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“Ka Thep Mawbah” or the Bone Burial Ceremony among the Khasis with Special Reference to Sohra (Cherra Punjee)

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Abstract:

This work “The Bone Burial Ceremony of the Khasis” was prepared with an aim to bring out the clear picture about the ceremony performed by the khasis after the demise of a person. This is referred to as the Bone Burial ceremony or Thep Mawbah which has both religious and socio- cultural implications. The bones of the deceased are collected and kept in a big stone box called Mawbah accompanied by prayers and rituals. The field work was done in Cherrapunjee where tradition has strong roots. As Cherrapunjee is an area which has always received heavy rainfall, the stone slabs are affixed with a wall to prevent the seeping of water into the boxes containing the bones. Though the khasis hold dear to their customs and traditions, the modernization process has however loosened the grip of the people over them.

Keywords: *Khasis, matrilineal, clan, religion, burial.*

The khasis have been depicted as a tribal society in the North eastern part of India. They are concentrated in East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills and Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalaya, bounded in the north by Assam, in the South by Bangladesh, in the West by the East and South Garo Hills districts and in the east by the Jaintia Hills District. With the progress of research, it is believed that the khasis belong to the Monkhmer group of the Austro- Asiatic stock both racially and linguistically. They are the mongloid race. The khasis like to call themselves ‘ Hynniew - trep ‘ or people of the ‘ Seven Huts’ and trace their origin from the ‘Hynniew- trep’ or ‘ Hynniew Skum’ or the ‘Seven Huts’.

The khasi society follows the matrilineal system. The khasis are the only known people who have an entirely different system of kinship which is opposite to that followed by others in different parts of the world. Female kinship is dominant and the ancestral property passes from the mother to the youngest daughter.

The khasi tribe is a conglomerate of clans each tracing its lineage from the ancestral mother, the founder of the clan. The youngest daughter is the custodian of the family rites and property and the man or Rangbah is the protector of the clan. The man exercises a dual function as u kni or maternal uncle who is a counselor of his sister’s kin as well as u kpa or father of his children at his wife’s home. Tradition maintains that God the creator or U Blei Nongthaw was at first worshipped. It was apparently monotheistic. The people practice ancestor worship, animal sacrifice and megalithic culture.

According to the Khasis it is a *common belief* that every human flesh on earth is made of mud and his bones were made of stone. It is for this reason that we find the bone burial ceremony among the Khasis. Besides, the spirit of the dead would not be at rest until their bones are kept in the Mawbah. And until and unless the soul of the spirit is finally at rest, it would disturb the living members of the clan.

Among the ritual festivals found among the Khasis, *Ka Thep Mawbah* or Bone burial ceremony occupies a prominent place. This ceremony, has been in practice for a long time and this is performed only among the members within the *Kur* or clan or the womb.

The *Thep Mawbah* (thep—burial; *maw*—stone; *bah*—huge) has both its religious and socio-cultural implications. It is called religious stones because it is associated with the religious rites and rituals, norms and procedure of the ‘*Kur*’ concerned with Khasi religion as a base. Besides, the stone structures are very huge, so it requires the co-operation of many people i.e. among whatever may be the clan, the near and dear ones, the differences. This indicates high degree of social organisation.

The religious and rituals ceremonies of the living clan among the Khasis is not over only with the cremation. They need to collect the bones of the deceased and put it in a cist. The Other members of the clan will collect the bones of those persons "who died in far of places and keep them in a small cist. However, after sometime when the clan is ready to meet the cost all the members of the clan collect the bones from each and every small cist and put it in a big stone slab box called *Mawbah* or *Ka Pepbah* which literally means big stone.

Before performing the ceremony, all the members of the clan including male and female meet together in a *Durbar kur so* as to represent the different lineage called Kpoh of a particular clan at the house of the Khaduh (youngest daughter), called the *ieng seng*. Then only the members of different lineage will fix a particular date for the keeping of bones on *Ka Mawbah* (Cist).

The shape of the Mawbah maybe big or small, square or round. They are well made with good interlocking system by four stone slabs and another one to cover the top- A space is left in the front for entry and it is provided with a stone slab as a door. After the construction is over they will erect three stone pillars called Mawniam or religious stones and is followed by *Ka Knia* (ritual sacrifice) of one pig.

Later each and every lineage of that clan will collect the bones from different cist and in this way they will also collect the bones of those relatives who died in foreign lands. While collecting the bones they will carry along with them *Ka Ksing* (small drums), *Ka lama* (Flag), *U Khaw* (rice), *Ka dieng-song* (fuelwood), *Ka Pylleng* (eggs), *Ka Um* (water), *Ka pliang* (plate) and *U Khiew* (pot).

The *ksing* signifies the important role played by Music in Khasi religion. The paternal children come to the place with their drums. The *Ksing* represents the unit of the clan or womb. The music played on such occasions that is the rhythm, the melody and harmony cannot go beyond the boundary of the musical pattern as adopted by Khasi religion, otherwise they may have to incur sickness or any misfortunes.

On reaching the place, they will open the doorway where they split one egg and sprinkle more water. The bone which was collected from the small temporary cist was put into the pot and then poured into a plate where it was washed or purged three times, it is a purification ritual. This signifies that the bones are now fit to be along with the other bones of the dead belonging to that particular clan. One member of the lineage will carry bones to their own house. The one who carry the bones cannot look back. In case they have to cross the river they will tie a thread from one end to other side. After reaching the house they will sacrifice one pig- Then only they will separate the bones of the female from the male ones. All the members of the different lineage will also do the same.

A big feast accompanied by dances and Phawars (couplets) had to be held for three days, before the setting up of Maw-bah. Accordingly on the first day they will make a figure of a man and dress him. They called this "U Tyngshop" which represents the uncle. The other female figure is called "Ka Puron". This represents the ancestress of the clan. On this occasion also they will sacrifice two pigs. This is to show that dead people of the clan would unite to their near and dear ones through spirit though not in form. On this day, they will construct the Maw Kjat or Mawlynti (Maw means stone, Kjat means feet and lynti means way). This is so called because if they go to the Mawbah, they will also have to touch or walk through these stones. The number of the Mawkjat depends on the number of wombs or units of that clan. The stones are always in odd numbers e.g. three, five, seven, nine etc. The middle one is always taller than the sides ones. The tallest one represents *U Kñi* or great uncle, the shorter ones on the sides represents the nephews, the grand nephews of the great uncle. At the base of these stones, there is a flat stone supported by four pillars which represent the great grand-mother of the clan.

On the second day, all the members of different units will bring their bones to the *Iingseng* or ancestral house. Each unit will bring two baskets of bones i.e. the male and female ones where it was kept separately and covered with traditional dress like Dhara, Muka and Gold jewelleryes. The erection of the Maw Lynti or Maw kjat is also finished on the same day. Here they cut a sacrificial cow, called *Ka Masi Lam Lynti*, on the village gate which means to lead the way.

On the Third day, they will sacrifice one Pig or Cow. On this day the nephew or niece from the paternal side will also give a helping hand. On this day i.e. on the night before going to the Mawbah a ritual ceremony called *Ka Beh Tympem* (to drive away) is performed. This ceremony is performed to drive away the evil spirits who may disturb the dead spirits going to the Mawbah.

On the day of going to the Mawbah a cow is fed, then only the bones are taken out to the compound. Here they cut a sacrificial goat called *Blang said ksuid* which literally means to feed the spirits of the dead and to tell them that they are proceeding to the Mawbah.

The members of the clan and from the paternal side will carry along with them rice bread, rice, betelnut, small drums accompanied by Phawars (couplets) and drumbeat. The dances, the music, the drumbeat would end at the Mawkjat or Maw Lynti. From here the members of the clan alone proceed to the Mawbah. Here some eggs are beaten, the bones are again washed three times and open the doorway. Then they will put the bones on the Mawbah accompanied by prayers. They always put the male bones on the front side or in the right side. The Mawbah *issympat* (beaten) with three bundles of fuel wood and then the doorway is closed. All the members of the clan will come back with the exception of three male members where they will perform the ritual sacrifice with hen, eggs and fuel wood and also listen if there is any sound inside the Mawbah. Otherwise the prayers and rituals performed by them will be incomplete or not satisfactory to the deceased.

On the next day all the nephews and nieces from the paternal side go back and give thanks to the mother of the father called *Ka Micha*. This ceremony is called *ka Phur Melkha*. This indicates the paternal respect, the role, the status and dignity of the man in the Khasi society.

Though the line of descent is taken from the mother, yet the father has his own role to play. The male stones in standing postures indicate the important role of the man the honour and respect that he ought to get in the family and in the clan. The female stones lying down indicate her to be the custodian of the family and the clan and yet, she waits for the direction from the man.

On the next day they kill one sacrificial pig on behalf of the ancestors and this is followed year after year on the same day. We may refer to Sohra or Cherrapunjee. It is a huge Me-galithic complex and it is marked with curious structures of Mawbah. The setting up of Mawbah in this region is very much a part and parcel of their traditions. It is located very close to the funeral pyre. There is also an alignment of small cist most probably it belongs to one clan. It is square in shape. Some are well made while there are some which is just fixed with four stone slabs and covered with another flat stone slab at the top. This is also another Mawbah covered with circular stone slab. We also noticed a wall which is partly short. Most, probably, this wall must have been to protect the rainwater from getting directly into the Mawbah because it is located on the hill top. The Mawbah in this area is four in numbers. One on the hill top is found fallen. Among the four Mawbah, one is very interesting. This is located within a stone slab square wall and is erected on the top of three steps at the doorway there .is a semi-circular or crescent shape stone slab which is moveable. Most probably this is meant so as to keep the standing slabs of the door erected. In front of this Mawbah there is a big stone with trough. Whether, it is the missing part is still not known. The other Mawbahs were plain. Some potteries are associated with these cists Small potteries are found with smaller cist and big potteries are found with bigger cist.

Ka Thep Mawbah or the Bone Burial Ceremony is an ancient custom of the Khasis. It has survived the stress and strain of time and circumstances. The traditional Khasis still adhere to it religiously. During the course of the field work, on which this paper is based, it was found a widespread prevalence of the custom among the non-Christians. The sites of the burial ceremony are held in high esteem by one and all in the Khasi society as the bones of the ancestors lie there in rest to bless and inspire the generations. An in-depth study in the origin, structure and content of the ceremony may bring to light the various stages in the social and cultural development in the Khasi society in a historical time sequence.

The khasi society has greatly been transformed by many changes which have taken place in recent times although it is more evolutionary. It started with the British annexation in 1833. The change has its impact in various spheres of social life and culture. Christianity accounts for considerable changes. Christians have departed from their former religious ceremonies and rituals. Christianity has caused reversals in marriages, funerals and village ceremonies in many ways as it applies abandonment of old religious faith and belief.

The people now a days have lost much of their grip on their traditional values. This may be due to increasing process of modernization at different levels of the life-style of the people. It is also declining because of the cost of living and non conformity among the younger generation to the complicated religious rites and rituals.

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