

Kynthah Nar (Singeing): Ethnic Khasi healing practices

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In an attempt to survive and develop, every society possesses healing institutions and practices of their own which is later passed from generation-to-generation. Folk wisdom is collective and one that has been accumulated within the cultural context of a society rooted in experience and practical considerations. Folk practices are considered to be part of the little tradition, i.e., the beliefs and practices of the masses (Mariott, 1955). It finds its expression in proverbs, folklores, legends, poetry, rituals and mythologies.

The health and wellness of an individual are reliant on the integrated effects of mind, body and spirit. Beliefs about pain and suffering are compatible with beliefs about life and the supernatural. The theory of supernatural causation is widely believed and is frequently invoked to explain a wide range of events. In the present day, healing practices evolved around such beliefs still exists among the Khasis of North East India.

Kynthah Nar (Singeing) of the Khasis is as ancient and diverse as civilization itself. It is a holistic healing practice performed by the *Syiem* (Ruler/King) or successors of the *Syiem of Hima Khyrim* or *Khyrim* Kingdom. It is knowledge learnt through apprenticeship and by assisting their maternal uncles which is a prerogative of the “*Syiem*” clan who are believed to possess special powers to heal certain ailments. The *Syiemsad* (Queen) of *Hima Khyrim* performs the sacerdotal function only on rare and special cases. She believes that healing powers have been prevalent within the royal clan since the days of *Ka Īawbei Pahsyntiew* (ancestress).

It has been observed that *ka kynthah nar* (Singeing) appears to be a social activity held in a shed within the premises of the *Hima*. People share their problems and consult the healer in full public view. Family members from the *hima* actively engage in the treatment process which comprise of a *nar khluid* (hot iron rod) and distribution of holy water which is to be consumed or used for bathing purposes by the diseased. Preparation for treatment process starts with the performer praying to God almighty for the power to heal. He prays over the water from the *Īingsad* (ceremonial house) meant for the ailing and then immerses the red-hot iron in the water to ward away evil spirits.

People from far and near throng the vicinity for various ailments such as *kyndeh shadem* (palpitation), *king khlieh* (headache), *suhkpoh* (colic pain), *tyrsaiñ* (cramps), *lwait bad shoh thait* (fatigue), *khap thlen* (bitten by the serpent), *taro* (another form of wealth generating evil spirit prevalent among the Jaintias) *lynkhuh* or *her-rngiew* (eerie feeling due to an incident or sudden sound or even when one accidentally cross paths with spirits) and so on. Besides aches and pains people undergo treatment for *eh rngiew* (to strengthen the inner spirit existent in every individual). It has been observed that *kynthah nar* is done even in the absence of the diseased represented by his/her clothes (inner clothing like vests and camisoles are preferred), *ksiar* (gold) and *paila* (beaded corals). It is believed that jewelry especially *ksiar* and *paila* are dreaded for their thlen trail, hence when they are purchased from the market they are brought to the *Īingsad* (ceremonial house) for *kynthah nar* or to be kept for a night or a week to rid-off the evil spirit. Visits for treatment is entirely dependent on the patient's belief, some frequent the place three times sticking firm to the Khasi belief of *lai sien lai wat* (three times three ways) while others make a single appearance .

In return for the service rendered the patients hand over gifts e.g. a bag of sugar, rice, fruits, any edible items, a *Jaiñkyrshah* (apron), *tapmohkhlieh* (shawl), shirt piece and so on. Cash is neither expected nor demanded since it is the responsibility of the clan to look out for the wellbeing of *ki khun ki hajar* (inhabitants) of the Hima/Kingdom.

Khap thlen (bitten by the serpent) is a condition related to *U Thlen* or the huge serpent requiring appeasement by human sacrifice which is one of the many supernatural beings in Khasi folklore. Possession of *u thlen* promises wealth in abundance provided the *nongri thlen* or *nongshohnoh* (keeper) is able to quench the *Thlen's* (serpent's) thirst for blood. Findings reveal three versions involved in catching a prey for the *Thlen*. Common belief has it that offerings to the *thlen* begin with the *nongshohnoh's* consumption of *ka'iad shi snem* (alcohol fermented for a year). Performance in the form of incantations is prime followed by accompaniments of *u khaw tyndep* (rice mixed with turmeric) meant to shock the victim during kidnap, a pair of silver scissors to cut off the tips of the hair and finger nails or part of a garment, a silver lancet to pierce the inside of the nostrils of the victim and a small bamboo cylinder to receive the blood drawn there-from. Another version suggests the *nongshohnoh's* possession of a natural instinct that exists in their hands and eyes. A stroke, a pat or a glance at those who are *jem rngiew* (weak spirited) is often regarded as capture accomplished. However, it may be mentioned that immediate return of the pat or glance is considered rebound of the evil spirit to the keeper. The

third is an imaginary version of the youth who compare the serpent to vampire stories that are currently sweeping the Hollywood awards.

The *thlen* supposedly has the power of reducing itself thin as thread. It is most often kept in an earthen pot or a basket in a hidden place. Offerings to the *thlen* (serpent) are usually done at night. Family members or *nongri thlen or nongshohnoh* (keepers) gather around a provisional altar created from a spread of expensive garments in the centre of a room dedicated for the ritual. A brass plate is placed on the altar wherein blood, hair or a piece of cloth of the victim is laid. When all requirements needed for the performance are in place drum roll begins followed by chanting, a typical style to invoke the *thlen* (serpent). It is believed that the *thlen* on pacification swallows the spirit of the victim known to have *jem rngiew* (a weak inner spirit). The infected usually goes through a process of slow death until every drop of blood on their vein is dry. Symptoms of one such condition is pale sunken eyes, a weary look with flushed pink chapped lips, *siep* (puffiness on the face), *ring swai* (wrinkly-pale) look, cranky in case of infants/children and disturbed sleep. It is learnt through intense field work that *ring swai* (wrinkly-pale) look similar to severe anorexia is the last stage of survival. Hence people suspected to be *thlen* keepers are feared.

Findings and personal interaction with the clan reveal that *kynthah nar* is the only remedy for such a condition and those affected shudder on immediate contact with *nar khluid* (red-hot iron rod); for it is through red-hot iron that *u thlen's* execution took place in a cave at *Rangjyrteh* near Cherrapunji. A courageous deed performed by *U Suidnoh* a resident of *Laitryngew* as depicted in the narrative of *Ka Daiñthlen* (hacking of the serpent). It may be worthy of mention that another form of treating the sick practiced in West Khasi Hills is *kheibyllei* or *ka jingpynkhieblei* (awakening of the Gods).

The efficacy of folk therapy is widely acknowledged among the Khasis and there is mounting empirical evidence that they heal. It cannot be denied that the rapid progress in modern medicine has affected the popularity of traditional systems. Traditional knowledge among the Khasis is not seen at par with professional medical systems which are rooted in academics, science and literature but its importance exist within the socio-cultural system. It is not looked at as something ancient but as part of tradition which is "created, preserved, and dispersed"¹.

How people interpret their illness and mental state is largely determined by the society and their social world. Social attitudes, beliefs, norms, values and so on provide the basis for making sense of *ki dak ki shin* (symptoms), *ka daw* (etiology) and *kaba wanlam ia ka jingpang* (import of the problem). The therapy is holistic and aims at the overall well-being of the person. It has been observed that though some healing centers and healers specialize in the treatment of a particular type of problem, often people with all kinds of crises frequent these places for physical or mental illness, family feuds, loss in business, marital discord or wrath of spirits. The inflow of people is testimony to the fact that there is reliance in the practice and belief system. An element of truth prevails that traditional healing system is perceived as prescientific and considered to be practiced by primitive and tribal people (Kothari & Mehta, 1988). It is further argued that ignorance and backwardness are primarily responsible for adherence to these nonscientific practices. But, as Watts (1975) contended, traditional healing practices are called primitive, mystical and esoteric because our education does not prepare us to comprehend their sophistication. The work of Kakar (1982, 2003) and Kleinman (1980, 1988) has shown that most of these traditional practices are deeply entrenched in folk wisdom and sound theories of mind. These practices provide practical solutions to personal, familial and social problems and have been integrated in the communal life. Interaction on field is evidential proof that the modern generation still rely on traditional practices which could be considered as an issue for maintaining and rebuilding cultures and ways of life.

¹ S.A. Hansen and J.W. Van Fleet, *Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property: A Handbook on Issues and Options for Traditional Knowledge Holders in Protecting their Intellectual Property and Maintaining Biological Diversity* (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2003).

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