



A Facet of Women's Spirituality and Religion in Meghalaya, India

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ABSTRACT

The Khasi-Jaintia society is a population situated in the State of Meghalaya and extends into pockets in the states of Assam, Manipur, and Tripura in North-eastern India, including the bordering country of Bangladesh. This paper formulates a narrative about an indigenous religious practice among Jaintia women. With Christianity the dominant religion, some sections of the population still profess the indigenous faith in this state, which centres on a sense of reverence and belonging to nature. This aspect of drawing one's faith and spirituality from nature is particularly evident among some women of the Jaintia society, who take on the roles of healers and clairvoyants (Soanes, 2001, p. 810), whereby certain spirits attributed to each element in nature are believed to descend and reside in them. This raises the question of how their religio-spiritual practice shapes the way they treat nature as their own home, crystallising the healer's role as one of providing aid to people in every area of life. The essence of this paper is to understand how, in this present era when science and technology have almost a firm grip on every life perspective, the people of this society choose to draw their strength in all aspects from nature despite a prevalent religious and political ideology. Relying on an ethno-historical approach, this paper has largely delved into the use of oral sources. What could be observed is a symbiotic and interrelationship amongst the people and their ecology. They collaborate with the environment to seek a healing balm, a sanctuary for their ailments and worries, thereby equally restoring the balance of nature and protecting it.

Keywords: Khasi-Jaintia society, indigenous faith, women, ecology, traditional healing

Introduction

The Khasi–Jaintia, a society that forms a population in India, are largely found in the State of Meghalaya in north-eastern India and are scattered in pockets of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, and the country of Bangladesh (OUP, 2022). Geographically, Meghalaya is bounded by the plains of Assam to the north, Sylhet to the south (present-day Bangladesh), and Kachar to the east (present-day district in Assam). It resembles an irregular parallelogram, mostly comprising hill terrain with several undulations, slopes, and plateaus, with rivers cutting across and marking natural boundaries (for example, the river Kupli separating it from Kachar and the river Umngot forming the southern boundary with Bangladesh). The climate here varies from temperate to tropical, with rainfall that blends all year long (Gurdon, 1975; Mackenzie, 1979; Pemberton, 1998; BBC News, n.d.). The Khasis, as a tribe, reside in these hills. They can be broadly categorised into sub-tribes, namely Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam, and Diko (The Khasis and most of the sub-tribes reside on the Khasi Hills, while the Pnars or Syntengs dwell in the Jaintia Hills). As per Khasi custom of law and inheritance, they follow a matrilineal form of kinship, whereby descent is traced through the female line. In a matrilineal set-up, the father retains his surname, and a matrilineal form of residence usually occurs. The youngest daughter is the custodian of the family's ancestral property. Along with this responsibility comes the care and aid of her parents in their old age. Before the coming of Christianity to these hills, the maternal uncle, known as the *kni*, shared the family responsibilities. In the socio-religious sphere, the dynamics largely centred on him. However, these dynamics have changed, and now one can largely find the father, *kpa*, replacing these roles. People have accepted and professed this pattern in their family set-up.

With Christianity the dominant religion, some sections of the population still profess the indigenous faith in this region, which centres on a sense of reverence and belonging to nature. Physically, this is evident in the terrain of this region, which lies in the foothills of the Himalayas. The climate naturally acts as a breeding ground for diverse flora and fauna. This ecology dots the hills with varied vegetation and weather patterns. Like any tribal ethos (Marcos, 2010), and consistent with broader patterns of religious life across Northeast India (Gurung & Mawlong, 2022), religion here also forms within a set of beliefs based on the idea of the sacred, and consequently unites believers into a socio-religious community. The earliest evidence of the religious practices of this society comes from ethnographers who have described in depth the primitive ways of worship. This includes finding aid and healing in the arms of nature, seeking counsel and wisdom from spirits, and engaging in deity possession. P.R.T Gurdon's work mentions a few of these practices before the dawn of Christianity in this region. As Christianity brought its beacon of light to the society, inevitably such tribal practices were assimilated, along with the way people viewed their reality of life. Stigmatisation became negligible. What is left now is a society with two factions. One group still follows the indigenous faith and practises the rituals of the yore, while the other has converted to Christianity but still seeks aid and guidance from the traditional practices.

It is within this dichotomy of religion that the role of women as subjects of possession will be reviewed. There have been several accounts of women in religion (P. R. M. Lyngdoh, 1999; Marcos, 2010; Syiem, 2010; Lakiang, 2023), but as healers, this has only reached the tip of the iceberg (Lyngdoh, 2018).

A note on gynocentric practices in traditional healing helps situate this discussion. Comparative scholarship on gender and healing across South Asia and other indigenous contexts has increasingly highlighted healing traditions in which women, rather than men, occupy the central ritual and social role — traditions that may be termed gynocentric, in contrast to the androcentric pattern in which men monopolise priestly and doctrinal authority. In many such traditions, women mediums, ritual specialists, and healers are recognised as primary custodians of a community's therapeutic and spiritual knowledge, occupying positions of authority rarely available to them within institutionalised religion (Flueckiger, 2006; Sax, 2009). This gynocentric orientation is significant precisely because it inverts the more familiar pattern of religious authority described above, in which women's spiritual labour is typically relegated to the domestic or the informal.

Among the Khasi-Jaintia, and more specifically within Pnar society, this gynocentric strand of traditional healing finds clear expression in the phenomenon of *hiar Blai*, in which women, rather than men, are the primary vessels through whom spirits are believed to communicate and healing is dispensed. Situating this practice within the broader comparative literature on gynocentric healing traditions allows the Khasi-Jaintia case to be read not as an isolated cultural curiosity, but as part of a wider pattern in which women's bodies and voices become recognised conduits of communal well-being.

This paper examines how women in Jaintia society, in particular, draw their faith and spirituality from spirits and deity possessions. They take on the role of healers and clairvoyants: some of the Gods and Goddesses associated with each element of nature are believed to descend into them. Indigenous religion is a way of life, and when it is distilled into this form of healing practice, the appropriate methodology is to rely thoroughly on an ethno-historical approach. Firstly, a range of primary sources is either ethnographical in nature, providing an outsider perspective (colonial), and the medium for communicating with the people is their dialect, thereby giving an insider narrative to this whole experience. In this way, this paper has largely delved into the use of oral sources. The global pandemic limited the scope for meticulous fieldwork, so the analysis presented here is based on only two case studies that could be observed. This paper is exploratory in nature; the generalisations offered are therefore modest and provisional, made in the hope that further research will refine, extend, or revise the interpretation offered here.

Literature Review

Since this paper is inclined towards the subjectivity of human nature, theoretical works such as those by Frederick M. Smith and the edited volume by Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf will enhance the clarity of this theme. As mentioned earlier, apart from the works of ethnographers and administrators, secondary sources such as those of H.L. Deb Roy and Amena N. Passah have elucidated the role of women in the religious sphere of society. Margaret Lyngdoh's work has dealt extensively with the subject of demonology that is prevalent in these hills. She has broadly covered the gamut of religious tribal practices, including the prevalence of women possessed by deities. According to her, deities function as regulators of clan and community norms, and much of the social justice within Pnar society can be traced back to the mediums themselves (Lyngdoh, 2017). It is in light of this observation that this paper attempts to find an answer to how a woman is vested with the ability to serve as a channel for the spirits and how the community perceives her as someone to whom they can turn for solutions to their problems. Why this phenomenon occurs mostly among women will be a humble beginning in understanding how men and women relate to one another in this society. A large corpus of secondary vernacular literature (Gatphoh, 1997; Elias, 2007) has documented the oral traditions and narratives of the people. This will be useful for understanding the bigger picture of people's beliefs and ideas, which spring from their surroundings and interactions in society.

Objective

There are three main objectives that this paper seeks to achieve. Firstly, to bring out the roles and responsibilities of the women clairvoyants in the Jaintia society of present-day Meghalaya. Secondly, to place them within the broader discourse of gynocentrism, which challenges the mainstream notion of androcentrism. Lastly, to examine how public and private spaces intermingle within their working space.

Methodology

An ethno-archaeological approach is the focus of this paper. Primary and secondary sources have been incorporated. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a gender lens on the discourse.

The Indigenous Religion

Since pre-colonial times, the people here have had a sense of belonging to nature (Tham, 1987).

This sense is evident in the way they profess their religio-spiritual life, which in turn affects how they treat nature as their home. The physical components of the environment, scientifically called abiotic, such as air, water, wind, fire, along with the Sun and the Moon, have been given religious and spiritual attributes. It is here that one finds the seed of inter-dependence and inter-relationship. People look to nature to heal both their bodies and souls, and in this way protect their environment by paying adherence to its spiritual keepers. It is mainly the language, in the form of oral traditions, that has kept such practices alive to this present epoch. It served as a bridge amongst the people of the yore, so that such traditions were maintained by their posterity. Some of the aphorisms, folktales, myths and legends (Elias, 2007) which centre around the creation story convey how God, the creator and sustainer of humankind, endowed them with being the keepers and protectors of Mei Ramew (or Mother Earth) (Pohlong, 2013). An understanding developed between humankind, nature, and its physical and spiritual components, and this was assimilated into their traditional beliefs and practices. This is seen in their philosophical thoughts such as kamai ia ka hok and ka im lang sah lang. The former reveals obedience and reverence to God and, in turn, channels this energy upon men and women of this society. While the latter brings out an essence of mutual co-existence, the welfare they share not only amongst themselves but equally with nature and her resources. Such are the characteristics in the context of oral traditions and philosophy of this society that have amalgamated into the culture and ethos of the people.

P.R.T. Gurdon observed that the religion of the Khasis may be described as animism or spirit worship, given the intrinsic bond between their way of life and the way people have centred it around nature (Gurdon, 1975, p. 1). This spirit worship is first directed towards their ancestors, Ka lawbei (the first grandmother), U Thawlang (the first grandfather), and U Suidnia or U Kni Rangbah (the first maternal uncle) (Gurdon, 1975, pp. 105–110). From here, the other paraphernalia of religion includes worship of every helm in nature and spirit, and the invocation of divination, with particular emphasis on adherence to each act. A mediator or a priest (lyngdoh) partakes in the rites and rituals and helps to conciliate with the unseen forces (Sen, 1992, 2017). In all of this, one finds that religion is an expression of the society's psychic experience, which moulds the clan and its belief system.

A Facet of Spirituality

Androcentrism is the idea that, in reality, all experiences are essentially male, and this has been universally accepted (Marcos, 2007). It leaves no space or even recognition for women's experiences. However, in tribal societies, patriarchal norms and androcentrism remain comparatively nascent. This may explain why we find many women magicians, healers and priestesses. They hold a respectable status in society. In the paradigm of religion, tangible elements where people place their faith, such as a sacred space or a temple, can be observed. On closer inspection, some women in Jaintia society incline towards a realm of spirituality where the tangible and intangible work hand in hand. By definition, spirituality refers to the alignment of one's inner disposition towards the human spirit and spirits, rather than towards anything physical or material (Scott & Marshall, 2009). In particular, women who generally reside in the Jaintia Hills have been performing this ritual, which dates back to pre-colonial eras. However, it has never been properly documented. Only recently has this aspect of spirituality piqued the interest of scholars, and the oral narratives were jotted down. These women (irrespective of their age) serve as oracles and intercede on behalf of the people to the respective spirits. The spirits (the pantheon of Gods and Goddesses that embodies the indigenous religion, Niam Tre, of the Pnars) come and dwell within the person's body (usually a woman experiences this transition more often than the male counterpart). This phenomenon is called *hiar Blai*. Here, such spirits are attributed with guardianship of natural resources. Ka Lei Myntdu (believed to be the goddess of the river Myntdu, which is the lifeline of Jowai town) is one such example. This phenomenon usually occurs among women across all age groups. When a woman enters the state of trance, she is elevated to a sacred position. She becomes a medium for the spirits to communicate with humankind. She loses her former self, and a new identity takes shape. The transition usually lasts for about an hour, and in

this regard her role becomes diversified. For instance, the woman hailing from a village called Wahjajer (located in West Jaintia Hills) is a grandmother. The interview was conducted when she was in her normal, sober self. She revealed that she has no memory of her former self, which indicates that, in a state of possession, there is a loss of personhood. People would seek her aid and advice in various matters that pertain to health, both physically, mentally and spiritually. People would have to bring along with them some sort of an ointment, sometimes the clothes or necessary items of the individual for whom she will be giving her blessings upon. The role expands at times to being a clairvoyant, and in this way minimal calamities could be prevented. It can also be noted that when she recovered from her experience, her body would become exhausted, and she would again confine herself to her room for some respite.

A similar experience was described by a 23-year-old woman from Jowai town. As a passionate and career-oriented woman, she aspires to study law, but her calling emerged from this. The elderly woman practises wet rice cultivation, the dominant occupation among the people. During her leisure time, she spends time with her children and grandchildren. The young woman still resides with her family. Her role as a healer indirectly provides for them, since people pay their respects in various forms of consolation. In both cases, one can observe that, irrespective of their age and occupation, their roles as mediators between the ectoplasmic and human worlds stand as a common ground. They are honoured within society. However, this respect empowers them socially. It permeates every aspect of their lives. They live in humble abodes and do not lead a sophisticated lifestyle. This further reflects their economic standing, which is not necessarily measured by a luxurious scale but by the bare necessities of life.

Hiar Blai, as a phenomenon, can be more complex than this, as told by the people themselves. Due to time constraints, the above is a projection based on only two interviewees. Hence, a conclusive answer cannot yet be derived regarding the further complexities of this ritual. This form of spirituality transcends the barriers of a rigid form of religion. It encompasses nature as well as the people in its core value system. The emotions of the women are expressed in this dialogue with the spirits, and they are able to channel this aid to society. Her identity as an oracle travels to the length and breadth of the region. In the cases above, both abstain from revealing their identities. They believe that the spirits' work should draw people to them, not that they should blow their own trumpets and proclaim it as if it were a sole deed. Another important aspect reveals an interplay between their private and public spaces, which is a rare phenomenon (Habermas, 1992; Arendt, 1998). People flock to their homes and are welcomed warmly. There is no separate place or temple associated with this ritual. It usually takes place in the oracle's abode, making people feel at ease and comfortable, without having to adhere to or visit any religious institution. Unlike Buddhist nuns or the Oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece, neither of these two women advises on decisions relating to governance or statecraft in the region. The other oracles are yet to be interviewed to arrive at this certainty. In summary, they provide only physical, emotional and spiritual sustenance. While being critical of the notion of purity and pollution, they, as well as the ailing person, are debarred from performing or engaging in this ritual during their menstruation cycle. Naturally, this becomes a setback, thereby showing that the mainframe of the religious ideology still hinges on debarring women from taking part in such rituals. Amid a dominant religious backdrop, which is Christianity, this form of spiritual inclination still draws people from all the corners of the region. This still shows humankind's eagerness to seek a quick and direct response to their crisis. A symbiotic relationship is seen between the people and their ecology when the respective Gods and Goddesses come to reside in the woman.

Such practices, when invoked, elevate these women and their role in society. From their perspective, as oracles, they restore and provide aid to the people. For the people, a part of the indigenous essence is kept alive, and the socio-religious belief still revolves around the dialogue they have with nature. Thereby, creating a natural reverence for the woman juxtaposed with the spirit.

Conclusion

Hence, from the above discussion, women clairvoyants in the Jaintia Society of present-day Meghalaya represent both resistance and resilience. By holding spiritual authority outside male-dominated institutions, they subverted androcentrism. This is particularly evident when private and public spaces intermingle. They preserved an ecological ethic that saw humans as part of nature, not its master. Yet their exclusion from formal power also made them vulnerable to stigmatisation. Their history, which is being lived and experienced today, teaches us that true balance, both gender and ecological, requires not only including women but also valuing different ways of knowing.

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