the Constitution through the Sixth Schedule.

Conclusion

The study has attempted to highlight the traditional strong connectivity with the land and the problems in this equation in the present in terms of the changes in the perspective of the people and how they maneuver their living.

The agricultural economy, which had maintained a strong intimacy with nature, was for a long time shorn of this connectivity with nature. Religious conversion, cult formation, societal change and worldview expansion, even within the same culture, lead to major changes in belief systems and the structure of the worldview. Overtly, the tribe may keep acting almost as before with minor changes in everyday lifestyles but the real change takes place slowly and from within. It transforms the way people look at the universe. In this case, letting go of traditional conservation practices is only one aspect which has emerged here. This change may later be linked to non-*Khaki* modes of land ownership, inheritance, personal concepts of property and a belief in maximization as a worthy goal. Thus, a change in worldview signals a possible trajectory of transformatory change in the whole society. This would have tremendous changes in the way development is perceived.

This may be seen as a classic way of understanding development goals as those ideas that are developed through the cultural lens. In this case development would incorporate elements of greed, monetization and acquiring of land that may break apart the present form of *Khasi* society. This is what the tension is, within the hallowed premises of the traditional *Khasi* institutions. This breakdown is seen as an outside threat, brought in by outsiders into a traditional society, though some of these elements are happening within their own society.

As the frustrations of these onslaughts mount and culture itself is held in doubt, small splinter groups with large followings, attack those who are seen as non-*Khasi* in their midst. In the slaughter and maiming of the innocents, there is a lull of satiation for a while, as people lick their wounds, look to find out who their friends really are, to reaffirm a new day which includes them as a part of this troubled world.

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