

Birth and Naming Rites of Passage in the Khasi Indigenous Community: An Exploratory Discourse

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Abstract

There are rites of passage in every religion. They usually involve rituals or ceremonies to mark significant moments in a person's life, such as birth, adolescence, marriage and death. These highly symbolic ceremonies prepare people of their respective faiths for new roles in their personal lives. These rights of passage temporarily extricate participants from their social statuses.

The anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, in his book, *Rites of Passage*, explains how cultures and communities ritualize and guide the transitions in life from infancy to old age and discusses extensively on the three stages that an individual will have to go through when she or he goes through a rite of passage.

Rites of passage are therefore closely connected to biological transitions in a person's life which includes birth, puberty, marriage and death and the ceremonies performed marks important transitional periods in a person's life. The ceremonies involve activities and exhortations that strip individuals of their present role and prepare them for new roles to acknowledge their entry into a different phase of their lives.

The present paper will attempt to describe the birth and naming ceremony as a rite of passage in the Khasi indigenous community of Meghalaya and will apply the relevance and significance of the three stages in the rites of passage as outlined by Van Gennep.

Keywords: rites of passage, rituals, birth, ceremony, indigenous

Introduction

According to Marvin Harris, a rite of passage celebrates the social movement of individuals into and out of groups or into or out of statuses of critical importance to the individual and to the community.

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Reproduction, the achievement of manhood and womanhood, marriage, and death are the principal worldwide occasions for rites of passage (Merriam-Webster: n.d.).

There are rites of passage in every religion. They usually involve rituals or ceremonies to mark significant moments in a person's life, such as birth, adolescence, marriage and death. These highly symbolic ceremonies prepare people of their respective faiths for new roles in their personal lives. These rites of passage temporarily extricate participants from their social statuses. Turner argued that rites of passage are antithetical to existing social structure and 'subjunctive' because they invite new possibilities. Rites therefore enable participants to experiment with alternative social relations or to invent new ones.

Rites often complement religion and are in all religions, the most stable and lasting element. (Radcliffe Brown, 1952:155). Radcliff Brown assumes that any religion or any religious cult normally involves certain ideas or beliefs on the one hand, and certain observances on the other. These observances, positive and negative, that is, actions and abstentions, according to him, are rites. Rites are often considered as the result of beliefs. However, according to, Radcliff Brown, rites and the rationalizing beliefs develop together as a part of a coherent whole and in this development, it is the action that controls or determines beliefs. He propounds, then, that beliefs are rationalizations and justifications of rites. Thus, rites are seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another certain sentiment on which the constitution of the society depends upon (Radcliff Brown, 1952:157)

Alexander and Norbeck, consider rites of passage as ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another. They stated that many of the most important and common rites of passage are connected with the biological crisis of birth — birth, maturity, reproduction and death, bringing changes in the social status and therefore, in the social relations of the people concerned (Norbeck, 2018: 1).

The New World Encyclopaedia beautifully elaborates on the rites of passage. Starting with the definition of the rite of passage as a ritual that marks a change in a person's social or sexual status, to ceremonies surrounding events such as childbirth, puberty, coming of age, marriages or death, The Encyclopaedia gives a detailed analysis of the stages, types, examples and the nature and significance of the different rites (2019:1).

The anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, in his book, *Rites of Passage*, explains how cultures and communities ritualize and guide the transitions in life from infancy to old age and discusses extensively on the three stages that an individual will have to go through when she or he goes through a rite of passage. He says, 'For every one of these events, there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined'(Gennep, 1960: 3).

Rites of passage are therefore closely connected to biological transitions in a person's life which includes birth, puberty, marriage and death and the ceremonies performed marks important transitional periods in a person's life. The ceremonies involve activities and exhortations that strip individuals of their present role and prepare them for new roles to acknowledge their entry into a different phase of their lives.

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ages in the rites of passage as outlined by Van Gennep.

U Khasi, Bhoi and War, known collectively as *U Hynniewtrep* or people of the seven huts, inhabit Meghalaya, a state in the North East of India. They speak a Mon-Khmer language of the Austro Asiatic stock. The Khasi have their own unique culture with their unique rites of passages in relation to birth, coming of age, marriage and death.

The community had seen conversions into different faiths, the most dominant being that of Christianity. However, there is still a credible percentage of the population that has retained the indigenous belief of the tribe. It is interesting though to remember, that despite conversion, some of the practices in the rites of passage have percolated into the local form of Christianity and conversion has not really erased the essence of being a Khasi. The different indigenous practices that are still inherent in the different rites of passage, has helped the individual and the community retained their '*Khasiness*' even when there is so much of a global cultural intervention.

Rites in childbirth and *ka jer khun*, the naming ceremony can be classified under the life-cycle ceremonies which include a number of rites to celebrate the birth of a child and the naming ceremony which follows.

Gennep's Separation stage and the Khasi belief system

To Gennep, there are three stages in a rite to passage, separation, limen and aggregation. Separation, according to Gennep marks the stage where individual leaves the present stage he or she is in and moves on to the next new stage. In pregnancy for example, the woman leaves the old stage of a free independent woman to take up a new role of mother hood. In the process of embracing this role, the mother goes through changes biological, mental and psychological. However during this stage, it is expected that both she and her spouse will have to adhere to certain directives given by the community. Pregnancy among the Khasi is considered a blessing from God, the Almighty, and a consecration of the womb ritual, *the tap kpoh* is observed for the good health and safe delivery of the child (Hemron, 2009:65). It is worth knowing that special attention is given to the pregnant woman for her health and well-being since death during pregnancy or delivery of the child is considered to a Khasi, an unnatural death or *ka iap tryut iap smer*.

In the case of a prenatal or post-natal death, that is, in *ka iap tryut* or an unnatural death, proper divination has to be made to ask God for forgiveness for whatever sins of commission or omission (Tariang, 2012:143). It is mandatory for the *mait tyrut* ceremony to be performed to cleanse the family and the clan of the curse, *ka tryut*, so that such manner of death may not happen again in the future among the clan.

The traditional beliefs ensure that a mother during pregnancy deserves a strong social support group to ease her of both stress and anxiety and is advised not to attend deaths and funerals as this may agitate her wellbeing and that of the child within her. Quarrels and arguments in the family are to be avoided at all costs. A Khasi believes in certain prohibitions that must be observed by a woman in the family way. She for instance, is advised not to be part of the cremation or visit the house where an unnatural death had taken place, since such situations may emotionally disturb the mother to be. She is advised not to engage herself in any unwanted arguments, hence procedures for divorce are never entertained during a pregnancy. She is advised not to sew, spin, knit or weave.

The mother to-be is especially advised not to attend deaths which are not natural as the situation may impact negatively on the psychology of both mother and child. Further, the mother is advised not to end

stitches when weaving, stitching, weaving or knitting garments, since it is believed that doing so will symbolically mean closing one's life and that of the child. Photographing the mother in the stage of pregnancy is not allowed nor is the mother allowed to wander and loiter in forests and jungles lest she is captured by *U Suid tynjang*, the evil one.

Restrictions such as these are not only for the mother, but for the father as well. During pregnancy, the father is forbidden to hunt, complete the weaving and plaiting of a basket or bamboo work, or heat a piece of iron or use it as such actions are believed to adversely affect the health of the child (Mawrie, 1981:74). A hunting or fishing tool may mark an ugly scar on the child. *Ka jwar*, or a scar anywhere on the body of the child and can be attributed to the deliberate violation on the part of the father. Again, the father is not permitted to smelt any iron as his doing will result in an injury to the child. It is a strong belief among the Khasi, that should the father ignore the prohibitions, there is every possibility that the child conceived may be born blind, scared, maimed or even disabled in some way or the other. It may be noted that Christian converts pay heed to these prohibitions as well and are duly considered important. Traditional beliefs and practices such as these enhance the sanctity of pregnancy and childbirth which is the culmination of a rite of passage (Jacinto and Buckey, 2013:11).

Gennep's Liminality Stage and the Khasi belief system

The second stage limen is an intermediary period of transition, neither here nor there. It is the stage of the in-between period during which a person has not yet fully reached the new status in whatever rite of passage he or she is going through. The term 'liminality' is derived from the latin word *limen* and means the threshold, the boundary, passage between two different places. The term and notion of liminality introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his work *Rites de Passage* not only provided a theoretical example of liminality but also practically displayed its role in the process of seasonal transformations and individual lifestyle changes as well. According to Gennep, liminality expresses a passage to the intermediate, ambivalent, social zone, the so-called 'limbo'. In the liminal phase, an individual undergoes through the full blurring of the social environment, disclaims reality and moves to a transit and dynamic condition in-between the solidified and transformed structures.

In terms of pregnancy, the mother perceives herself as being betwixt and between the person she is now and the person she is becoming (Jacinto and Buckey, 2013:12). Her experiences can be either positive or negative depending on the context of her existence.

The liminality stage in the Khasi woman will be determined by her relationship and adjustment with her spouse and the family. The period will be one that is comfortable as she gets the support of her family and accepts her new role. In some cases, though, in a situation, where there is a strained relationship between the woman, her spouse and the in-laws, the woman can go through biological, mental and emotional challenges as she tries to accommodate and adjust to the new arrangements of a marital life.

It is at this early stage of pregnancy, that a woman can have likes for something (food, fruits) or even people and dislikes for something (food, fruits) and people. Hence a great deal of support and understanding is required both from the spouse and the families, both maternal and paternal.

At this point, it is important to note that the Khasi believes that a disturbed emotional condition can affect the developing foetus and result in an unhealthy pregnancy which can have an adverse effect on both the child and the mother. Procedures for divorce, *ka pyllait san shyieng*, if it has to happen, is kept in abeyance till after the child is born.

Genep's the Aggregation Stage and the Khasi belief system

The third stage as defined by Genep is Aggregation, which implies the recognition of the person's new status or a stage which incorporates the initiate into his/her new status.

When it applies to pregnancy, aggregation is a stage where the woman is accepted and recognized in her new role as a mother when the child is born. Birth is the mother's arrival at a new stage of life where her role significantly changes (Jacinto and Buckey, 2013:12). During the aggregation stage, both mother and child are introduced into the family and the society. Childbirth has been described as a spiritual event that is a peak experience for some women and the peak experience that accompanies birth often leads to a transformation of the mother's self-concept. When a woman gives birth to her child, she experiences the culmination of a rite of passage (Schneider, 2018: 21-22).

In the Khasi indigenous community particularly, the aggregation stage is of extreme relevance, because it is at this stage especially to the child who will be given an identity an individual recognition into the community through the naming ceremony, or *ka jer ka thoh*. *Ka jer*, refers to the choice or the selection of a name and the signifying process, *ka thoh*, refers to the testimony given or the witness to God, the family and the community about the authenticity of the name as formulated through the completion of the rituals, *ka suit ka shor*.

Before the delivery of the child, the family prepares a specific gourd, *u klong iawbei*, a hen whose legs are spotless, an earthen pot, *u khiew um sohpet*, to store hot water, a bamboo cylinder called *ka tang sohpet*, for the cold water, the mixture of which is poured into an earthen pot which is kept aside to bathe the new born child. Further, a flat elongated splinter is peeled off from the side of the bamboo cylinder with one side sharpened for cutting the umbilical cord.

When the baby is born, the umbilical cord is severed with the bamboo splinter prepared and tied three centimetres from the base of the baby's belly with a thread. However, it may be mentioned at this point that the practice is not as common presently, as presently child birth in most cases happens at hospitals and no longer at home.

The new born baby is bathed from a vessel containing a mixture of hot and cold water from the red earthen pot and the bamboo cylinder respectively. Every day the baby is given a bath from these three containers till the umbilical cord falls off (Tariang, 2012:144).

A black earthen pot, called *U khiew shynnai*, is prepared ready to put the placenta at the time of the birth of the child. The placenta, *ka jhep*, is not disposed of with disrespect. The placenta is considered very significant to a Khasi, since it has housed, nurtured and fed the foetus during the period of conception. The important role of the placenta is duly acknowledged by a Khasi and hence its disposal is done in a manner that is hygienic and respectful. The placenta is put into a black earthen pot, *u khiew shynnai*, along with some fire ash, and is kept aside to be disposed of at the time of the naming ceremony by the father who stores it away till the time the father takes it away to hide it in the hollow of a tree somewhere in the a neighbouring forest, if there is, and placing it high up on a tree to prevent the placenta from being devoured by wild animals. On the father's return, the priest pours water on the feet from the earthen pot, symbolical of cleansing the father, who then washes his hands before being part of the ceremony again.

After the delivery, the ritual is performed by sacrificing a hen. The *lyngdoh* or the priest critically examines the entrails of the hen for signs that can be interpreted either negative or positive. If the signs are not clear, the sacrifice must be done again (Mawrie, 1981:75-76). The ancestral mother, *Ka iawbei*

tynrail of the clan, is then invoked to support and bless the mother and the child with health and wellbeing.

The Naming Ceremony in the Khasi Indigenous Community

The naming ceremony is often done immediately after the birth of child so as to integrate the child into the family, *ka kur ka kha*, and the community, *ka imlang ka sahlang*, and save it from the possession by evil spirits. Once a child has been given its name, it no longer belongs to the parents, but to the entire clan, *ka kur ka kha* and to the community at large and carries with him or her, the religion *ka niam*, the beliefs and the rituals that go with them. It is worth noting that if the child is still born, the bones of the child cannot be kept in the family sepulchre as it has yet no name or identity. The bones of the dead child are just tucked in by the sides of the *mawshyieng*.

Ka jer khun, the naming ceremony takes place the morning after the child is born, in one of the rooms of the house that faces the east. Members of the family from both the paternal and maternal sides are invited to sit facing the east in the room allocated for the naming ceremony. If the child is born in the morning that is before dawn, the naming ceremony is done in the morning of the same day. In case the child is born any time during the day, the naming ceremony is done the following day.

Once the family has agreed upon the time for the naming ceremony which is indeed a rite of passage into the clan, the family and the community at large, the items for the ritual are prepared. These will depend upon the desire of the family but the general requirements will include the following:

U Prah — winnowing basket, *Ka Lakait* — plantain leaf, *U Skaw* — a small bottle carved out of a gourd *khaw* — rice, *ka um(ha u luta)* — water in a container, *pujer* — pounded rice powder, *ka ja* — cooked rice, *ka ryntieh* — bow (if the child is a male), *lai tylli ki khnam* — three arrows (if the child is a male), *wait bnoh* — small knife with a bent tip (if the child is a female), *ka khoh* — a conical basket (if the child is a female), *u star* — a cane head strap for the basket (if the child is a female) and *ka rashi* — a sickle (if the child is a female) (Marbaniang, 2012:3-5).

On the day of the ritual, the maternal uncle or a senior elder from the *kur*, (the mother's clan) sweeps, cleans and sprinkles water on the floor, lest there should be any stain or something unclean, be it a generational curse or an evil eye. He then throws a few grains of rice to the left and then to the right to ward off the evil and sinister forces. He takes the plantain leaf, dips it in water and waves it forwards and backwards, left and right, to cleanse the surroundings thoroughly. He then places the plantain leaf on the winnowing tray. He picks the pounded rice thrice and places it on the plantain leaf. A little of the pounded rice is kept aside by the leaf so it can be mixed with water and smeared on the baby and the witnesses later. He then takes the rice beer, pours it into the hollow gourd together with the pounded rice and some water and shakes the gourd for the mixture to be consistent enough before he places the gourd on top of the plantain leaf.

Early in the morning of the ceremony, rice is pounded in a *thlong* — a pestle with a *synrei*, a mortar. The items to be used are placed in a *prah*, the winnowing basket and kept ready for the priest. After having washed, bathed and dressed, the child is then brought into the room by either the *meikha*, paternal grandmother or the *kha*, sister of the child's father. The importance of the role of the *meikha* at the ceremony is considered to be auspicious for the good health and well being of the child. It is in recognition and respect of the contribution and role of the father and his clan to the process of procreation. The priest and all present are then seated around the child (Tariang, 2012: 149).

Having completed the preparation, the elder asks for the three names selected for the child by the paternal grandmother, paternal grandfather or the parents of the child. The ceremony begins with the priest putting all the required items on the plantain, *ka lakait*, which is then kept on the winnowing basket, *u prah*. The priest picks grains of rice together with the rice that has been pounded *u pujer*, and puts them inside the *skaw*, or the container carved out of a gourd and pours a little water into the mixture and leaves it aside.

If the child happens to be a boy, the bow, *ka ryntieh*, and three arrows, *lai tylli ki khnam*, are placed alongside the winnowing basket, *u prah*. If the child is a girl, a bamboo conical basket, *ka khoh*, the head strap, *u star*, and the sickle *ka rashi*, are placed instead.

The priest begins the ceremony by offering prayers to God, the Creator, *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*. The prayer mentions the name of the clan to which the child belongs and informs God about the name chosen for the boy/girl. The prayer and chanting of the priest is particularly significant since it is a seeking of permission from God the Creator, for a smooth passage into the life of the family and community, a formal rite of passage into the next stage of existence. The prayer begins by praising God for bringing into the world the child who will, after being given the names, will take an entry into the life of the family, the clan and the community. The priest/ elder beseeches God to bless the individual with a healthy and long lifespan, bless the endeavours undertaken, bless the person with prosperity and abundance and inculcate values of respect. After this, the priest once again beseeches God to bless the child with health and prosperity, integrity and honour in order that the child's aura, *ka rngiew*, may be strengthened and his/her life be guided by the three tenets of U Khasi:

- **Earn righteousness — *Kamai la ka hok***

This tenet emphasizes on one's honesty and integrity. The individual is expected to be above unfair practices in the pursuit of his /her work at all times. Hence the person's mission and goal is to earn with a sense of dignity and integrity.

- **Know yourself and know God — *Tip Briew Tip Blei***

This tenet highlights the importance of self- reflection. One should know and respect oneself which also necessitates the knowledge of God. A person who knows God will ultimately know how to guide oneself along the path acceptable to God.

- **Know your own maternal clan and know your paternal kin — *Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha***

The second tenet leads on to the third principle which demands respect and an acknowledgement of one's kith and kin, a respect to all members of the family from the mother's side and respect to all members of the family from the paternal side. This is the basic structure of *U Khasi's* social structure (Marbaniang, 2012:5).

In voicing the prayer, the priest holds the container hollowed out of a gourd, *u skaw*, which contains the mixture of pounded rice, and tilts it down. He calls out the first name chosen and if the mixture dangles as a droplet on the mouth of the gourd, the name is being considered as acknowledged by God and the forefathers. However, if the mixture flows through freely, the name is discarded. The priest or elder asks for the other two names chosen and proceeds with the same process of tilting the gourd with the mixture inside till the time the mixture adheres to the mouth of the container, *u skaw*, which implies that the name chosen for the child has been complied by God (Tariang, 2012: 151). If the mixture sticks on to the mouth of the container, it is assumed that the name mentioned has found favour in the eyes of God and the name chosen is confirmed. In a situation where the mixture flows out, it is assumed that the

name is not found suitable. When the name has been decided, the priest thanks God for the identity of the individual who will from hence forth be known by the name approved by the Creator.

Should the child be a male, the priest takes the bow and prayers for the gift of strength and honour .He then takes an arrow together with the bow and chants that the boy grows up into an honourable human being who will be ready to fight against all odds and protect himself from negative forces .The second arrow is then taken, symbolical of the man's protection of his siblings, his clan and family. The third arrow is taken, symbolically representing the tool of protection for the community, the village and the land and is accompanied by a prayer whereby the individual is entrusted with the required responsibilities (Marbaniang, 2012:5).

The priest concludes the prayer and chants by asking God to make the person a responsible human being, a good maternal uncle, a brother who will look after the affairs of the home and his siblings, a respectful husband, a responsible father, a good citizen in the community.

Should the baby be a girl child, the same process is being done except that while chanting the prayers, the priest seeks for the protection of God and His blessings of a fruitful womb. The priest or elder takes the scythe and exhorts the individual to use it for her protection, to fight the negative forces that may come her way and to protect her honour and dignity. The scythe is besides meant to keep her smart and active in all her chores. He then takes the bamboo cone basket, *ka khoh*, and the head strap, *u star*, and exhorts the girl child to be diligent in her household chores, to be thrifty so she can multiply her possessions. The responsibility of being the custodian of her family and her clan is bestowed upon her (Marbaniang, 2012:6).

Finally, the priest or the elder then takes a pen and paper and prays to God for wisdom to be given on the child who now has an identity and a role to perform in the family and the community. He prays for God's guidance to help achieve a name and honour in one's own community and among others as well. He then smears the mixture on the toes of the child and on the left foot of all the maternal family and on the right side of the paternal members of the family before taking the pounded rice powder three times and scattering it on the plantain leaf for the last time. Once the rituals are over, the priest takes the purer, mixes it with sugar and distributes it to all the members present in the ceremony together with some dried fish.

Conclusion

The rite of passage or entry into a community can only be done through the completion of a number of formalities which are highly significant and symbolical. The exhortations, prayers and chanting are extremely important before one can enter into the new stage of survival with an identity. The birth and naming ceremony of the Khasi indigenous community encapsulates the different stages of the rites of passage and signifies the entry of an individual into a new realm of his and her existence into the clan, the family and the community at large.

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