



NATURE AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP - A STUDY OF THE KHASI ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Banyllashisha Kharbuli

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.

Abstract

The Khasis are known to be great worshippers of nature. Nature plays an important role in the life of the Khasi tribal community. For the Khasis, nature is not just an object existing outside which is necessary only to sustain human life for all living beings. The Khasis look at it with respect as they hold the belief that nature is the only medium which connects God with the living beings, hence nature for the Khasis is not a non-living entity rather nature is conceived as the living entity which operates according to its rules and is the most sanctified creation of God. This paper covers solely the expression of the relationship between Nature and the Khasi tribe as its scope and to substantiate the paper both primary and secondary sources have been consulted.

Key words: *Nature, God, Khasi, Belief, Sacred.*

Introduction

“The Khasis like every tribal group have a very close affinity to nature. For a Khasi, God, man and nature form one single and indivisible entity. God takes his residence in nature, on the mountains and the hills, in the rivers the lakes and the forests, etc. Man, on the other hand, is seen as an integral unit of nature. His relationship with the rest of creation is so elemental that he is perceived as a being who communicates with the rest of creation. From this point of view, we can correctly affirm that the Khasis have an eco- theandric vision of reality.”¹ The Khasi belief system views the God, man and nature relationship as interconnected and there is no single area in which this relationship can be separated. The entire views about life of the tribal Khasis people are determined by this kind of relationship.

Nature in the Khasi belief system plays a very crucial role for the Khasis believe that lives on earth came forth due to the desire of nature herself, hence the Khasis affectionately address the nature as Mei ramew, Mei mariang which when translated to English means Mother Nature. “Nature for the Khasis is a mother and a teacher and they see a harmonious relationship between the various things in nature, such as plants, trees and animals. They see a valuable connection between nature and the life of man. A Khasi therefore personifies nature and speaks of its qualities as if they belong to a real human person. Thus the pine tree for the Khasi is a teacher of self-sacrifice and service, because it provides fuel, timber for houses, leaves for shelter, etc.”²

“All the Khasi moral stories through which the ancient Khasis used to transmit moral lessons to their posterity, are centred round nature.”³ The Khasi ethical outlook by which how a life is lived is determined by what is justified by nature, the Khasis hold the view that any act performed by a person has to be in accordance with the rules of nature and for every correct and wrong act, the nature herself takes the role of a judge and either punishes or rewards a person accordingly.

¹ Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.27.

² Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications, 2009) p.47.

³ Mawrie.L, SDB, Barnes, *Khasi Ethics* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications ,2014) p.99



It is interesting to note that the Khasis possess a philosophy of environment of their own without any influence from any external source. The Khasi philosophy is enriching as it is based mostly on moral stories which gives man a direction on how to lead life. Unlike in the west where environmental philosophy emerged as a concern when environment degradation had brought about drastic alterations in the lives of the masses, in the Khasi lives environmental philosophy was there right from the very beginning of life although there is no adequate writings about it. Right from the very beginning of the start of life the Khasis have always lived in harmony with nature, thus until the present time the Khasis have preserved many natural habitats which are of significance to the Khasi tradition. The Khasis view nature as something sacred and sublime which has an intrinsic value of its own and it is also considered as the most sanctified creation of God and hence everything that lives on it is also regarded as possessing an inherent value. According to the Khasi belief system, nature is the most important, precious and lively creation of God and thus it serves as the medium of communication between man and God. Nature plays a very crucial role in the Khasi tradition and whenever any hardship occurs in the lives of the Khasi people, they turn to Mother Nature by worshipping it with the help of its natural objects to make a communication with God and find a solution for the hardship. The Khasis have always believed that in case of any unwanted events which would occur, Mother Nature does her duty by warning the people through signs and signals which appear in the form of natural phenomena. Thus the Khasis refrain mostly from going against mother nature's wishes for they believe that doing so may incur upon them bad luck. Hence man and nature relationship in the Khasi tradition is unique and beautiful.

The Khasi Origination Myth

The idea of creation is something which has attracted attention of people of different communities and religions and at the same time it has also attracted great attention of the different areas of studies because each individual always desires to solve the mystery of creation and at the same time to discover how actually life began on earth. It is evident that many attempts have been made to solve the mystery of creation, there is on one hand the theological aspect which gives an explanation of how creation began and almost all religions have their own interpretations of creations and on the other hand there are scientific attempts which aimed at solving this mystery by putting different theories and material evidences, however hitherto no exact proof and evidences could be provided to prove how creation actually began.

The Khasis like almost every other community do possess an idea and concept of creation. It is crucial to note that man nature relationship developed with this idea of creation. Although the concept of creation is a central theme in the Khasi belief system yet there is no exact evidence to trace the exact nature of how creation began. The Khasi theory of origination is expressed in the form of myths and has been transmitted orally from one generation to the other because the Khasis do not bear a written scripture. According to the Khasi origination myths nature is found to be the ultimate source of creation of lives of both human and the non-humans hence nature is always given great value and revered.

“According to this Khasi creation myth, right in the beginning God is said to have created Ka Ramew (Mother Earth) and her husband called U Basa. The two of them lived in perfect peace and love for many years. However, they had one sorrow in life, namely, that they had no off-springs. In the course of time they felt bored and lonely. So they requested the Creator to give them children. Finally, when Ka Ramew had made ceaseless petitions to God, He heard her plea and gave them five children. The five children born to them were Ka Sngi (Sun) who became the first child, U Bnai (moon), Ka Um



(water), Ka Lyer (air) and Ka Ding (fire) who became the last child with the right of inheritance of everything that belongs to the parents. With the appearance of the Sun, Water and Air, vegetation began to grow on the surface of the earth. Many varieties of plants and trees, fruits and flowers flourished on the surface, thus giving a grandiose appearance to the whole world. Ka Ramew was very pleased with everything that she saw.”⁴ “As regards the creation of man, it appears that the Khasis believe that men have been created by God and lived with Him in heaven. Human beings appear to have belonged originally to the group of heavenly inhabitants known as the Khathynriew trep- Khathynriew skum (sixteen huts and families). These beings lived in their heavenly abode ordained by God for them. Of these sixteen huts, God sent down to earth seven of them (Hynniew Trep-hynniew skum) while the other nine remained on in heaven. The purpose of the arrival of the Hynniew Trep- hynniew skum, as it appears in the Khasi legends, was to look after the earth. Therefore, it is evident that mankind came into this world as stewards of creation. This is the Khasi explanation regarding the appearance of man on the face of earth. God blessed mankind and so they grew and multiplied and under their stewardship the earth prospered and there was peace and harmony.”⁵

The Khasi eco-spirituality

The Khasis, like many other indigenous religions lays great emphasis on nature, the way Khasis relate themselves with everything in nature points to the fact that the Khasis beliefs of nature is eco-spiritual. The eco-spirituality of the Khasis is evident in the way they relate themselves spiritually to the entire creation of God and as such they live a life of mutual connection with nature and everything in it. “A strong underlying principle of the Khasi eco-spirituality is the concept of sacredness of nature. Nature is seen as God’s greatest creation and a mother who nourishes every beings living within its bounds. The existence of sacred mountains, hills, rivers and sacred groves or sacred plants vindicates this fact. For the Khasis, nature is a holy sanctuary where God resides and continue to interact with man. The Khasis treat nature with respect and they reveal a certain feeling of awe towards her.”⁶ The Khasis thus worship rivers, forests, groves, trees, mountains and peaks as the places where God resides.

Significance of Nature and its objects in the Khasi lives

Sacred Groves (Law Kyntang)

Among the tribal Khasi the most important belief that they hold is that nature is sacred and holy, for such reasons certain places such as some forests have been preserved and marked as sacred. The Khasis call the sacred forests or groves as Lawblei or Lawkyntang, Law Adong or Law Lyngdoh. “There is a custom among the Khasis to declare certain groves or forests as Lawblei or Law Kyntang (sacred groves). It is believed that deities live in these grooves and, for this reason, no one is allowed to damage the by lumbering or by indulging in any other injurious activity. In these groves the trees and plants grow without any threat of being destroyed and the animals too enjoy the freedom and guarantee of security of life.”⁷ According to the Khasis, these sacred groves are dwelling places of deities and as such are bound by one strict rule- nothing can be taken out of these sacred groves, displacing even the

⁴Mawrie. L.,SDB, Dr. Barnes , *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.29

⁵ Mawrie.L, SDB,Dr. Barnes , *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.30

⁶ Mawrie.L, SDB,Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.154

⁷Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.155



tinest object in these groves means disrespecting the deities and as legends have it anyone breaking the rule is punished by the deities with illness which can even lead to death. A very important sacred grove in the Khasi hills is situated in Mawphlang, also called the Mawphlang Sacred Grove, this area is considered among the Khasis a very sacred place and this grove is taken care by a particular clan called the Lyngdoh as the belief is that the deities residing in this grove protects and looks after the wellbeing of the entire village, hence it is the duty of the people to look after this sacred place and to protect it from destruction while upholding its sacredness.

Sacred Mountains

Apart from the sacred forests and groves the tribal Khasis also recognize some mountains and hills as sacred and as legends have it the Khasis are believed to have descended to earth through these mountains hence such mountains have been preserved and protected by the Khasis. The tribal Khasis do have a practice of worshipping these sacred mountains and hills annually as a sign of thanking and pleasing the deities residing in these places. According to the tribal Khasis, among the other sacred mountains the Lum Shillong and the Lum Sohpet- bneng are considered to be the most sacred.

Lum Sohpet-bneng

“This is a peak that is most sacred to the Khasis because it is connected with their origin.”⁸ “This myth explains the arrival of man into this world. It is said that when the earth was filled with such grandeur, God blessed it with growth and increase. Then the earth made a plea to the Creator to send someone to be the guardian and steward of the whole creation. The Creator God summoned an assembly of his heavenly servants to discuss about this request of Mother Earth. After a long and hot discussion among all, finally they came to a conclusion that from among the sixteen huts who reside in heaven, seven of them should be sent down to earth to look after the earth and all the living beings on it. Thereupon God ordained that the Seven Huts (hynniew trep) should remain on earth and take care of everything in it, while other nine huts would remain on in heaven with Him. God granted peace and prosperity to the Seven Huts. They lived in harmony with every creature on earth and lacked nothing. God also made a covenant with them that he would be with them always. As a tangible sign of this, he planted on a hill top a giant tree called Ka Diengiei which acted as a ladder between heaven and earth. Through it Seven Huts could go up and down any time they liked. The covenant stated that as long as man would preserve this tree they would enjoy peace and immortality, but if the tree was cut down sin and suffering of all sorts would invade the world.

One day, however, man fell into the trap of the Evil one, in the form of a big snake (iakjakor), tempted the two brothers U Sormoh and U Sorphin to cut down the tree. The devil told them that the branches of the giant would block all light from the sun and then every form of life on earth would be suffocated to death. A great assembly was summoned and the people decided to fell the tree. Thus the tree was finally cut down. When the tree fell the world became clear and bright, but man realized that he had sinned against the Creator. Mother Nature died broken hearted and her children the Moon, the Sun, and the Stars ceased to shed their light. Man was left in the darkness of guilt and shame.”⁹

The Lum-Sohpet bneng is considered as the most holy place for the khasi indigenous people, the tribal Khasi people till date have preserved this holy place and every year religious customs are carried on top

⁸Mawrie. L, SDB Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.157

⁹Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications , 2009) p.31



of this peak as a mark of respect and to offer prayers and seek blessings from God. The Seng Khasis who are the followers of the tribal religion have taken up the task for the preservation of this place which tells a story of their origination on earth.

Role of Nature in the Khasi Customs and Rituals

As mentioned earlier, the Khasis consider nature as their mother who nurtures and take care of her children. It is important to bring out the point that in the Khasi lives nature plays the greatest role and hence every object of nature has a great significance in the Khasi indigenous religion. The Khasi tribal religion is largely dependent for its existence and prosperity on the nature and its natural objects. The Khasis do believe that every aspect of life depends on the will of God hence at any time, when sorrow overshadows or joy and happiness comes about the Khasis do have a practice of either pleading God for forgiveness and protection or thanking God by offering prayers with the help of natural objects. According to the Khasis the natural objects of nature are the most sacred objects hence it is through these objects that God and man relationship is established. “It is the firm belief of every Khasi that God reveals himself and his desires through the things of nature. A person who is closely associated with her will be able to read these signs and interpret them in his own life.”¹⁰

The main objects necessary in the Khasi religious rituals are the water gourd (u klong), rice grains (u khaw), water (ka um), banana leaf (la-kait), distilled liquor (iad-um) egg (ka pylleng), each of these objects has a profound significance in the Khasi custom and ritual and without these objects any Khasi ritual would remain practice. These natural objects are believed to be the best medium through which the will of God can be best revealed. “Khasi religion is a religion characterized by a variety of rituals and sacrifices proper to every occasion: at birth, at the naming ceremony (ka jer ka thoh), at marriage (poikha poiman) or at death (niam iap)”¹¹. At each of these ceremonies it is the natural objects which are of great significance. “Things from nature are indispensable for the sacramental effect of any khasi ceremony. They are being utilized with due reverence and with a great sense of sacredness about them.”¹²

What is crucial about the Khasi religion is that they consider religion not a human affair alone, by the use of natural objects in every ceremony it signifies that nature is as well plays an important role in the Khasi religion. In fact the role of nature is more prominent in the Khasi religion as nature partakes in all religious practices in the most concrete and polite manner. It is a well-known fact that the khasis do not have any specific place of worship such as a temple like other religions do; hence in this case nature becomes the only place where offerings to God can be made. “Nature becomes the altar and the prime matter for the sacrifices and she stands out as the ominous participant in every ritual. Her presence is invoked and solicited and man surrounds her with due reverence.”¹³ “For the Khasis the whole of nature is itself a place of worship. There are no artificial or decorative altars on which rituals are

¹⁰ Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications, 2009) p.63

¹¹ Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications, 2009) p.58

¹² Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications, 2009) p.59

¹³ Mawrie.L, SDB, Dr. Barnes, *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* (Shillong: Venrdame Institute Publications, 2009) p.62



performed. A simple altar made of mud and stones which are readily procured from nature, become the sacred altar on which they offer their sacrifices.”¹⁴

Nature as the judge of human actions

The Khasis have great reverence for nature as it is considered the most sacred creation and expression of God. The Khasis believe that nature is God’s best gift to mankind and as such nature is given great value in the tribal Khasi religion. The Khasis as it has been mentioned earlier considers the nature as their mother who nurtures her children and at the same time who guides her children to the right path. Nature is not only looked at as a mother but nature is regarded as the best judge who judges the course of actions performed by any human. The Khasis believe that rewards and punishment of actions performed by human always depends on Mother Nature; hence all human actions according to the Khasi are bound to be scrutinised morally by Mother Nature herself. The Khasis lays great emphasis on the ethical aspect of actions; hence every action demands that it should be in consonance with the demand of nature. “The Khasis believe that nature and untainted by any form of evil or corruption. While man’s honesty and integrity can often be doubted, nature’s integrity can never be put to question. For this in many instances of legal matters which are complicated and are beyond human judgement, the Khasis have recourse to nature as the just and final enforcer of laws and principles.”¹⁵ The most important objects of nature by which he judgements of nature is evoked in the Khasi belief system by virtue of their sacredness are the water gourd (u klong), water (ka um) and fire (ka ding).

It is worth mentioning that the Khasis not only believe that nature is the most just and accurate judge but also nature at times takes the form of a retributer who punishes a person who commits the most sinful act. “The Khasis also believe that Mother Nature exercises her own justice on people. Thus if a person commits a grievous crime, she herself punishes the culprit. There is a common belief among the Khasis that if a person commits ka sang like incest, which is considered a crime against nature herself. In this case nature takes her own step in castigating the culprit. Such a person would get deformed children, he/she would be eaten by a tiger, scratched by a bear or by some other wild animals or struck down by lightning or in such a family and clan an internal war and fight would take place. Such punishments are reserved to the forces of nature and these are understood to be the measures taken by God himself. Therefore for the Khasis nature is not a silent onlooker to the crimes committed by people against her, but she assumes the role of a just judge and metes out justice to one and all.”¹⁶

Man as the Steward on Earth

It is important to note that the Khasi religion regards the status of man not as the master of nature rather they see humans as the stewards or the care taker of nature and everything that lives in it. Man is regarded as the representative of God who descended on earth to look after the welfare of mother earth and as such becomes the medium between the Creator and the created. The Khasis also believe that man is a fellow creature with all that exists on earth from the animate to the inanimate and hence they cannot treat nature as their own property, rather the nature is respected and revered for the opportunities it has provided to the humans. The Khasis as mentioned earlier belief that man came to this earth on

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,p.62

¹⁵ Mawrie.L, SDB, Barnes, *Khasi Ethics (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications ,2014) p.100*

¹⁶ Mawrie.L, Barnes, SDB, *Khasi Ethics (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications ,2014) p.103*



mother earths plead to God to take care of mother earth, hence it is man's duty to take care of the nature and other fellow creature living in it. The Khasis have a firm belief that man does not have the authority to exploit nature or any of its beings, man only possess the right to ask, to seek permission from God before taking things from nature to fulfil their basic needs of life. As a steward, the Khasis hold the belief that they have the duty to live in tranquillity with everyone in nature and preserve it.

Significance of the self in the Khasi belief system

According to the Khasis, God is formless and shapeless however, God is conceived as Supreme Divine Spirit or the Self who pervades and permeates the entire universe. For the Khasis as humans are nothing but God's creation hence the self of humans are not different from that God. The concept of self is at the centre of the khasi tribal thought. The Khasis belief that while living on earth man is bound by some principles, so the Khasi lives rests on the most important principle of 'Kamai iaka hok' which when translated in English gives the meaning 'Earn your righteousness'. Living a righteous life has been at the centre of Khasi moral life; the more one lives a righteous life the more one is assured to be in communion with God or to get eternal peace in God's residing place in the life after death. According to the Khasi belief system the physical body perishes with death, however the soul remains immortal, hence living life in the most possible moral and ethical order is what will give the soul the eternal peace in Gods dwelling place. The Khasis term this eternal peace or the communion of the soul with God as 'Bam kwai ha dwar u Blei'. In the Khasi belief system there is no concept of heaven or hell, not even that of rebirth which is central to religions like the Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The Khasis belief that life is given by God through birth and in the time of death the same soul will go back to its original source.

Conclusion

In the conclusion it can be said that nature is of great significance in the Khasi lives, the Khasi eco-spirituality is an outcome of their view of live. The Khasis have a very close affinity with Mother Nature and this idea is not something novel but it was present right from the beginning of formation of the Khasi society. According to the Khasi belief system nature and lives of humans are closely connected, the Khasi view of life is such that one can never comprehend the meaning of life if separated from nature. Nature according to the Khasis is the most decisive entity in shaping the lives of any individual whether good or bad by virtue of it being considered the Mother Nature; hence the Khasis look at it with awe and treat it with great respect and care.

Although Nature plays a great role in the lives of any tribal Khasi, however it is disheartening to see that at present the condition of Mother Nature even at the hands of the Khasi is deteriorating with time, there is rampant exploitation of nature to such an extent that it has become difficult for Mother Nature to replenish itself because man's greed has surpassed even man's need. The reason for such kind of over exploitation of Nature is strictly because with the advent of modernization man has become a beast who has lost its conscience for the sake of fulfilling one's endless desire. The modern man has so become a slave of modernity that it only lays emphasis on satisfaction of one's greed by giving it the name of development, not realizing that in doing so it has stripped off Mother Nature from what it originally was thus reducing to an object fit only for exploitation. Unfortunately this idea of development has become so dominant that it has crept its way even to the Khasi lives that the khasis have unfortunately forgotten their roots and caused immense pain to their very own Mother Nature. Another reason for the present condition of Mother Nature is that the tribal ideology which served as



the basis of Khasi tribal religion has been replaced by the western Christian religion which does not share a similar ideology about nature like the tribal religion.

It is very crucial to set aside whatever may be the reason but instead bring about a change in the very mind-set of the modern man. It is important in today's modern world to not only safeguard the tribal religion but at the same time there should be endeavours to bring forth the ideology of the tribal religion regarding nature and its significance. As it has been mentioned earlier the Khasi tribal religion do not treat nature as an object for exploitation rather nature in the Khasi lives is the only cause for their existence therefore nature is valued and given great respect, therefore its protection and preservation is crucial to the tribal Khasi people.

It is very important in the present where environmental crisis is at the rise to talk about the kind of philosophy that the tribal groups uphold. It would be of great significance if such a noble view of nature is brought out to the world at large so that if not completely at least a bit good can be done to nature by enhancing the perception of man about nature. In a world where environmental degradation is the most serious problem, even the most little steps to help protect it from degrading further is worth considering.

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