

In Life and Death: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Khasi- Pnar Society

By:

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Introduction:

Meghalaya located in the North Eastern part of India, is widely known for the people practicing matrilineal way of life. The Khasi-Pnar and the Garo surrounded by patriarchal cultures, are the only communities practicing matrilineal system in main land India. In the last two hundred years or so these societies has gone through many changes – social, economic, political and religion. This paper ponders on Reciprocity, Gifting and Solidarity in Khasi-Pnar Society, also it aims to highlight changes in the same due to the dynamic nature of human society generally.

In all human societies there are rites and ceremonies accompanying major events in life such as birth, marriage and death- in some simple whereas in others more elaborate. The Khasi adage *‘Ha ka ka- iap ka-im’* meaning in life and death, refers to the solidarity of family and lineage members as well as members of the village community on the occasion of life-giving and especially at the time of someone’s death. This presentation is not an elaboration about the rituals or ceremonies accompanying rites-de passage, but rather on the reciprocity and gift-giving on these important occasions as the way of life of the Khasi-Pnar people.

Reciprocity and Gifting: Traditional Practices

With conception a woman is suppose to eat for the *‘two bodies’*. Relatives, neighbors and friends would try to feed her something delicious or her favorite dish so that the unborn baby inside her do not feel deprive by the craving of food by its mother. A drooling baby is believed to be due to the unfulfilled yearning for

some food by its mother. Even spicy food etc. which are usually avoided during pregnancy and breast feeding period is allowed to the pregnant mother to satisfy the craving. Ideally birthing of a child is help by a 'gifted' woman or by women relatives and neighbors. After birth of a child both mother and child is being 'bath' for at least a week. Neighbors, relatives and friends will bring chicken or other food items for the physical well being of the mother and the new born. On the occasion of naming a small or big feast is given to all relatives and neighbors.

As the child grows the upbringing of the child is not the responsibility of the mother and father alone. Among the Pnar who practice the 'visiting husband', mother's brother/s assume the role of a social father. Other relatives- grandparents, uncle and aunts and elder siblings do take care of the physical and social development of the child. Even neighbors taught children right and wrong, etiquette, manners etc. Thus mothering or parenting is not limited to biological parents alone. An unmarried woman or man can always mother her/his sister's or brother's children. Orphans of sister's need not be formally adopted by the family- they automatically become children of the surviving sisters or the responsibility of the youngest daughter of the family. A Khasi-Pnar ruler 'Syiem' is known as 'U Syiem- U Kmie' -meaning king is like a mother- he was suppose to take care of his subjects like a mother care for her children. Older women are commonly addressed by strangers as mother. Motherhood is not limited to a biological mother alone and though Khasi never have a 'commune' per-se, the whole community was a commune in itself traditionally.

Marriage for the Khasi-Pnar need not be accompanied by elaborate rituals and ceremonies. It may be carried out without rituals by simply informing the parents of the concern couples and later other relatives; maybe what is understood in western societies as common law relationship. When formal ritual takes place it may range from simple ceremonies to elaborate ones. When a couple is married through formal rituals, especially those accompanied by big feasting everyone is involved – family, lineage members and also the villagers. Clan members would contribute animals like pig and chicken for the feast, villagers on the other hand may contribute paddy or rice and vegetables for the feast. When money sets-in

monetary contributions from family and lineage members is received. Besides all these contributions for the wedding feast, gifts especially household goods or money is given to the bride and the groom by friends and family members.

One or two days prior to the marriage feast villagers would lend their helping hand in preparing for the feast- women pound the paddy and clean it as well as the vegetables etc. men would be busy collecting the fire wood, setting up sitting arrangements etc. and on the day of the feast slaughter the animals for feasting. On the day of the marriage both men and women would be busy cooking the food, young boys and girls busy themselves with distributing of 'Kwai'- areca nut and betel- and food for everyone. The atmosphere is filled with the festive mood and in the evening and at times throughout the night everyone takes turn in singing and dancing. This free giving of food stuff, free service, money and time away from the daily chores, is reciprocated by the family when similar occasion happen in others families.

Marriage is an occasion celebrated by all in the villages and there could be families who may not reciprocate but death is an occasion where no family should fail to reciprocate. It is customary to keep the body for two-nights, awaiting relatives from adjacent villages to arrive for the cremation. While the body is still in the house it is customary among those in Khasi Hills to give modest food for all who comes and share in the lost of the family. It is borne by not only the family and lineage members but to an extent by others in the village by contributing foodstuff and money. This is done to express good feelings for the departed soul, at the same time wishing the soul to depart peacefully from this world. Among the Pnars it is not customary to give food rather neighbors will bring food and 'kwai' for the family members and those who come from adjacent villages.

In sympathy of the bereaved family neighbors will stop going to the fields and take turns to be with the family members day and night till the body is cremated. Young boys and girls will be present in the nights with the bereave family as long as the body is in the house. Men will prepare the concierge for carrying the body

to the cremation ground, while women busy themselves preparing the 'Kwai' and food etc.

Depending on the capacity of the family and convenient of the other lineage members a primary or secondary burial (of the uncalcined) bones takes place, when the unburnt bones collected after cremation are deposited in the clan ossuary. On such occasion a feast is given to the lineage members and to the villagers. It is the family and lineage members who bore the expenditure. Each family contributes animals for the feast as well as other foodstuff or money. Neighbors too may contribute in cash or kind. It is a practice among the people in West Khasi hills that on the secondary burial of the father's mother – *Ka Meikha*- each of her son's family should bring at least one pig to be feasted on that occasion. Respecting a father is shown by the respect meted to his mother and sisters while alive and on their death the numbers of pigs brought by the 'Khun-kha' speaks volume.

The Khasi-Pnar reciprocal practices of gifts giving and free service is not carried out only during important events of human life as described above. Reciprocal services especially when building a new house and harvesting period can still be observed in some villages till date. Besides these major occasions family members and neighbors help one another when sick and when any unto-wards incidents occur like bad harvest, accident etc. For example there is no professional healer or masseur in the past, these attributes are neither hereditary nor acquired- one is simple blessed with such capacity and one is suppose to provide one's service freely.

A traditional Khasi family always cooks extra food, in case someone drops by while eating. When someone visits it is customary to give them something to eat, if not at least 'kwai'- arecanut and betel- is given (there is a sad story as to the origin of 'kwai as the culture of the Khasi-Pnar). No one waits for the formality of being invited to have a meal when visiting family, friends or neighbors. Children are especially regarded as ravenous throughout, and no adult can eat letting children watch whether known or strangers. Food a basic needs of human is

shared with joy and open heart and it binds the diners in a way. Reciprocity of food-gifting and free- services is a way of life of the Khasi-Pnar society and what binds them together in solidarity.

Reciprocity and Gifting: Contextual Practices at Present

The reciprocity of gifting and free-service has substantially modified at present. Reciprocity and gifting is still practice but in different degrees and in different modes, at different level of the contextual situation and position of the family or individuals. Khasi-Pnar gifting and reciprocity is rudely altered and compromised in different ‘pockets’ of Khasi-Pnar society by the dependency of money as a means of survival, as determination of affluence and status imposing symbol. Khasi-Pnar society was exposed to market exchange through the medium of barter or monetary exchange long back from the 16th century onwards; but back then money was a means to secure daily necessity for the commons (salt, soap and dry fish at least) or acquisition of luxury items (gold, precious stones etc.) for the more affluence.

When the East India Company reached the then Bengal Province in the late 18th century, ‘money’ became a household word not only for acquisition of daily necessity or luxury items, but for trading beyond their territory (export) of natural products like limestone, iron ore, oranges, honey, areca-nut and betel etc. The intrusion and occupation of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills by the British empire in the early 19th century (1826 in Khasi Hills and 1835 in Jaintia Hills) is accompanied by full scale usage of money- either British officials negotiating for land or service with money exchange; or with the Bengalees Babus and Nepalese Soldiers who live full scale on monthly salary provided by the ‘Throne’ for their livelihood. Colonization and the introduction of white colored jobs- clerical or sought for designated ‘Indian Civil Services’ officials - one needs money for being formally educated at neighboring ‘principalities’ to aspire for these posts.

Money makes all things turn around the fingers full angle by the 20th century, in the new-found town, Shillong and to a great extent in the villages too. Reciprocal gifting is carried out with money and free-service providers and receivers vary

accordingly. Among town dwellers it is more limited or provided as token service. The affluence does not want to be obliged with free service and the less affluence reciprocated in a rather limited way compared to the earlier eras. The have-nots and the village folks still reciprocate free services in a generalized way. Thus the traditional practice is being affected with the introduction of monetary payment for goods and services.

With the introduction of modern medicine, institutional delivery becomes popular. Most practices related to pre and post-natal care for the mother and child needs cash compensation or payment. Massage for the expecting mother, help in case of home delivery, bathing a mother and child all needs monetary payment. When visiting a newborn too friends and relatives commonly give money, wishing for its healthy growth etc. Naming ceremonies maybe accompanied by moderate or small feasting. The practice of giving foodstuff etc. for the mother's health is rarely carried out presently.

Marriage rituals vary among Christian and non-Christian, ceremonies and feasting too vary according to the economic status of the family and the type of ritual perform. The joy of communal cooking for feasting on a wedding is taken over by commercial caterers in the town and to an extent in the villages too. The bonding and solidarity of joint cooking, contributing foodstuffs and free-services is not felt, when the job is taken over by professionals. Monetary help is still rendered by family and lineage members to meet the expense of the wedding feast. Fewer neighbors are invited and even relatives are being redefined, unlike before where all relatives and all the villagers were welcome. In the villages however, the old practice of cooking together and inviting all relatives also every family in the village still persists. In Nongbah village it is customary till date for every family in the village to contribute one basketful of paddy to the wedding feast, about 20 to 40kgs. A ritual specialist whether Christian pastor or traditional priest gets the fore limb of at least one of the pig killed for the feast.

Practices relating to death rituals vary according to the religion - Christian or traditional and old ceremonial aspects are being syncretized in both sections of the

Khasi-Pnar people. The custom of keeping the body for two-nights in order to wait for relatives and friends from adjacent villages or towns is still practice among all Khasi-Pnar, irrespective of religion. The giving of food has become less modest and again varies according to the status of the family- Kwai, tea and snacks is provided to all who comes to express sympathy; food (simple or more elaborate) is offered to all but usually decline by many except for close relatives and friends. Among the Pnars too, kwai, tea and snacks as well as food is given to all unlike before.

Two- three decades back male neighbors/ villagers contribute their free service by making the coffins and women the beautiful westernize wreaths from the flowers collected from or donated by neighbors and friends. Neighbors help in preparing the tea, food etc. offered to sympathizers. At present ready-made or custom made coffins are being purchased. With the starting of floriculture, rarely one gives flowers for free, the same need to be purchased. Paid dishwashers and many a times so-called professional for preparing tea and food, and in some areas in the town paid grave-diggers are engaged. Free- service practice in the past is very limited at present, even time spent to comfort the bereaved family by neighbors and friends alike becomes token- like and none will stop going to works except for immediate members or very close friends. It is usually close relatives who will be present in the nights with the bereave family when the body is in the house, not young neighbors in the by-gone eras.

Funeral becomes expensive affairs but still one good thing is that all who comes to sympathize, and /or to attend the funeral or cremation will definitely donate some amount of money- relatives and lineage members often donate more than neighbors/villager, but a stream of villagers for each family donating no doubt make a substantial contributions. Besides the personal contributions, each village or locality in the town and some clans have collective donations to be gifted on this solemn occasion which should not be missed out; by anyone who counts in the network of relatives and friends. Thus expense at death ceremonies though more expensive than in the past is borne not only by family and lineage or clan members but definitely by co-villagers, co-workers , friends etc. of the deceased

person. Khasi –pnars reciprocate more when death occurs rather than in times of birth and marriage occurs.

Reciprocal services when building a new house or harvesting becomes a rarity but still observed in some remote villages till date. Helping one another by family members and neighbors when sick or when any unto-wards incidents occur is still carried-out to a great extent. Now many healers and masseurs charge for the medicine and /or services. Cooking extra food is not widely practice at present except in big families in the town and villages alike. It is still customary to offer ‘kwai’ , tea and snacks, to anyone who drops by but sadly eating food is regarded differently at present. Food a basic needs of human is shared with joy and open heart and it binds the diners in a way, but sadly this is less open at present. Reciprocity of food and services was and still is (in a more define sense) the way of life of the Khasi-Pnar society and what binds them together in solidarity.

Rematriation of Traditional practices in Khasi-Pnar Society

The Khasi-Pnar reciprocity and gift-giving in life and death though altered is not obliterated by the market economy and exchange based on money. Money almost obliterated gifting of foodstuff but facilitate gift giving in some ways- especially for those who depend on cash income for their livelihood. The solidarity of family and lineage members as well as members of the village community, on the occasion of life-giving and marriage may have lessen, but at the time of someone’s death all comes together. People are bustling and preoccupied with jobs and other familial obligations and this makes free service rare except from few close relatives, friends or neighbors. The unilateral gifting

In anthropological terms khasi –Pnar gifting practice in the events of life and death can be classified as generalized exchange not balance-exchange. It is interesting to note that they do not have a term equivalent to ‘gifting’. In their saying ‘ai-kti ai-kjat’ -literally give a hand give a foot- meaning to lend a helping hand is the logic of their gifting. Such gifting need not be reciprocated directly between the giver and the receiver, but each and every Khasi-Pnar becomes the giver and the receiver to and from everybody else. It is a way of life and the logic of gifting

passed on from the past to the present generations and so on. When **Genevieve Vaughn** talk of the **Gift Economy among matriarchal people and the maternal values**, I'm sure she refers to these kind of existing societies like the **Khasi-Pnar** where gifting is the way of life that binds them together in solidarity. **“Gifts given unilaterally can propagate throughout the community, creating a chain of givers and receivers who are all related to each other. This chain is broken when exchange and the market step in” (200????; 2007).**

Modern way of life pushed people from the village to towns or from towns to village. This makes it difficult for clan or lineage members to stay near one another- and know all the clan or lineage members. Some clans have started new clan organizations with the aim to know the increasing members and especially to support one another in life and death (*‘Ha ka- iap ka-im’*). These clan organization collected monthly or yearly contribution with a minimum ceiling and each family can increase according to capacity. The fund collected is diverted to help clan members at the marriage feast, for funeral expense, during serious sickness or when any untoward incidents occur. The gift economy though modified still exists among the indigenous Khasi-Pnar society.

This practice of forming new clan organizations is but a rematriation of our traditional cultural practices of herding back clan members into a syncretize gifting practice befitting the context and setting we live-in at present. Borrowing Newcomb's words (1995) “rematriation acknowledges that our ancestors lived in spiritual relationship with *one another* for thousands of years and that we have a sacred duty to maintain that relationship for the benefit of our future generations” (italics mine). In all of our cultures there are good practices and these needs to be rematriate, revive and propagated.

References:

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