

CHAPTER IV

Matriliny and Folk Media: Tracing the Dynamics and Linkages

Dissanayake (1977) has also recognized the vibrating character of traditions and institutions of the folk...they are not mere quaint relics of the past, but vigorously active and highly functional cultural institutions performing functions vital to the well-being of society: they provide entertainment, disseminate information, inculcate socially accepted norms and values, and perform a general socializing function. (Cited in Ghosh 2010, 3)

This chapter discusses, the significance of folk media and its underpinnings of worldview. Also, mention is made about the relevance of examining folk media and identity formation. Following which deliberation is made on the potential linkages between Khasi folk media and matriliney. The argument being that, certain matrilineal principles have been encoded in the folk forms, which is a factor that is playing a role in the sustenance of matriliney till day. Also, with the analysis of folk media, the argument is reinstated that Khasis are a matrilineal community with patriarchal realities.

The study of folk media and matriliney is so vast that it in one study all its aspects cannot be covered. Nevertheless, an attempt is being made to comprehensively understand the associations that can be drawn between folk media and matriliney, which is an instrument for looking at social systems.

4.1 Folk Media: Its Underpinnings of Worldview

The fundamental beliefs held by members of a given culture are rooted in the folk. It is worthy of reference that “all cultures have underlying assumptions and it is these assumptions or folk ideas which are the building blocks of worldview. Any one worldview will be based upon many individual folk ideas and if one is seriously

interested in studying worldview, one will first need to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of the worldview” (Dundes, 1978, 109). Herein, worldview implies the complete ways in which a community or society wilfully or unconsciously takes cognisance of the associations with other individuals, the cosmos and the order of everyday life. “Worldview is the way in which society views the universe around it” (Payyanad, 2006, 198).

Worldview is articulated through wide-ranging folk forms. Inferring the ideas from the folk is of significance leading to its subsequent examination to decipher as to what magnitude these are associated to the culture and its manifestation. Esther Syeim also argues that “folktale is the repository of cultural values that inform the present and invests it with a living sense of tradition” (2005, 29). Thus, it is reasoned that folk music, folk dance and oral narratives in its totality provide the medium by which worldview is made relevant to a community.

Worldview is not merely conjectural or introspective, it is also demonstrated in the engagements by which it is communicated. As Marshall McLuhan had articulated, the medium does in effect become the message. For instance, “historically, songs serve a number of purposes, such as disseminating traditional wisdom, commenting on local news, relaying history, instilling pride and solidarity, as well as teaching, testing, and storing information. They critique local action and personages, serve as mnemonic devices, and/or provide mediums for thinking through ideas” (Nicholls, 1997, 54).

At this point, comes in the dichotomy between worldview and ethos. On one hand, worldview refers to the philosophy about the life, and ethos refers to the characteristic essence of culture. In selected cases, folk idea will be embraced by value judgments but ordinarily folk idea is free of value judgments. “The folk idea per se would simply be an empirical description of the nature of reality (or at least a segment of reality as perceived in one particular culture)” (Dundes, 1978, 118). Thus, folk ideas are considered to be expressive ideas and consequently they cannot be shelved as good or bad. Also, if folk ideas are affianced to comprehend human

thought then it must be noted that these are not encircled to folklore only, but commonly can be traced in different mass media forms.

“In theory, a given folk idea might pervade nearly every aspect of culture” (ibid., 119), thus, smaller unit of investigation is essential which can be inclusive of popular or literary culture as well. Herein the example of Jataka tales can be taken into consideration where the understanding about Jataka stories enables scholars to examine the worldview, temperament, and traditional principles of the Laotians, an ethnic minority group in Thai community. “Jataka stories helped the Laotians to achieve new awareness and hope in a new society, a society in which they had to accept the status of ‘captives’ and adapt themselves to the Thai and the Cambodian cultures. Jataka stories have been a means of communicating beliefs; they are a symbol, a universal language for communicating their ideas to other people of the new environment” (Wongthet, 1989, 24). The villagers make use of these stories to elucidate historical and geographical characteristics of the community. “It can be said that the Laotians attachment to Jataka stories (stronger than that of the Thais), becomes an important mark of Laotian ethnic identity” (ibid., 23).

Which folk form is being used by a group is not much of a concern, what is of significance is distinguishing the different essential assumptions that members of a community believe in. As articulated earlier, all cultures have certain fundamental conventions and it is these conventions or folk ideas which become the building blocks of worldview. Any single worldview will be grounded upon many singular folk ideas and if one is earnestly interested in understanding the worldview of a community, it becomes imperative to define some of the folk ideas which bequeath the establishment of that worldview. Also, in the last decade or two, wider examination of the folk is being undertaken since “folk narrative stock has broadened considerably, because field collectors recording community repertoires found a greater diversity in narratives than previously noted” (Dégh, 1994, 245).

This opens up the window whereby scholars seek to define the unconsidered worldview assumptions which are so craftily enunciated in folk narrative and other forms of folk media. In contemporary times, perceptions of worldview lean towards

more cognitive and fundamental assumptions. It takes into consideration the manner in which people recognise the world through innate groups and unexpressed principles or axioms. Accordingly, the cosmology itself (the older kind of worldview that was concerned with man's position in the world, and in the cosmos) tends to provide information from which one could infer philosophies of the new-fangled worldview.

As a core idea, it has to be surmised that no branch of folk is so insignificant and that it cannot be used as a unit for understanding worldview. "Worldview, the way a people perceives the world and its place in it, permeates all aspects of a given culture and this is why the pattern of the whole is to be found even in that whole's smallest part" (Dundes, 1989, 83).

"Methodologically it makes more sense to examine microcosms, and from these examinations, one may have better access to the corresponding macrocosm" (ibid., 83). Herein, example is drawn from the folk-toy, The Pecking Chickens which is popular in parts of Asia and Europe. Every pecking chicken toy is a model of the character of the world in which they live. The most usual exemplification of pecking chickens is that of more than one or two birds, characteristically some have four to five chickens. The existence of that many chickens sharing a collective stage licences an assessment of both cosmos and food allocation as demonstrated in diverse cultures. But it does not suggest the toy manufacturer has deliberately portrayed the cultural perspicacity of food and space as commodities in his culture¹. Just as languages are "governed by inducible principles, so worldviews are equally highly patterned" (ibid., 89). And it is this arrangement that opens up possibilities for folk studies to inspect the folk forms as a potential and essentially untapped source for examining worldview.

¹ In three versions of the toy from India, only one has any representation of food, as symbolised as dots contained within a circular area in the center of the triangular platform. Of course it is dangerous to conclude that folk toy is a true representation of culture for comparative data is limited but nonetheless they provide valuable clues to understand such perceptions though worldview which is people's perception if often difficult to grasp. People cannot always articulate worldview principles to inquiring ethnographers and folklorists any more than they can articulate principles of the grammar of their language (Dundes, 1989, 89).

When folklorists speak in general terms about worldview, folk-idea, ideology - any kind of reaction to stimuli by the surrounding environment (Dundes 1971, 93-103; Mullen 1978, 209-20; El-Shamy, 1967), they mean the sum total of subjective interpretations of perceived and experienced reality of individuals. Any human action is motivated by such a perception. It contains beliefs, opinions, philosophies, conducts, behavioural patterns, social relationships and practices of humans, related both to life on this earth and beyond in the supernatural realm. Worldview, then, permeates all cultural performances, including folklore. Narratives, in particular, are loaded with worldview expressions: they reveal inherited communal and personal views of human conduct - this is their generic goal. (Cited in Dégh, 1994, 247)

Case 8

In the context of the Khasis too for instance, *Jingsneng Tymmen* (maxims) are forthright, concise reservoirs of values, poetry, ethos and literature that helps in the formation of worldview. “The motivating power of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* lies in the elder’s consistent efforts to keep the symbolic Khasi flag flying high at all times, for the *Rngiew* to be nourished and to grow” (Syiem, 2011, 46). The study has also highlighted the fact that *Jingsneng Tymmen* acts as the dynamic chords of the society and the oral narratives vindicate the connotation of existence. Again the Khasi folk dances, gestures, stances, and movements manifest worldview philosophies such as fertility, community collaboration, respect for the elders and family, codes of conduct, and cultural amalgamation. “Dance demonstrates normative behaviour in a variety of ways including: directly through role modelling, retrospectively through recapitulation, anticipatorily through rehearsal, and symbolically through metaphors for model behaviour” (Nicholls, 1997, 55).

Furthermore, like most other tribal communities of Northeast India, Khasis did not have a written script till it was introduced by the missionaries. But the lack of a script did not deter the Khasis from communicating, expressing and preserving their

worldview and community believes. It has been sustained across generations by means of folk media. As stated earlier it is a legend that endorses the rationale behind why Khasis rely profoundly on oral narratives. The legend re-counts how a Khasi forefather who was on his way back after a spiritual unification with God, lost a manuscript in which the philosophical and religious teachings was documented. Thus, it can be understood that Khasi worldview is embodied in its varied oral narratives, Khasi forefathers were aware of the idea that oral narratives were also a medium of teaching its younger generation about life and culture in general, “they mark an important territory in Khasi thought for they capture the ambience of a culture with roots embedded deep in oral practices of their ancestors, where the social and the metaphysical interpenetrate each other” (Syiem, 2011, 44).

It is also stated that folk music are a manifestation of social motivation, it is a representation of the collective mind, worldview, emotion “and representation of all the phases in the human life-cycle signifying a cohesive relation of music with the process of living” (Sen, 2004, 93). Through the folk media communicate is made about the connotation and characters that are allotted to living and non-living elements in a world. There is continuous process of understanding life and such understanding is imparted through the network of meanings expressed via the folk media. The Khasi community too has its own structure of understanding life which is perpetuated through the folk. Lying at the centre of the Khasi worldview is the highest ultimate reality who is U (male) *Blei*/Ka (female) *Blei*. This is beautifully symbolised in the Jaintia myth where the goddess *Ka Blei Synsar* is pictured as managing the house of God, the abode of the earliest sixteen families out of which seven were sent down to earth, of course, on the advice of *U Blei* – the invisible ruler and sustainer of the world” (Miri, 2010, 1).

The following tenets or divine ruling are considered as the foundation of Khasi life and worldview. It is communicated by elders to the younger generation. Traditionally such knowledge is orated when the family gathers around the hearth where the hearth is representative of the domestic solidity which is a significant characteristic of the Khasi. The three maxims are the three symbolic corner-stones that make up the fireplace (Syeim, 2016).

- i. *Tip Brew Tip Blei* - is indicative of the need for man to be knowledgeable about the presence of a world order that situates human above all other beings. Knowing and valuing another human, helps the individual to choose the right course of action. And the capability to know God aids in understanding community cooperation that intertwines society together.
- ii. *Tip Kur Tip Kha* - Know your maternal (*Kur*) and paternal (*Kha*) kins, or in simple words venerate both the matrikin and patrikin. The fundamental virtue of knowing one's paternal and maternal relatives is imperative such that the offense of incest and intra-clan matrimony may be forestalled. The social customs and ethics that spiral from this aphorism institutes a society that espouses the sacredness of family values.
- iii. *Kamai Ya Ka Hok* - Earn (*Kamai*) righteously (*Hok*), the preponderance of a virtuous life is the vital idea of this tenet. The stress is upon honesty and a disciplined way of earning a livelihood.

Thereby, it is being reasoned that folk media which customarily relies on orality has survived the depredations of time and continues to be a source for the perpetuation and understanding of a community's worldview. Folk media has not remained stagnant, but, it has experienced a constant modification since it is dynamic in character and acclimates to new circumstances, yet its essence still remains the same. "Our post-modern society may have changed and become more advanced in technology and scientific discoveries, yet folk literature can still be applied to such developed societies" (Syiemlieh and Nonglait, 2014, 191). The folk tradition among the Khasis till day is a living tradition, that, is rich source of examining worldview and also its social structure.

4.2 Folk Media and Identity

It is worthy of mention that till the 19th century, simply oral forms were considered folk, however from 20th century onwards folklorists approved that some written forms are also folk, for instance envelope sealer popular in America like SWAK (sealed with a kiss), autographed books, latrinalia (bathroom wall writings), epigraphs, and the like, all this goes on to indicate that "one of the ways individuals define their own identity is through folklore" (Dundes, 1989, 2).

Identity has always been a central area of research and has fascinated scholars from across domains. The word 'identity' is derived from the Latin word 'idem' which means the same, but it is important to note that the discussion and work on identity relies on both similarities and differences. "One of the earliest statements about identity was made by Heraclitus (circa 500 B.C.), when he suggested that a person cannot step into the same river twice"² . Herein similar meant identical, concentrated around this, numerous philosophers have used the river analogy to deliberate upon identity, whereby it is established that identity is not absolute or seamless.

Early scholars focused more on personal identity rather than group, thinkers like John Locke (1690) in his essay, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* defined identity using the consciousness and continuousness as factors whereby he said, "consciousness always accompanies thinking and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done " (1690, 449).

Furthermore, Erik H. Erikson in the book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* added on to the definition given by Locke, said "the conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of self-sameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (1968, 50); he added a core idea that a person is aware of the fact that his or her identity is accepted by others.

Again it is to be distinguished that there are numerous social and personal identities. Similarity cannot be understood if the dissimilarities are not taken into account, the

² St. Thomas Aquinas wrote as follows: The Seine river is not 'this particular river' because of 'this flowing water' but because of 'this source' and 'this bed', and hence is always called the same river although there may be other water flowing down; likewise a people is the same, not because of sameness of soul or of man, but because of the same dwelling place, or because of the same laws or the same manner of living' (cited in Dundes, 1989, 3-4).

perception of self and the other comes in. Acknowledgement by others is apposite for defining ethnic or other group identities as it is for personal identity. A typical example being, while defining woman, a man has to be mentioned and vice versa. Thus, it can be considered to be an antithetical process by means of which identity structures are strengthened or fashioned in which majority culture dominates minority culture. "It is the oppositional principles which constitutes one of the common threads in both personal and group identity, as there can be no self or concept of self without other, there can be no sense of group without some other group" (Dundes, 1989, 7).

There has always been a challenge in conceiving identity and the opposition revolves around personal identity and group identity. That is to say, for an individual or a group it is not adequate to merely affirm an identity. "It also needed to be validated (or not) by those with whom one had dealings" (Jodhka, 2001, 19). Simply passing on a message about the distinctiveness of one's identity is not enough, it is overbearing that the message is accepted by substantial others, ahead of it being established. "Identities were therefore to be found and negotiated at the boundaries of the internal and external" (ibid., 20). Furthermore, the perception of having an individual identity has its underpinning on two corresponding manors, 1) the sensitivity of self-sameness and perpetuation of one's being in time and space 2) the discernment that there are others who recognise this consistency and persistence of existence. "No one has an identity on an uninhabited island; one has it only in so far as one is 'with others'" (Dundes, 1989, 5).

Classical theorists of sociology, Mead and Cooley, in their work spoke of the prominence of meaningful communications as a component of social development, which assists in the formation of an individual 'self' and the function of the 'other' in the creation of an individual's self-identity. It is in particular the association of self with others in correspondence to identity that is, of significance. Margaret Mead remarked on the manner in which a person's identity "has depended on defining somebody else's identity" (1958, 12). The most fundamental example being how a woman can be defined without making a reference of a man. Furthermore, it is argued that "the term identity points to an individual's links with

the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of his people” (Erikson, 1980, 109). Herein it is appropriate to comment that the notion of sameness rises out of the incessant sharing of some form of central character with others.

To understand, what the fundamental character is and how it helps in the formation of identity, the role of the ‘folk’ comes in. “The essential feature of any identity system is an individual’s belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or, more accurately, with what certain symbols stand for” (Spicer, 1971, 795-796). The question surfaces as to how these symbols are transmitted. Folk becomes the passage of communication that is used for the manifestation and dissemination of the symbols.

In the process of deliberating on folk and identity, reference is also drawn from Max Weber *Economy and Society* where he reasons that “we shall call ‘ethnic groups’, those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both” (1978, 389). It is apparent that Weber draws on customs as a requisite element for describing identity. “If one substituted folk speech, costume and food habits for language, clothing and food, it would perhaps be more obvious that, it is folklore which is responsible in large measure for creating ethnic identity” (Dundes, 1989, 9). It is discernible that folk represents people’s identity, and people from time to time count on the folk for inspiration and understanding of one’s culture, history, origin.

For example, in Yugoslavia children’s book writers rely on folklore for motivational material, similarly for the residents of Senegal, folklore may be the chief guarantor of cultural identity.

Attention has to be given to the inarticulacy of the word ethnicity or ethnic and it is in this regard that the term folk stand out as a meaningful auxiliary. Primarily, folk helps in eluding some of the plausible downsides of using the term ethnic, like “folk is not a synonym for peasant (as it was in the 19th century), nor is it limited to one stratum of society, for example, the *vulgus in populo*, or the lower class. Nor is it the illiterate in a literate society” (Hultkrantz, 1960, 126-129).

Here it is significant to mention that the Khasis have been facing challenges posed by several factors like economic deprivation, evangelisation, globalisation, and demand for patriliney for decades now. But despite such challenges the Khasis have been able to maintain their sense of identity as a community. Identity construction is a continuous process in the lifecycle of an individual and a community. Whereby every element of social life language, dress, song, dance, lores, tales, norms, philosophes are at work in formulating the identity. All these are depicted and expressed via the folk media. This is also applicable in the Khasi context wherein the oral narratives are laden with philosophies of morality, codes of social conduct, clan structure, governance that builds both the individual and group identity. Khasi identity is further reflected in the folk performances like dances, varied rituals that creates a baton of identity. Arguably, the processes of social exemplifications through the folk media mould identity, and in turn identity progressions are fundamental in encouraging the occurrence of social representations. “It is pertinent to note that group identity formation is influenced by social representation, since by sharing a social representation, group members come to share a common worldview and a common identity” (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983, cited in Kharshiing, 2016, 200).

It is essential to say that music, dance, customs and rituals are varied forms of folk media. But it is fundamental to note that these folk forms are the vehicles of communication of a group’s symbols and customs. “Folklore is clearly one of the most important, perhaps the most important, sources for the articulation and perpetuation of a group symbol” (Dundes, 1989, 8). Bauman also states that “folklore is a function of shared identity” (1971, 32). In this milieu, it is stated that matriliney in the context of the Khasis is central to identity. And folk media in all its forms enables the process perpetuating matriliney and also provides the scope for examining it. Identity for the Khasis is not a non-figurative notion whose prominence remains only on the emblematic level, but it is a lived experience which has extraordinary active value. “In other words, identity not only marks the distinction between groups, it is also a cultural resource par excellence that can be effectively exploited for economic and political gains” (Nongbri, 164, 2010).

Change is inescapable in any society and factors directing the course of change are multifarious. Along with factors like globalisation and westernisation religious conversion had a colossal impact on Khasi life and identity. “The missionaries came as the messengers of Christianity and in the process inflicted a super-imposition of foreign religio-cultural ethos which served as an external force, shaking the existing cultural ethos of the Khasis” (Talukdar 2004, 1). It was this subjugation and super-imposition that threatened to change the Khasi identity and cultural milieu. Scholars argue that, “Christianity was first introduced to the Khasis by the Serampore Mission during 1813-1838. However, a permanent mission work was established by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists’ Foreign Mission (WCMFM) in 1841 and the Catholic Mission in 1890. In the process of their interaction many Khasis embraced Christianity. Thus, Christianity played a dominant role in the process of socio-cultural change in the Khasi-Jaintia hills” (Nongbri 2009, 178).

Apphira Sohtun who is in her late seventies argued that during the time when the missionaries they looked down upon Khasi religion and practices, some scholars also went on to write that Khasi philosophies inculcate elusive belief in god. But it has to be understood that *Niam Khasi* has never been an organised religion like Christianity or Islam or any other. It is a religion of the home and hearth, it is a clan based religion. The dances, rituals, stories, everything is connected to the *Niam*. Khasi forefathers had created a harmony between socio-cultural and religious life and it is difficult to segregate one from the other. So when conversion began it was bound to impact Khasi traditions, identity and life in general. Traditionally among the Khasis the spoken words are considered sacrosanct and obligatory on a person, and if the spoken word is contravened relationships are broken.

“For the Khasis, religion is so connected to socio-cultural existence, that at times in history, there had been tensions in society when a person changes his/her religion” (Mawrie 2009, 178).

In the beginning the tension that brewed post conversion was explicit, the Presbyterian Church was extremely rigid and people were not even allowed to play traditional music instruments. There are instances that people even shut down doors and

windows when any traditional procession would pass by and this did have an impact of Khasi way of life and identity, opined a 49 year old Lamjingshai Nongdhar.

The Christian missionaries ushered in a process of deculturation the inevitable antagonism that developed between the converts and those of the old faith gradually affected their social relations. This clearly brought out in Nalini Natarajan's work, where she states that most Khasi Christians felt they were superior in every way to orthodox Khasis. In fact, the latter were called "pagans" and "heathens" by some of their own Christian brethren. It is no exaggeration to say that social intercourse between the two was little or non-existent. A story recounted by the Khasi stalwart U Jeebon Roy, an orthodox Khasi himself, spoke of how he and his companions were not allowed to halt at a Christian school one night, by a Christian teacher, as it was "prohibitive and sinful" to do so. (Mawlong 2009, 199)

During this time when the Khasi community faced incessant pounding on its traditional faith and folk traditions, sixteen young men united to form an association called the 'Khasi Young Men's Association' on November 23, 1899 to preserve and defend the indigenous way of life known as *Niam Khasi*. Later in the year 1900, the Khasi Young Men's Association celebrated its first anniversary naming the festivity as *Seng Kut Snem*, subsequently this occasion is celebrated every year to honour that movement. It is appropriate to note that the in Northeast the Khasis were amongst the first tribes to have engaged with the Christian mission. The establishment of this association was also an upshot of the process Christian proselytisation that was taking place in the state whereby majority espoused Christianity. The need to sustain the folk identity of the Khasis within a larger cultural philosophy was felt. The opposition put forward also aimed at thwarting the progression where the "British and the missionaries could not totally subvert and undermine their cultures and also to check the subtle idea that Khasi culture was lower and inadequate in comparison to that of the British" (Syiemlieh 2013, 43).

In 1901, the association was renamed as *Seng Khasi*, whose aim is to uphold the Khasi religion of *Niam Khasi*, alongside the *Seng Khasi* has been making continuous strides for strengthening the traditional administrative systems involving the Syiems, Lyngdohs and Dollois and safeguarding the Khasi customary usages and folk traditions.



Image I: Prayers being offered during the *Seng Kut Snem* celebration 2014.

***Seng Kut Snem* is an annual event held on November 23.**

It is important to note that *Seng Kut Snem* celebration is not a New Year celebration but is a form of community gathering where prayer is said seeking protection of the distinct identity of the Khasi tribe. The day's celebration is marked by a colourful cultural procession known as *Iaid Pyni Riti*, in this procession tabloids are taken out throughout the city depicting the different facets of the indigenous culture and



Image II

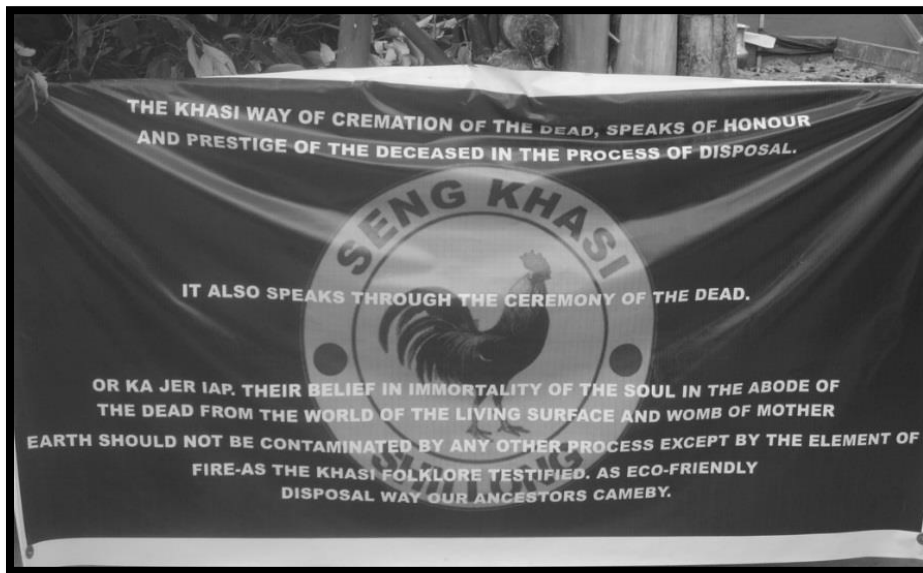


Image III

The above images II & III, show the tabloids depicting the Khasi way of cremating the deceased. The tabloids are part of the cultural procession (*laid Pyni Rit*) held during *Seng Kut Snem* celebration

faith. The procession culminates at the Lympung Weiking field where prayers are offered, following which lectures on the Khasi faith and ways of life are delivered. During the celebration elders communicate oral teachings to the younger generations pertaining to the traditional faith, beliefs, customs, conduct propriety and the Khasi culture as bequeathed by the ancient Khasi predecessors.

Post the prayer and lectures, cultural programmes are also held where young boys and girls showcase Khasi traditional dance and songs dressed in colorful traditional attires.

Formation of Seng Khasi can be called a means of consolidating *Niam Khasi* and Khasi identity which are threatened by proselytisation, also under Seng Khasi, several other groups have been formed like Seng Samla (youth wing), Seng Kur (clan based groups) which work towards strengthening *Niam Khasi*, propagating folk traditions and reestablishing among the younger generation the Khasi philosophies and worldview, pointed out a 69 year old, Basuk Kongsit.

The organisation and control of the *Seng Kut Snem* is taken care by various wings of the Seng Khasi, wherein the *Seng Samla*, i.e., the youth wing takes dynamic part precisely with the organisation of the cultural parade. An official of the *Seng Khasi* noted that through such activities the youth gets the chance to learn or relearn the Khasi philosophies, and reinvent their faith in it.

Festivals celebrate a consciousness based on guiding philosophies of a community wherein the life of a community is strengthened. Community festivals universally honour identity and reintroduce recurrently the life rivulet of a community and give ratifications to its traditions. “By placing identity or cultural specificities as worthy of jubilation, a festival tends to become a celebration of that identity and its projection. It is argued that such festivals can aid in the process of enhancing both community and region identity where it becomes a showground for enunciating local cultural identities” (Dutta and Ghosh, 2016, 41). “Festivals take place at special times and places and often serve to intensify societal values by bringing them into sharper focus during special events” (Kaeppler, 2002, 8). Also, it is imperative to note that folk festivals uncover how people and groups want to unveil

themselves to themselves and to others. Prominently, folk performances and illustrations in the festival also find a slot in the mass media and helps in the process of constructing local and regional identities. “This implies that cultural festivals become a showground where local cultural identities are enunciated” (Dutta and Ghosh, 2016, 48).

How far Khasi identity is created or reflected through *Seng Kut Snem* is debatable, but festival does facilitate a process and acts as a platform in this direction. The census of 2011 indicated that Meghalaya has 74.59 % of Christian population and there has been a decline by 2.83 % in the number of people following indigenous faith. In view of the festival of *Seng Kut Snem* becomes all the more important, since even up to this day, those trying to preserve the indigenous faith and folk forms are facing challenge by the development of proselytisation which has been strengthened since the 20th century. The founding fathers of the *Seng Khasi* had also anticipated the danger and begun the process of Khasi renaissance, a challenge that still hovers in the contemporary times.

There is a vital linkage between the concept of identity and folklore, as Edward H. Spicer argues “the essential feature of any identity system is an individual’s belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or more, accurately, with what certain symbols stand for” (1971, 795-796). Spicer goes on to reason that an association between individuals and particular cultural elements is the indispensable facet of a collective identity system. Along with land, language and symbols, common components of identity systems are music, dances and heroes. “What makes as system out of identity symbols is not any logical, in the sense of rational, relationship among them. The meanings that they have fit into a complex, that is, significant to the people concerned. The meanings amount to a self-definition and an image of themselves as they have performed in the course of their history” (ibid., 798).

A question that ascends in the course of understanding folk practices is that of identity. As enunciated and questioned by Sujata Miri, ‘what does it take for a human collectivity to count as a community? What constitutes the identity of a

community'? (2013: 136). Identity is a multi-dimensional term in sociology and has been apportioned with in various ways. In simple terms, identity denotes the concept of who a person is and what is important to that individual. Principally it has to be taken into consideration that identity is not impeccable or absolute and that there are several social, group and personal identities. Also acceptance by others is important in outlining ethnic or other group identities as well as personal identity. Continuing research on folk traditions has made apparent that folk embodies people's identity, and people from time to time fall back on the folk for inspiration and understanding ones ethos, history and foundation. Identity of a group or community is commonly reckoned with reference to definite collective ideas and practices shared by its members. This is explicable in association to the linkages of shared history, kinship, common memoirs and experiences creating a sense of collective identity. "Collective identity refers to those aspects of personal identity that are derived from experiences and expressions common to a group. The recognition of this collective aspect of personal identity has produced the deep sense of identification with others - the consciousness of kind" (Oring 1994: 212). "It is the people's action and experience that constructs a social structure, an arrangement that sets into the daily lives of people living in group overtime. Inside this arrangement the individual lives and develops a sense of collectivity and identity. In due course, people nurture connections with certain cultural codes which become the common linking factor of an identity system" (Dutta & Kikhi 2016, 247).

Mere association with the cultural symbols is not sufficient; what connotation people derive out of it and what image they construct out of it is important. This offers the argument on the issue of the substantial role of the folk as the transporter of the cultural symbols, facilitating in its communiqué and continuance. "If one substitutes folk speech, costume and food habits for language, clothing and food, it would perhaps be more obvious, that is, folklore which is responsible in large measure for creating ethnic identity" (Dundes, 1989, 9). This draws the example of Hungary whereby in the 20th century folk music was used successfully to create and

maintain identity, through the efforts of Bela Bartok and a crusade that became established as the Dance House Movement.

Jingrwai Iawbei (song in honour of root ancestress) in this case, becomes a foundation of identity formation. Notably, on several occasions smaller identities surface within a larger group owing to some distinguishing features and this is the case with the residents of Kongthong village, who consider themselves to be the originator and keeper of a traditional practice. It was exposed through the interviews that *Jingrwai Iawbei* is not practiced by Khasis dwelling in other rural and urban spaces of Meghalaya. On investigation, the many respondents informed that not only *Jingrwai Iawbei* but numerous other folk practices have no place in the life of urban dwellers, also in a big city how can you call out to someone by humming a melody. While others felt that through generations the eminence of this custom did not go past Kongthong and its neighbouring areas and failed to permeate.

Dwellers of Kongthong for ages have been the founder and torchbearer of this habitude, besides some villages around Kongthong are also known to uphold the practice of *Jingrwai Iawbei*. This enables a group to affirm its individuality, pursue cultural revivalism and bring people under one common cultural platform. Herein, the people of Kongthong have whittled a distinct identity for themselves, notwithstanding the fact that they belong to the larger Khasi community. A 35 year old, Rothell Khongsit stated “yes we are Khasis, but people also recognise us independently, because of *Jingrwai Iawbei*. As is obvious, not only outsiders but even our own Khasi people want to know more about it”. Given the concept, ethno-specificity of culture, the indispensable link between identity and folk can be acknowledged, taking the example of *Jingrwai Iawbei* as practised by residents of Kongthong. Since the relationship between members of a group or of a community determines the collective identity; folklore serves as the most important source of construction, articulation and perpetuation of collective identity (Sen 2010: 37). It is imperative to note that identity is not direct behaviour or experience or manifestation but these helps in the creation of identity, as identity is entrenched in one’s consciousness, hence for the residents of Kongthong *Jingrwai Iawbei* is a

means of instituting shared identity; and subsequently, conserving it for the community, even though all Khasis do not practice it.

Though the collective identity also called cultural identity is not the same as culture, but it can be captured from culture. Therefore, it can be reasoned through this unique practice of *Jingrwai Iawbei*, the Khasis of the Kongthong village find a harbour to their identity.

Furthermore, traditions like the Nongkrem dance is an art, artefact and artifice, which helps in understanding folk and identity. In the present context, 'artefacts' includes "any material, verbal, or behavioural form that is held to exist apart from the times and conditions of life in which it was originally fashioned and employed" (Oring 1994: 213). Again the idea of 'art' which is a creative endeavour is basically oblivious and through which the world is transformed. 'Artifice' indicates the procedure of construction 'a process that is deliberated, controlled, utterly replicable, and expedient' (*ibid.*: 213). Identity is the quality that individuals use to group themselves with some people and differentiate themselves from others. Identity can be defined as "the characteristics that individuals use to group themselves with some people and differentiate themselves from others" (Morrison 2003: 14).

In the context of the present study, Nongkrem dance, the Khasi oral narratives, *Phawar*, *Jingsneng Tymmen* are all representations of Khasi language, attire, rites and rituals. These are also the attribute which has become a living identity and is passed on from one generation to the next.

Oral transmission refurbish the folk and hence, the identity. As Cecil Sharp in his work *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusion*, points out that oral transmission is a "process by which it grows and by which it is created" (cited in Oring, 1994, 218). This transmission helps in reflecting the community's beliefs, assists in its continuance and preservation.

Khasi folk media can be seen as a method of expression for the people, a vehicle of communication and identity creation. Folk practices help in appreciating the manifold layers of identity which is like an onion skin layering. At the same time,

identity is neither absolute nor can it be positive or negative; however self-identity is secured to group acknowledgement of identity. Thus, it is argued that Khasi folk media helps in renovating this recognition. It has become one of the cultural expressions engaged to create, define, and reinforce identity. Identity in this case is clan, village, community identity and also importantly 'cultural identity'.

Folk is thus, a charter of communicative behaviour organisation of the members of a particular group, a combination of expressions that is fashioned, refashioned, disseminated and transferred within the boundaries of a group that find recognition among its members. It is considered to be a set of discourse that depends on cognitive apparatus, where collective recollection is in play representing the shared value of a group: in this case the varied elements of Khasi folk media fits this edifice.

4.3 Khasi Folk Media and Perpetuation of Matriliney

The aforementioned arguments is aimed at establishing the relevance of Khasi folk media as a perpetuator of worldview and identity since times immemorial. In this milieu, an endeavor is to examine Khasi matriliney through the lens of folk media. The distinctiveness of matrilineal communities is conspicuous in their social structure, art and craftsmanship, architecture, religious values and observances, dances and music, rites and rituals, tales and narratives, political structure, language and knowledge. In short it is evident in all realms of tangible and intangible folk traditions and belief systems. Using this framework, Khasi matrilineal system and folk media practices is analysed.

Folk media has been studied at length not only by folklorists but also by scholars from different domains like anthropology, history, communication and more. Folk media and its associations to development activities, education, literacy programs, political campaign, etc. have been thoroughly researched, but there are few studies that correlate folk media to social structure. "Folk cultivates the culture, perpetuates it across the community and also act as a unifying agent. The folk mirrors the rich socio-cultural aspects of a community that has been lived since time immemorial

and which is handed down across generations propagating the social set-up, familial associations and social being” (Dutta and Kikhi, 240, 2016).

Pui-Lam Law in the article *The Revival of Folk Religion and Gender Relationships in Rural China: A Preliminary Observation*, notably remarks “despite the fact that folk religions are diffused and eclectic, they have had much influence on the stability of the patrilineal system. In view of recent developments in southern China, it seems that this relationship continues to hold amid advancements in economic conditions” (2005, 90).

Through a study of a village in Guangdong, the connection between the resurgence of folk religions and the resurrection of the patrilineal system is established. It is reasoned that some practices in folk religion have a reciprocal affiliation with patrilineal gender associations that exist in the Pearl River Delta. Thereby, the revived folk religion may serve the purpose of strengthening the resurged traditional gender dissimilarities.

Furthermore, in the paper *Folktales and Social Structure: The Case of the Chinese in Montreal*, Ban Seng Hoe states that, in the absence of a community, there is no upkeep for the folk traditions; and without a family, there is no platform for the communication of traditions from elders to children. Furthermore, folk is shared between a group and is made distinct by ‘esoteric sharing’ (Bauman 1971, 33). Bauman has further reasoned that there are two major factors that are discernible in considering folk as a shared representation: a) the inimitability of folk in the cultural units and family units b) folk being a product of production and reconstruction of standardised social units and an enunciation of their shared temperament.

At the superficial level, sitting around the hearth and listening to stories or partaking in a folk ritual can be circumvented as a source of entertainment. However, in societies across the globe, folk media help people gain multifaceted understanding of the social order, structure and norms that guide a community. For instance through varied oral narratives, also people remember the means by which their lives are connected to all-encompassing longstanding ecological cycles. It is loaded with the ethos of resource management, survival stratagems, kinship systems and the

like. These are important proposition in understanding both folk media and matriliney since both require the presence of a community, family and transmission of knowledge.

When the Khasis embraced matriliney is a difficult conjecture. There are origin stories that talk about foundation of the Khasi society, by contrast some scholar's opinion that the Khasis came from South East Asia and potentially could have adopted their matrilineal system enroute to these present hills. An 83 year old, Buromlang Majaw stated, Khasis men being warriors were out fighting battles and they feared if they did not return from the battle, their very existence would be lost. Thus, the responsibility of family was entrusted upon the women, women being the guardian of the clan and family. There are several opinions on when and how Khasis adopted matriliney, one thing that is indisputable is that the matrilineal structure has grounded itself very steadfastly. Because matriliney is the mainstay of the Khasi society, a general sentiment the Khasis have is that the matrilineal system, is their distinctive characteristic which differentiates them from the rest of the communities.

It is a familiar fact that the Khasis have been following matriliney even though they have been living in the midst of a very strong patrilineal arrangement all round. Remarkably, the fundamental beliefs which direct the matrilineal system are also infused in the life of a Khasi through oral narration. *Long Jait Na Ka Kynthei*- from the women ascended the clan is one such principle.

Dakerlin Lynrah who is in her 50s, explained, that just like a person learns how to eat, sleep so also these tenets people learn from the elders and pass it on to the children. Word of mouth is very important for the Khasis even today.

A 52 year old, Iban Pohnong narrated, the story of the *Ka Tiew Larun* which according to popular beliefs talk about the importance of clan system, the role of men and women in the Khasi society, importance of family life. The story in its totality is illustrative of the matrilineal order, whereby the clan system binds the Khasi society together and up to this day the sanctity of the clan is being maintained. With the upsurge in demand for patriliney among the Khasis in the last two decade,

it is the inviolability of the clan structure that many opine has helped the matriline to sustain. And stories like *Ka Tiew Larun* function as a prescription to sustain matriline.

Case 9: Oral Narrative

“Long ago in a village a natural catastrophe or a plague destroyed the entire village, the only survivors were two siblings a younger sister and her elder brother. He was old enough to take care of his sister and decided to look after her and protect her, for he believed she was the only one who could perpetuate the clan afresh *Long Jait Na Ka Kynthei*. He toiled hard in nearby fields at a minimum distance away from their home so that he could watch over her, and she could stay protected inside the house.

One day, however, she insisted on going to the field with him and he could decline her. After spending time in the scorching heat, she felt thirsty. Since there was no water body nearby he cut a bamboo in two parts which contained ample water, but accidentally she also gulped a baby snake. With the passage of time, the snake grew bigger inside her and the brother suspected that she was pregnant, and no matter how much she assured him about her innocence, he was not convinced. In order to verify the truth he one day hid near house and watched over his sister. After the day’s work when she had gone off to sleep to his shock, he saw a big snake crawl out of her mouth, he hastily killed the snake and smeared its bones near the *Larun* plant, and warned her not to go near the plant lest she be pricked by the snake’s bone. When the flowers were in full bloom she was tempted to pluck them and her brothers’ fears came true. As she plucked the flower, the snakes’ bone stabbed her and she took ill. Her brother knew her death was near and with deep sorrow made preparations for her death, so that if anyone would pass by would know she did not die alone. He dressed her in fine garments and decorated the room with all the wealth they had. He himself struck in grief renounced all world pleasures since with his sister’s death, his last hope of making the clan survive came to an end, he left home.

Destiny however had other plans, the *Syiem* (king) was hunting in the nearby area. The king became thirsty and his attendants looked for water and happened to locate the house. The servant found a girl lying in pain and reported back to the king. The king immediately called for the physician who cured her by removing the snake bones from her foot.

Soon the both fell in love and once she regained her health, the king married her. After a year of marriage they she gave birth to daughter but the king noticed her unhappiness. On learning the cause of her unhappiness the king ordered his men to make a figurine of a man and drape it with her brother old clothes. The king ordered the figurine to be placed in the market area and whosoever showed interest in the figurine must be arrested. As plans a man did show interest on recognizing his clothes, he was arrested and brought back to his house. To his great joy he was reunited with his sister and was rejoiced to see her safe”.

This story narrated by Baiahun Sohklet, is laden with the fundamentals of the matrilineal system and its values specific to the Khasis where the clan system is a powerful structure even in current times. The role of the man as the protector is significantly highlighted in the story. Because her brother is the only clan member she has, she is desirous of meeting him and getting his approval even though she is already married. The function of the man as the husband, father and *U Thawlang*, the male progenitor of the clan also plays in the story.

As a folktale it symbolically represents the Khasi culture and few respondents opined that tales like *Tiew Larun* continues to communicate the society's conviction on the woman as custodian of religious rites, wealth and lineage, even though factions like *Mait Shaphrang* and *Synkhng Rympei Thymmai* have been making incessant efforts to outdo the matrilineal system.

It is pertinent to mention that the Khasis have their own knowledge system, therefore, embedded deep in their racial memory, exerting an influence parallel to the western. It has flourished in the crevices of a culture that has mediated between what may be defined as, inherited primary intelligence vis-à-vis imparted knowledge of a

secondary nature. This oral intelligence may be harvested from the elders of any village or any clan who, by virtue of having interacted in this world longer than others, are the repositories of knowledge and wisdom of their respective communities. (Syiem, 2011, 28)

Case 10: Social Folk Custom

In the context of the matriliney and folk media *Tang Jait* ceremony becomes appropriate as a point of reference. The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act 1997, defines *Tang Jait* is a ceremony for adopting a Jait (surname) with the prefix of 'Dkhar' or simply 'Khar'. It is applicable for the person or persons born of a Khasi father and a non-Khasi mother such that they can be absorbed and assimilated into the Khasi community. In Khasi there is popular saying *Khlem Kur Khlem Jait* (lacking a clan name). It is believed that to be recognised by god having a clan name is important. Thus, this ceremony *Tang Jait* is very significant; it implies the process of sanctification of a new Khasi clan. Through this ceremony it is ensured that children born out of wedlock between a non-Khasi mother and Khasi father are inducted into the Khasi way of life and identity. The rites and rituals are known orally, the ceremony is conducted by a *Nongknia* religious specialist in consultation with the *Meikha*, the paternal grandma as per the approved customs of the family. It is also imperative to inform about the implementation of the ceremony to the associates of the *Seng Khasi* which is a socio-cultural organisation and also the village headmen the *Rangbah Shnong* for formal assertion. The role of the *Meikha* is very important in all such functions (naming, marriage) amongst Khasis since it is via her son that the clan is propagated argued Naphisa Khongwet, who is in her late 60s.

This social folk custom of the Khasis, is yet another, exemplar of matrilineal principles being embedded in folk norms. It is reasoned that such practices enables Khasi matriliney to survive the gusts of change, which may also have been the purpose of initiating such a tradition in Khasi way of life by the Khasi forefathers. Speaking along the same line 74 year old, Lyndom Buhphang stated that by performing *Tang Jait* a non-Khasi mother is inducted in the Khasi society, she is

called *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* (clan mother). The Khasi father is given the name of *U Thawlang* (clan father), the forbearer of the clan. The family is expected to espouse the Khasi way of life, acquire the language via day to day dialogue, and adopt both the cognates and agnates (*Ka Khein Kur Ka Khein Kha*). This ceremony is very important for all Khasis irrespective of the religion people follow Christianity or *Niam Khasi*. *Tang Jait* is considered to be imperative in order to circumvent taint and taboo that may occur as a result of marriage within the same clan resulting in the birth of children thereafter.

It is pertinent to mention that through this ceremony the offspring is given a clan and not the mother, the first female that is born in this clan becomes the root ancestress *Ka Iawbei*, conversely the first male child is the great grand uncle *U Suidnia*. It is a folk tradition that emerged out of a need to protect the system of clan exogamy by avoiding *Ka Shong Sang*, i.e., incest and also the matrilineal order. The *Tang Jait* ceremony is another indicator of the embeddedness of the matrilineal traditions in folk practices.

Case 11: Folk Performance

Another folk practice that is suggestive of matrilineal set-up among the Khasis is the Pomblang festival. The Pomblang festival is also popularly known as *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* or *Shad Nongkrem* (*Pom-* cutting, *Blang-* goat) festival, it is organised annually by the Chief (*Syiem*) of Khyrim and the council of ministers (*Dorbar Hima*), in Smit in Nongkrem the headquarters of Hima Khyrim (Khyrim Syiemship). It is an important harvest festival of the Khasis, held every year in the month of November.

Through this festival the Khasis pay respect to the ancestors, honour the forefathers of the state and seek almighty's benedictions for a plentiful harvest, also prayers are said for the well-being of the royal family and people in general. The hub of the festival is the *Ing Sad* (Syiems house), said Pynsuk Khongjirem, aged 66.

There are several rituals that are a part of Pomblang festival but none are open for public view. Inside the *Ing Sad* (Syiem's house), where the religious ceremonies related to the festival is conducted, only the members of the Syiems family and the

Lyngdoh (priest) are allowed it is not open for the common public, prayers are offered in front of the oak pillar called *Rishot Blei*.

The last two days of the festivity take place in the public purview. On the second last day, a procession is taken out from the *ling Sad* which moves towards a nearby hill top, procession is led by the *Dhulias* (musicians) and male dancers, where rituals are carried out by the priest and a cock is scarified.

This takes place in public view in the presence of the royal family, after the priest makes certain predictions about the harvest by looking at the intestine of the cock. The farming or ploughing tools are also blessed during the event.

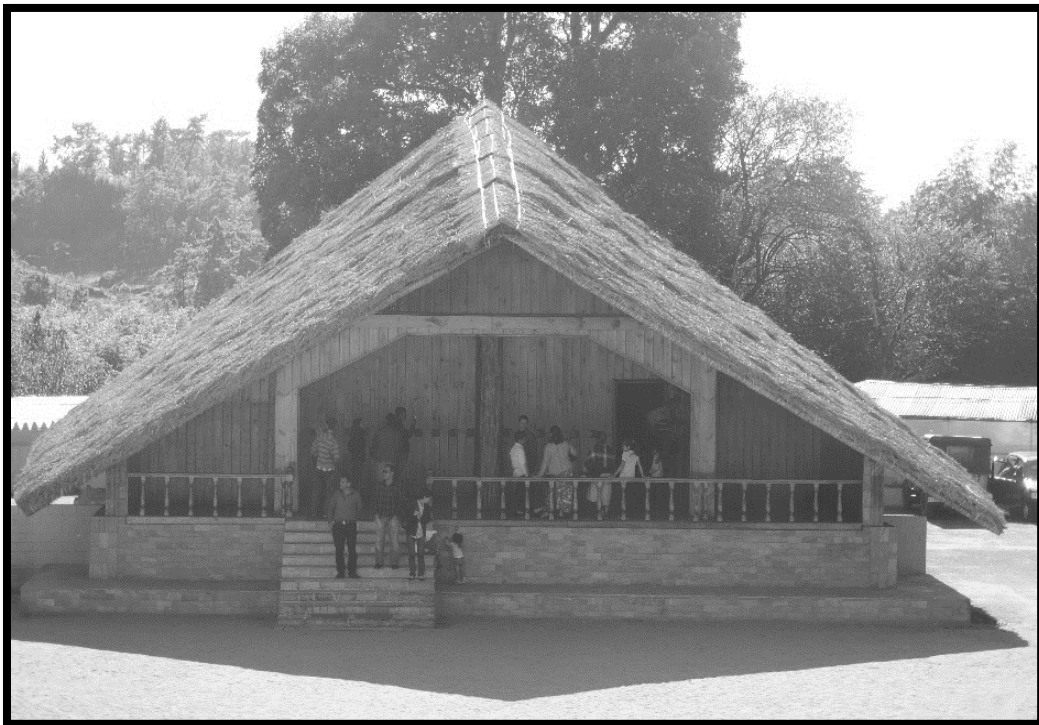


Image IV: *ling Sad* (Syiem's house) located in Smit about 11kms from capital town Shillong. It is considered to be the seat of Khasi culture. The oak pillar called *Rishot Blei* is placed inside the *ling Sad*

Then the rituals are carried out for the sacrifice of a goat as an offering to the administrative chief of the Khasi state, the forefathers of the ruling clan and to the deity known as *U-Lei Shillong* and *Ka Blei Synshar* for a bountiful harvest and

richness of the people. Gun fire, traditional dance by the menfolk backed by the tune of the music of the drums and pipes (*Tangmuri*) is a constant activity during the ceremony.

It is important to note that abiding by the Khasi matrilineal tradition the eldest sister of the king, also called the *Syiem Sad* is the chief priest who supervises the entire ceremony, though the main execution of the rituals is carried out by the official priest.



Image V: Traditional musicians who lead the procession from *ling Sad* till the hillock where the sacrificial ceremony and other rituals of *Pomblang* festival are conducted

Each year the ceremonies associated with *Pomblang* acts as a reminder for the youth and people in general about the importance of *Niam Khasi*, Khasi values and



Image VI: Priest conducting rituals during the *Pomblang* festival



Image VII: Priest conducting rituals during the *Pomblang* festival. Predictions are made about the harvest and blessings are sought for the Khasi community

way of life. People bring their children to participate in the dance so that they can learn and appreciate their own tradition.

“Now people are broad minded so those who are Christians also come to witness the festival for they may follow another religion but cannot go away from the traditional practices” argued, octogenarian Ridalin Nongbet.

The last day of the celebration is very popular, and draws a large number of visitors both Indian and foreign, along with official guests. It is considered to be a day of celebration wherein the women along with the men dance, which is the highpoint of the festival. It is the commoners who perform till dusk and in the interim, the maidens of the Kings family join the dance shaded by an umbrella made of gold. Also, it is of significance that all the participants in the dance and associated rituals are followers of *Niam Khasi*, i.e., the traditional faith, Christian Khasis however do not partake in any of these activities, but they can be part of the audience. Also, women are not allowed to dance during the ceremonies of the Pomblang festival it is only the men who dance, women dance on the last day as a part of the celebratory event.

The Virgin Dance

The Nongkrem dance is also known as the virgin dance because the woman or girls, only if virgins are likely to dance though no such standards is set for the men. Along with this dance of the virgins *Shad Kynthei*, a thanks giving dance parallel dance by the men, *Shad Mastieh* goes on. The Khasi elders say that it is a matter of integrity and goodness for the girls who partake in the dance to fulfill the criteria. For they believe that if somebody breaks this custom, ill foretokens are sighted and there have been indications of such omens in the past.

In the course of exploring about the Nongkrem dance it came to be known that in the dance the women are the symbolic representation of the *Lukhimai*, the guardian spirit of the house, the foundation of a clan and is held in high esteem, where virtue and pureness are her indispensable characteristics. This is also signified by a flower *Tiew Lasubon* which is used to traditionally decorate the crown women wear while dancing (the aromatic cactus flower blooms with an uncommonness which is an

indicator its refinement). The women dance in the center in sombre movements making use of the feet, moving elliptically by burrowing the ground. Their motion is dawdling and pre-meditated their eyes downcast, and their face is a quintessence of poise and composure.



Image VIII: Virgin Dance also known as Nongkrem Dance which is a celebratory event of the final day of *Pomblang* festival

Female dancers connote purity and the tilling of the ground during the dance, such movements are a display of the adversities that a woman goes through at child birth, and also the discomfort that mother earth is put through during farming, informed, a 71 year old, Bashisha Shadap.

Contrariwise, the men dance around the women vivaciously waving yak tail whisks and swords. It is a representation the Khasi popular belief, that it is the duty of the men to safeguard the women, to ward off evils and defend the purity of the whole race. As the saying goes *Ka Jing Im Ka Bakhuid Ka Ba Suba*, i.e., accomplishing a life that is immaculate and unblemished is the chief purpose of every Khasi.

Herein, it is also to be mentioned that matrilineal implications are deeply entrenched in all these practices. For instance, the turban that the men wear while dancing is adorned with the *Thuia*, i.e., feathers of birds. It is a commonly accepted

that the feather on the turban represents masculinity, power and freedom, signified by the bird that soars high in the sky. Remarkably, the quiver (vessel for holding arrows or darts), that men carry has three arrows placed in it named as *Nam Blei* - God, *Nam Thawlang*- first paternal progenitor, and *Nam Iawbei*- first maternal ancestor. It is a depiction of the triumvirate of the three most influential powers in a Khasi man's life which assists him to protect himself, his household, his clan and community in general, his *Hima* and motherland.

Silvester Sohkhlet, who is in his late 40s, argued, "all Khasi folk practices or traditions are a reflection of the social structure, change cannot be avoided but the effort to preserve what we have is important". People bring their children to these festivals so that they are aware of the Khasi heritage, such so that they do not forget about their roots even if they live outside the state.



Image IX: Male dancers carry a quiver with three arrows emblematic of *Nam Blei* - God, *Nam Thawlang*- first paternal progenitor, *Nam Iawbei*- first maternal ancestor



Image X: *Shad Mastieh* performed by male dancers during *Pomblang* festival

A common site in during the Nongkrem dance is the initiation of the small children in the dance. Children from the royal family as well as toddlers from commoners families are made to dance guided by the older members though not a formal process it can be deemed as a rites de passage.

A few respondent reasoned that, folk media is linked to religion and ritual, and religion is central to the Khasi society. Folk is very important in a Khasis life and is handed down through generations, it is ingrained in the system, those who practice *Niam Khasi* the folk practices are still sanctified for them. Those who follow Christianity, have learned to appreciate folk values as an integral part of the Khasi society but do not take part in it directly.

The Syiemship also broke down at a certain point with the rise in conversion. *Syiem Khyriem* (Nongkrem) hold on to *Niam Khasi* and hence hold on to vibrant traditional practices and thus, Hima Khyrim is today considered to be the seat of Khasi culture. Syiem Mylliem and Sohra do not practice *Niam Khasi* and so folk norms and rituals have become slackened. At the beginning there was clash when Christianity came but people began to realise that culture can be understood from

the past and the same kind of comprise has taken place where many Christian Khasi realise that the root of being Khasi lies in the folk rituals.

Though in at present the majority are Christians, the Niam Khasi residue is very sturdy. *Niam Khasi* is a way of life, folk rituals cannot be eliminated conspicuously but none it has to be also agreed that rituals and practices have undergone change. For example, the traditional naming ceremony Christian Khasi do not practice it any longer. Then among *Niam Khasi* followers now people opt for burial whereas earlier *Niam Khasi* were cremates the dead bodyd thus cremation practices are lessening. Time consuming, long drawn rituals are also being given up since followers of *Niam Khasi* themselves lack resources or knowledge about them. Thus, these ceremonies are either simplified or completely done away with, claimed 50 year old Percy Khongthohrem.

As has been reiterated folk media echoes the socio-cultural and philosophical features of a community, interlaced artistically and aesthetically into a life experience. Despite frequent changes, the folk withstands a component of continuousness and emphases on the collectiveness of the community. It has been acknowledged that folk customs have its own oddity and unconventionality which is associated to the beliefs of the people and the people themselves use it to express. Through such means of communication, the philosophies, approaches, way of life and culture are propagated, restored and disseminated. Khasi folk media that has been discussed so far is also a reflection of these traits and know-how and practices related to the matrilineal system too is perpetuated through the varied folk practices.

Case 12: Folk Performance

Along the lines another Khasi folk practice that is of significance is *Jingrwai Iawbei*, a practice carried out by residents of the Kongthong village specifically.

If you ever hear the winds humming a tune and smoothly whistling, you most certainly are in Kongthong village. The tune that the wind carries is nothing but the *Jingrwai Iawbei* informed an octogenarian Phiban Majaw. Kongthong village is recognised as the ‘singing village’ for its distinguishing folk tradition. The mothers

and other family members call their children with a distinctive tune composed at the time of birth; the tune is locally known as *Jingrwai Iawbei*.

The *Jingrwai Iawbei* is a song (*Jingrwai*) in honour of the root ancestress (*Iawbei*), which is composed by the mother upon the birth of her child in the preliminary weeks when she is recovering her health post-delivery. On several occasions the father too composes the melody; two to three tunes are formed and the finest one is selected. People believe that by the use of this song a mother can communicate her love passionately, and subsequently this *Jingrwai Iawbei* becomes a definite song to the child to which he/she answers and is associated with him/her throughout the life span.

76 year old Daribha Khongsit said that the song has a start and an end but there is no distinguishing lyric. When the children grow older and parents wish to call out to their kid, only a portion/initial part of the song is used, the entire song is used outside the village or in the field for communication.

The pet name of a person can be common but the song is exclusive to the person and when someone listens to the *Jingrwai Iawbei* only that individual to whom it fits will reply by humming it back. The study also found that *Jingrwai Iawbei* is reliant on memory and no individual transcribes it in any form, but remarkably people remember two songs: one that their parents made for them and the second that they created for their children. It is worthy of reference that when a person is born a fresh *Jingrwai Iawbei* is composed and it expires away when a person dies. In some cases people also recall the tune of other fellow residents. Calling out by *Jingrwai Iawbei* is calling with love and admiration. *Jingrwai Iawbei* is unique for it lives as long as the person lives, informed 18 year old Tesikhem Lynrah. People of the village also opined that though it is called a song, it is more of a tune and the lyrics are not distinctive. Hence, as one travels around the village one can hear a hazy tune at all times, more specifically it resonates like a whistle. The study found that every member from every single house in this village is apportioned a definite tune making it easy for the other members of the household to understand who is being called.

The respondents also narrated that *Jingrwai Iawbei* has spiritual connotations, it is oral and so far no effort has been made to classify or document it officially. It also came to be known that residents of the Kongthong village are the architect and custodian of this tradition of *Jingrwai Iawbei*, though some adjacent villages like Wakhen are also known to practice it. *Jingrwai Iawbei* goes beyond religious barrier and it is practiced by people of the Khasi traditional faith *Niam Khasi* and also Christian converts. It streams from generation to the next is a means of thanks giving to god and the root ancestress. People also feel that singing of *Jingrwai Iawbei* creates a sense of belonging to a family and the community at large.

Respondents from the Kongthong village believe that although one may not know the root ancestress of his/her clan, nonetheless when they sing the *Jingrwai Iawbei*, they feel a connection with the roots. *Jingrwai Iawbei* as mentioned earlier is a means of paying homage to the root ancestress (*Iawbei*) for protecting the clan and strive for her incessant blessings.

Jingrwai Iawbei is a practice exclusive to the dwellers of Kongthong, but is of importance to the Khasi society at large for it reverts an attention on *Iawbei* (root ancestress). *Iawbei* for the Khasi matrilineal set-up is the linking aspect of each clan where the origin and foundation of each clan is illustrated. *Iawbei* provides an eccentricity to each clan and its members, the matri kin and patri kin delineations are laid out. Thus, in the larger Khasi social life *Iawbei* emerges as the link thereby the tradition of *Jingrwai Iawbei* also turn out to be a source of understanding the matrilineal arrangement as followed by Khasis in general. Practices similar to *Jingrwai Iawbei* are difficult to trace in other matrilineal societies.

“For each clan, *Iawbei* is the joining link; it is through the *Iawbei* that the beginning of each clan is traced. She is reckoned to be the protector of the clan and is also responsible for upkeep the clan with the help of the goddess called *Ka Leilong Kur Ka Leilong Jait* (goddess of clan preservation)” (Dutta & Kikhi 2016, 246). Here, reference is drawn from Alan Dundes who states that ‘the goal of understanding folklore is not just to see how the folk use and understand it, but to understand/examine patterns which may help in revealing the general principles of

worldview and better understand the nature of man' (Dundes 1978: vii). "Furthermore, it is pertinent to understand what *Iawbei* means for the Khasi tribes and its culture. The clan is joined together by outlining its roots to their grand ancestress (*Ka Iawbei*); alongside each clan in the Khasi society has its own separate story about its particular *Iawbei*" (Dutta & Kikhi, 2016, 246). This lineage also helps in preserving clan exogamy among the clans.

In most of these folk practise it has been seen that the female character or *Iawbei* has a more noticeable part than the male characters. The legends, folk rituals confirm that women in the Khasi society since times immemorial held a respectable position. *Ka Iawbei* embraces not only the life of the clan as a whole but that of each individual member of a clan.

The Khasis are of the view that when a child is still in the mother's womb or is in a toddler stage, the child is still under the guardianship and shelter of the ancestress, who holds the position of a deity (Mawrie 1981). Additionally, when a new born passes stool without consuming the common food, it is called *Ka Eit Iawbei* (ancestress stool); when the child beams or parts the lips prior to attainment self-consciousness it is assumed that it smiles as a reaction to the caressing of the ancestress *Rkhie Iawbei* or *Iarain Iawbei*; and if the child impulsively moves its lips as if it is suckling, people believe that the ancestress is nourishing the child. There are more such believes devoted with the root ancestress, like the ancestress scratch, *Ka Trud Iawbei*, which is the scratch mark that appear on the belly of the mother at the time of gestation. A child's hair is clean-shaven only after it completes one year. For it is believed that the hair that one is born is part of the ancestress hair, *U Niu Iawbei* and hence no sharp objects should touch the child's head till this time period is over. It is to be noted that while shaving or cutting the child's hair, some part of the original hair or ancestress hair as believed has to be retained, informed Rilang Tynsong, aged 32.

Thus, through such customs the consecrated place of *Ka Iawbei* in particular and the mother at large is proliferated in the life and culture of the Khasis. *Jingrwai Iawbei* is a further illustration of consolidating the position and also preserving it.

The practice of *Jingrwai Iawbei* and its reverence mirrors the highest regard for the *Iawbei* and the deeply rooted matrilineal system of the Khasi social structure.

“Every society emerged out of its past, thus associations of a natural group were genetic though not biological and its members inherit a language, a literature, and a body of custom that linked them to the generations that preceded them and to one another” (Oring 1994: 214). This idea as discussed by Oring, becomes evident in this study where *Jingrwai Iawbei*, and the other Khasi folk media forms has fundamentally amalgamated with the daily life of the people. The varied folk forms of the Khasis have fundamentally been an enunciation of ethnic and religious identities and of the sacredness of the matrilineal, social order, social structure and political organisation. It appears like a ‘strategic knowledge system’ (Sen 2010: 18) functioning as a communication apparatus anchoring/promulgating community life, refurbishing and improving shared beliefs. And this statement holds true in the context of *Jingrwai Iawbei*, which is being practiced even to this day upholding its actual fortitude.

Case 13: Material Culture

Remarkably, through the course of the study it also came to the fore that Khasi material culture is also infused with matrilineal insinuations. Khasi musical instrument like the *Ksing* (drum) is classified as male and female. The right side of *Ka Ksing Shyrang* (male drum) is made of cow’s skin, while the left side is made of goat’s skin. There are two male drums which are a signifier of the two clan that a man is a part of two families his natal home and his wife’s home, and his dual role as the *Kpa* (father) and *Kni* (maternal uncle). In the male drum, the right side is always specified by the drum syllable ‘*Dun*’ played with a stick denoting the function of a man as the protector of the family and clan from any kind of danger. The left side is played with the hand and indicated by a soft syllable ‘*Thang*’ which connotes the gentle advice the *Kni* gives to the nieces and nephews (Syiem, 2012, 83).



Image XI: Commencement of the procession *Pomblang* festival. Musicinas lead the procession from the front, *Ka Ksing Shyrang* (male drum) is played during such ceremonies

Conversely, the *Ka Ksing Kynthei* (female drum) signifying the honoured position of the women in the Khasi society. It also signifies that the women is weak and needs protection and hence there is only one female drum. It is made of goat skin on both side, played gently with the hands. The female drum is used carefully only in cultural occasions. While the male drum is played in both religious and cultural events, which also indicates the role of the man in the matrilineal order in terms of authority in the family and clan. The women do not perform any rituals but only make the necessary arrangements while the actual execution is done by the Khasi men.

Teilin Khongsit, aged 73 informed that the matrilineal connotations have been instilled in all layers of Khasi folk life. It is very definitive and has helped matriliney to survive. Along similar lines, yet another facet of Khasi religious and folk life that is reflective of the matrilineal order is the monoliths erected as memorial stones *Ki Mawbynna*. They are also called *Ki Mawbynna Kynmaw* (here *Kynmaw* implies to remember). Along with being memorial stones they also function as markers of the area where the bones of the deceased are conserved. The whole process of collecting the bones and bringing it to the final clan ossuary entails elaborate ceremonies. The ceremonies are conducted by the matrikin of the deceased, likewise, the paternal family members have their part of rituals to conduct. It is not necessary that the ceremonies are done immediately, but till the time the bones remaining in the *Mawkynroh* (stone cist). It is important to note that when the wife and children cremate their spouse and father, they keep his bones in a different *Mawkynroh* and not in the *Mawkynroh* of their ancestry.

Mawniam (religious stones) is the final ossuary for the bones, in which the bones of all associates of all lineages descending from the same ancestress are kept. Furthermore, *Mawniam* are primarily made of four stones, three raised vertically and one horizontally, informed 70 year old, Lawanhun Lyngdoh. The vertical stones are the *Mawshynrang* (male stones), the stone standing in the centre is representative of the *U Suidnia* (maternal uncle of the clan). While other two stones on the left and right called *Ki Maw Pyrsa* are emblematic of the younger maternal uncles.

On the other hand, the horizontal stone or table stone is the *Mawkynthei* (female stone) and is symbolic of the *Iawbei Tymmen* (first ancestress) or *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* (great great grandmother). Along the lines as a mark of respect for the paternal clan, the *Mawnam* is instituted. Like the *Mawniam* here too four stones are used. The vertical stone *Mawkynthei* is symbolic of *Ka Iawbei*, i.e., father's grandmother. Of the three horizontal stones *Mawshynrang*, the middle signifies *U Thawlang* (father), and the other two on either side stands for the father's bothers or nephews. "The monoliths and dolmens and the memorial structures now remain as the only

lasting memorials of the ancient Khasi race” (Roy, 1979, 160, cited in Jyrwa, 2011, 84).



Image XII: Memorial stones *Ki Mawbyinna* also called *Ki Mawbyinna Kynmaw*

The custom of instituting the megaliths is slowly subsidised and many have argued that it is a tradition that is at core of the Khasi matrilineal structure. Limited time, resources and knowledge about the intricacies of the ceremonies are one of the prime reasons for its disappearance. Also, followers of Christianity do not believe in such rituals, thereby making it impossible to conduct such rituals at the clan level. But despite the practice becoming almost non-existent, many respondents concurred the fact that this element of Khasi folk life is indispensable and is a well-conceived system of the ancestors to remind the community about its identity as a matrilineal society.

In the article, *The Monoliths of the Khasi Janitia Hills*, Kynpham Singh has some interesting quotations from government records concerning these monoliths. He points out that in 1894, the following notification was issued by the secretary, to Chief

Commissioner of Assam: ‘On returning to Assam after an absence of five years, the Chief Commissioner has been struck by the extensive destruction of Khasi memorial stones which he has noticed in the neighbourhood of Shillong...these monuments are not only of great interest from anthropological point of view, but are also entitled to respect as memorials of the dead they represent...

The Deputy Commissioner, Khasi Jaintia Hills issued the following purwana (as a follow up).

...For the above reasons, I now put under your care these stones; you will be responsible for the maintenance and protection of these stones (Roy, 1979, 160-161, cited in Jyrwa, 2011, 84).

From times immemorial, folk media has directed the route of meaning and identity for societies as a whole. Folk traditions are inclusive of both tangible and intangible elements. The knowledge system of the people in most cases had been interpreted as irrational belief leading to a far-reaching disrespect of their philosophies and customs. But over the years, it has been established that the traditional philosophies and allied practices have functional values. Therefore, in recent times, the focus is readdressed to the multi-layered cultural practices, creative values and principles of communities and it is principally recognised that heritage is not restricted to monument and relics.

Herein, it is important to bear in mind that, folk practices are a heritage of the past. People live with it in the present-day with the expectation that some of it can be passed down to the subsequent generations. In all societies, folk practices are an evidence of life and history and also a distinct source of inspiration. The folk media forms can be compared to the DNA, which institutes people’s identity, offers them with principles and helps them appreciate their worldview. This holds true for the Khasis for whom the varied folk practices, is not an extraneous component, but is knotted in the system of the society itself having a strong influence on the culture, life and philosophical thought of the people. The Khasi’s are by and large an oral society wherein in the oral expressions comprises of enormous spoken forms like

legends, proverbs, myths, songs, dance performances and many more. They play a decisive function in keeping cultures alive.

Taking the example of the Trobriand origin myth, Malinowski had pointed out that the simultaneous emergence of brother and sister might be misinterpreted as a mythological allusion to incest, which would be entirely erroneous. The sister is responsible for the transmission of the family line, and the brother, rather than the husband, is indispensable as the guardian. If, on the other hand, an attempt were made to determine the identity of the sister's husband, an outside observer 'would soon find himself once more confronted by an entirely foreign set of ideas - the sociological irrelevance of the father, the absence of any ideas about physiological procreation, and the strange and complicated system of marriage, matrilineal and patrilocal at the same time'. 'Only a full knowledge of matrilineal ideas and institutions gives body and meaning to the bare mention of the two ancestral names, so significant to a native listener'. The full meaning of these origin myths becomes clear only when the kinship system, the legal concepts of local citizenship, and the hereditary rights to territory, fishing grounds and local pursuits are understood. (Bascom, 1954, 338)

How far folk represents the socio-religious life of a community is a concern for scholars from diverse fields, for folk is an all-encompassing element of group life. The norms of incest to taboo, code of conduct to laws of governance, rituals pertaining to birth and death, architecture to agriculture are embedded in folk culture. These gradations are perpetuated through the folk, thus these can be deciphered from the folk media. Also as a corollary, the kinship system, administrative arrangement and all such systems of a society have to be examined to better understand the folk, two sides of the same coin one could say. In the context of the present study, similar attempt has been made to understand Khasi

matriliny and folk media in isolation first and then attempt has been made to examine both in conjunction.

4.4 Summation

The purpose of this study is not to romanticize matrilineal or folk media, but the focus is to understand matrilineal set-up in contemporary times through the prism of folk media that cuts across mass / popular culture. Folk forms ‘remain a significant social force, energised by the dynamic process of traditionalisation, ideology, social thought and artfulness of everyday life’ (Bauman 1992: 40). The essentials of folk cannot be ruined even if metamorphosed, for it acts as ‘the courier of tradition’ (Sen 2010: 48). The folk media are methods through which messages, opinions and approaches are articulated. In earlier times, folk were also the agents of change in cultural and social revolution. Viewed therefore, folk media functions within a community to indemnify conformism to the conventional cultural customs, indoctrinate the philosophies and ethical standards among the younger generation, sustain the stability of social structure, and also offer validations when the organisations and conventions are confronted or questioned. “There is no doubt that this centuries-old art will continue to pave the way for knowledge, awareness and salvation among the people... It is fulfilling not only the ritualistic needs of society but aesthetic also” (Patil, 2011, 6).

A close look at Khasi folk form reveals that it is laden with the ethos of matrilineality, some aspects may be overt while others covert but its manifestation is most certainly evident. Because folk media forms are manifested in matrilineal connotations it has been perpetuated across generations. The tenets of matrilineality, its beliefs and practices have not been at large but remain in shared collective memory and living through the folk media. Folk media evolves as the society progresses and assists in sustaining the essential concert for a society to function. Thus, the role of folk media in perpetuating matrilineality cannot be negated though it is debatable. Researchers across domains have researched about Khasi matrilineality and Khasi folk traditions in isolation, though a common argument being both Khasi matrilineality and folk tradition are integral part of who a Khasi is, and what constitutes Khasi

identity. In this light to draw parallel between Khasi matriliney and folk traditions does make a case.

Additionally, in course of this study it has been reinstated that folk media is the channel of communication in a society in this case the Khasi society. The narrative of the Khasi community is transmitted via the folk, matrilineal implications have been communicated through the folk. This has taken place by means of interaction and interpretation in the home and hearth, public places like festivals and clan gatherings, sign and symbols like the megaliths.

The study is based on the batons of symbolic interactionist perspective wherein the micro system folk media has been examined to understand Khasi matriliney which is the macro structure. Each element of the folk media be it oral, performance, material or custom is socially created in that the connotations are contrived through the process of social communication. It is a never ending process which is the essence of the Khasi society that leads to coordinated efforts. The winds of change cannot be disregarded, but there is also a persistent force working within the society to meet the challenges.

Humans are acting creatures, interacting continuously with self and others, and responses based on its own understandings. Such wide-ranging interactions produces a social network through which information or traditional knowledge is handed down to the next generation, where meaning formation is a dynamic process. Arguably, folk media is a physical reality that is more than just the fabrication in peoples mind. It acts as a medium for understanding, demonstrating and communicating history.

Folk media is a reserve as well as an artefact in which the past is used as a source for comprehending the present. "It is a powerful untapped resource for social healing and civic engagement with the on-going legacies of the past - where the past is used to address the pressing concerns of the present" (Dutta and Kikhi, 2016, 238-239).

The modern discourse on globalisation has many wide-ranging implications and raises the pertinent question of how people connect in a global village and what

helps in identity formation and sustenance. It is progressively being accepted that folk media is the foundation of understanding the life and culture of a community. And also rediscover a common means of communiqué for dissemination of information that is 'person-centred'.

Folk mirrors the socio-cultural and philosophical aspects of a group, interlaced artistically and aesthetically into a life experience. It has been established that folk forms have its identifiable oddity and unconventionality, is linked to the principles of the people and the people themselves employ it as a means of expression. In this case blatant or clandestine gradations of matriliney is passed on by means of folk forms like oral narratives, material culture, performances and rituals. Folk media becomes the bearer of matrilineal philosophies and helps in its propagation across time.

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