

Local knowledge networks: A portraying interview of a sacred grove

Nena Seitz

Abstract

Formed in 1972 and located in the northern east of the Indian subcontinent, Meghalaya shares its northern border with Assam and southern border with Bangladesh. Having a population of over three million, the state is made of a mild climate with clouds constantly floating through green layers of the hills. And nestled in the state's East Khasi Hills lies the Mawphlang sacred grove. Guiding through the forest, Johnstarfield Myrthong portrays his perception of the grove, local belief systems and the social structure of the Khasi community.

Author's profile

Nena Seitz is a graduate in cultural and social anthropology from Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany. Her research interests focus on post-colonial power structures and environmental anthropology. These include political ecology and the ontological turn as well as the role of local knowledge systems and networks in a highly globalised world. Her studies also focused on the geographical region of South Asia and parts of West Asia. From May to October 2019, she was a trainee at hbs India.

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A shield, welcoming at Mawphlang Sacred Forest. Photo by Nena Seitz

John: “I am here for seven years and we are the Khasi people.” Dressed in a red sports jacket and trainers, Johnstarfield Myrthong – who introduces himself as John – is 24-year-old who grew up in the Mawphlang village near the sacred grove. He identifies himself as Khasi. And as Christian – ways of life many people in the region are being interlaced with by birth. Having been a tour guide by profession for the last seven years, John offers tours through Mawphlang’s Sacred Grove, day by day.

Tribes: “In Meghalaya we have very few tribal people. Three tribal groups are existing: Khasi, Garo and Jaintia.” Meghalaya’s main tribes are named after the three hillsides, which determine the state’s landscape. “But the language we speak and the food we eat, and our culture, especially the traditional dance of the Khasi people, differ between the groups.”

Language: Although John is speaking in English, his mother tongue is Khasi. Khasi does not have its own written script, but its oral sound is thus even richer of vivid sounds and emphasises. “The Khasi language is difficult to learn. For writing, we use the Roman scripture, which we learn in school.” Being sent to Calcutta as a Christian missionary, Thomas Jones (1810 – 1849) worked among the Khasi and by living in the region, he started recording the Khasi language in Roman script, which is why the same script is used till today.¹

Routes: “In the forest we have two routes. Do you want to walk the short or the long path?” Having chosen the longer route, a carved path leads us into the forests’ inner side. Without recognising it, the paving stones turn themselves into a brownish-earthy ground, interspersed with roots, flattened and dried by countless pairs of feet, which have trampled it down by time.



Inside the forest, monoliths are lining the way and marking a meeting point. Photo by Nena Seitz

Monoliths: Monoliths are lining the way, here and there – not organically grown, but brought “from outside inside the forest”, by the people. Outside, monoliths are arranged next to each

¹ Magdalyne, Syiemlieh. 2013, Early Khasi Response to Christian Missions: Challenges, Acceptance and Assertion, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science, Volume 14, no. 2 (Jul.-Aug. 2013): 36-43, [http://www.academia.edu/download/32109782/G01423643_\(1\).pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/32109782/G01423643_(1).pdf).

other, like a sculpture, “for our memory”. “We put the long stone along with the flat stone; the long stone represents the male and the flat stone represents the female.” Inside the forest, arranged in a line, next to the path, made of flattened earth and leaves, the monoliths mark a meeting point. “When a sacrifice is performed, we have to assemble behind that stone, at the meeting place, and wait for the chief.”

Labasa: “Some people only have one religion. But the people here, we believe in the initial god.” “In Khasi we call it the labasa. That's the name of the holy spirit in the forest.” Existing beyond material limitations and rational perceptions, “the deity only appears in the body of a leopard in the time of a sacrifice.” If the deity embodies itself in a leopards’ shape, “the god is happy and the sacrifice was successful”. On the other hand, the expression of the initial god in form of a snake means “bad news for the people”. ‘Sain’ means snake, ‘la’ can be translated into leopard and ‘basa’ means deity. “It won't appear for everyone. I mean, you can do a sacrifice, but nothing will happen. It will only appear for us, the Khasi.”

Playground: “You've seen it when we stand outside.” Outside the grove, standing next to the paved road, where a tea stall is stationed, car parking is arranged and huts for tourists staying overnight are under construction. “What do you think why this dense forest never expanded to that side?” John points towards the green field, located between the paved road and the densely grown forest. “So, if you'll come here again in the next 10 or 20 or 30 years, you will see that the forest will be still the same.” As being withheld by a not yet materialised barrier, the plants, the trees, the bushes, the flowers and their roots which constitute the forest over and under the ground, come into being and form a cupola, intensifying the obvious flatness of the grassy area right next to it. “We call that flat side the playground of the god. But inside is the place where the god, labasa, lives. So, the labasa used to play outside. Even if we try to plant the trees on the playground of the deity, they won't grow.”

Offerings: “It's a little bit similar with the practices in Hinduism. In the sacrifices I have seen, the people used the coconut and check from the inside if the coconut has any disease.” Before a house is build or an important event takes place, an offering is made to the deity. “It's nothing you can learn in school.” Some people, a few and “only men” have the knowledge of the way an offering has to be performed and “only men” are allowed to do so. “Like in the Hindu religion. They also have a special person who knows how to do the puja. In Khasi, we have the nongkiniam who will know how to do the sacrifice.” The nongkiniam, the priest. “Even I am Khasi, but I don't know how to do the sacrifice.” Physical sacrifices are

expressed for community purposes only. “Before building a bridge or before a festival starts or before doing something for the village in general, they (the priests) do a sacrifice. There are also people who want to do sacrifices for personal reasons, but then they don't do it in the forest, they do it outside the forest.”

Sacred grove: “We have the sacred forest, which starts from there” – a door-like arch, constituted by leaves in different types of green form an entrance to the grove, guarded by a reddish plant hooded with pitcher-like leaves and bearing a bright red flower. “The red lily cobra plant has a very poisonous fruit. You cannot use it for anything.” “In the forest, we have many species of plants and orchids and different kinds of insects.” Constantly accompanied by the chirping of crickets, immense trunks of trees form the forests’ inner structure. Some of them are wrapped in lines of roots creeping and crawling their ways downward to the earth from the tree’s branches. Also called the Tree of Heaven, the Mahrukha tree is “more than 600 years old.” Out of Mahrukhas’s fruit juice, “we make medicine for gastric.” The bark of the Rhododendron tree can be used as a “medicine especially for heart diseases”.

Preservation: “The total area of the forest is 76.8 hectare and we don't allow anyone to pick anything up from the forest.” While the flat side, outside the grove, forms the deity’s playground, the grove’s inner side forms the space where the deity lives. Each and everything growing inside can be used, but needs to be kept within, too. Being “more than 800 years old”, the Mawphlang forest belongs to the people living in the village nearby and is preserved and protected by them. “We have another forest, from where we can collect firewood to cook food at home. But if we use wood from this forest, we make a fire directly in front of the forest and we never take the wood home.” At the routes’ end, outside the forest, some greyish-black and almost round fireplaces appear like memorials at one of the forests thresholds, seeking shadow below the trees’ branches, which the visitor has to cross during the walk back from the grove to the tea stall.

Tourism: “A person from Hyderabad came here eight years ago, walked the David Scott trail and shot some pictures with his camera. He uploaded them and put my number on the same travel website. That is how the people became aware of this place and the forest. And you know how tourism works. This was the first step and now more and more tourists are coming.” More and more tourists, that means 30 to 40 people a day, in high season. Now, at end of August, it’s monsoon season. A cloudy sky and a grey atmosphere at 10 o’clock in the morning. Two to three tours a day for around 15 tour guides. “This time there are very less

people visiting here, but in high season there are more, and we then need around 25 guides.” All of the guides are male and mostly in their mid-twenties. “The youngest guide is 18 and the oldest is 50 years old”. All the tour guides are from John’s village, which lies next to the Mawphlang forest. “Khasi people from other villages – Shillong or Cherrapunji – are not allowed to guide other people inside the forest.”

Daughters²: Women may not lead any tours through Mawphlang’s sacred grove, but they are still part of the community. Visibly, a woman is steaming momos and boiling water for tea in a hut next to the paved road. Invisible, many other Khasi women are living in and between the houses of the village. The Khasi is a matrilineal society, being structured by a clan system with mothers being the heads of each clan. The son who marries a girl from another family establishes a sub-clan with the wife being the head of it. As a bachelor, John has to give his earnings to his mother. “This demands our tradition.” The Khasi’s tradition also demands the men who are married to give their earnings to their wives and to take the last name from the mother’s side. Part of this structure is also the inheritance of the family’s property: “Our parents won’t give anything to us boys, instead they will give everything to the girls.” If there are three girls in the family, around 10 per cent of the property will be transferred from the mother to the first daughter and 10 per cent to the second. “The remaining 80 per cent they will give to the last one.” Inheriting the property, the youngest daughter is thus responsible for taking care of the parents, too.

Village: “All the men are allowed to participate in the durba shnong.” Two of John’s brothers stay in Shillong and his father “is a little older”, John attends the ‘durba shnong’ (village council) nowadays, “to represent my family”. Durba shnong is made up of male representatives of the local families. “Every male person of the family is welcome to attend the assemblies, but usually only one representative will attend the same.” Before implementing a scheme for a footpath or a building or even before a festival can take place, the government has to consult the village, which is represented by a mayor who the Khasi called ‘rangbaj shnong’. He is the elected head of the Mawphlang village and the person who people from outside have to communicate with. However, “the chief then has to call the people for a durba shnong to discuss with them. “In 2015 the government planned to build a highway from here to Cherrapunji, but we, the local people, didn’t allow that. Only if a

² Esther Syiem, Khasi Matrilineal Society: The Paradox Within (2010), <https://zubaanbooks.com/shop/khasi-matrilineal-society-the-peripheral-centre/>
Sapphira Beth, The Khasi Community Is Matrilineal, But Not Matriarchal (March 16, 2018), <https://feminismindia.com/2018/03/16/khasi-community-matrilineal-society/>

majority votes for it, a festival can take place, or a street can be built.” The government “respects our decision” – the decision to preserve this forest, this sacred grove, this network of knowledge and facilitator of exchange.

Disclaimer: This interview was prepared with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung India. The views and analysis contained in the publication are those of the interviewee and interviewer and do not necessarily represent the views of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

Further readings

Tanvi Patel (2019) “India’s First REDD+ Project: Meghalaya Tribes Are Reviving 27k+ Hectares of Forests”, <https://www.thebetterindia.com/179346/meghalaya-tribes-mawphlang-project-first-redd-india-un/>

Poffenberger, Mark (2014): Khasi responses to forest pressures: A community REDD+ project from Northeast India. In: Katila, Pia et al. (eds.): Forests under pressure: Local responses to global issues. IUFRO World Series Volume 32. Vienna, p. 229-240. (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wil_De_Jong/publication/265017551_Forest_under_pressures_-_Local_responses_to_global_issues/links/5403d1020cf2bba34c1c27b7.pdf#page=230)