
The Universal Threads of Morality: The Khasi and Christian Stories

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Paper Received on 14-12-2023, Accepted on 12-01-2024,
Published on 14-01-24; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2024.9.1.133

Abstract:

Moral stories have been a fundamental aspect of human societies since time immemorial, serving as vehicles for conveying ethical values, guiding behavior, and fostering a sense of communal identity. While religious traditions have played a significant role in shaping moral narratives, it is fascinating to observe the striking similarities that exist across different cultures, including Christian moral stories and those from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This essay seeks to explore these common threads, highlighting the shared moral principles that resonate across the globe.

Keywords: Religion, Khasis, Christianity, Moral Stories, Morality

Introduction

Religion has been a fundamental aspect of human civilization for centuries, shaping cultures, influencing moral frameworks, and providing individuals with a sense of purpose and community. While the specific beliefs and practices vary widely across different societies, religions often share common themes, such as a connection to the divine, moral guidance, and rituals that bring people together. This essay explores the multifaceted role of religion in human society, examining its impact on individuals, communities, and the broader social fabric.

Religion plays a crucial role in fostering communal bonds and social cohesion. Throughout history, religious communities have provided a sense of identity, belonging, and support for their members. Shared beliefs and rituals create a sense of solidarity, promoting a collective consciousness that extends beyond individual differences. These communities often serve as pillars of social support, offering assistance in times of need and celebrating shared values that contribute to a sense of unity.

Religion has been a powerful force in shaping cultural expression and artistic heritage. From architecture and literature to music and visual arts, religious themes have permeated human creative endeavours. Religious stories, symbols, and rituals have inspired countless works of art that serve as a testament to the deep impact of faith on the human imagination. The diverse religious traditions worldwide contribute to the rich tapestry of global culture, fostering a sense of diversity and interconnectedness.

Similarities of the Khasi myths, legends, and folktales with Christian Stories

There are various methods of imparting wisdom and instructions with each having its own pros and cons however the most widely used tool in instructing and teaching is through the channel of stories which is quite effective for children and adults alike. This system of storytelling is seen in many cultures and in Christianity as well where Jesus Christ taught using parables and in them lies deep philosophical ideas and teaching. It is not just because stories are endearing to hear but because they attract a larger crowd and are also quite easy to remember. These stories are also easy to memorise and they can be reproduced with ease.

The advent of Christianity to various parts of the world is in no doubt considered a contribution to most for they assume the role of educators, introduced proper healthcare facilities, and brought in a broader sense of understanding of the social and economic concept.

However, in their ways of contribution, they completely neglected the age-old practices and beliefs of various indigenous groups.

Through their education, they attempt to change the mindset of the Khasis through the process of the masses and swayed them to their ultimate goal of conversion. Many indigenous groups had compromised their traditions and culture and followed the teachings of Christianity and “the heady mix of the sudden advent of proselytising Christianity on the people, combined with the traditional beliefs and attempts to accommodate these into wider circle of beliefs and systems newly formed- has resulted in a society grappling with concepts thrust upon it without context” (Kakati 2). This is because of the facilities offered by the missionaries that the Khasis deemed necessary like health and education. Nataranjan commented that.

The heritage of Khasi religion is expressed in myths, cultural customs and ritual practices. During the course of time, Khasi religion faced an inner crisis of doubt and confusions, increasingly and inevitably, it encountered neighbouring religions like Hinduism, Islam and others, the influence of which can be traced in some aspects of Khasi religion practices (Nataranjan 142).

However, “The majority of the Khasis did not respond favourably to what was regarded as alien teachings because of fundamental differences in religious concepts and social - cultural practices” (Dutta 5). Hence, their ideologies were not at par with what the Khasis stand for in terms of many aspects ranging from the matrilineal system, caste system, idol worship, meat-eating, and language. The Hindus teaching that they tried did not yield results in terms of the societal and religious aspects. This factor led to the Khasis’ emergence of finding its own narratives of life and its phenomenon.

The Khasi and their religion share a relationship that is

interwoven in their social life and shape their social behaviour. They have several teachings in the form of oral tradition later recorded in written form. These teachings embedded in stories have changed their course in their oral telling because “In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not” (Perrel 56). Hence, the Khasis were at their disposal in explaining the natural phenomenon according to their observations.

Upon reading the stories of the Khasis, their origin, and culture, there are various similarities to the Christian stories. It cannot be blatantly put out that the Khasi stories are influenced by the Christian missionaries but due to the lack of records, it can be interpreted as such for it not until the 1840s that the Khasi received their written script by a Welsh missionary, Thomas Jones, the founding father of Khasi alphabets and literature. And since many of the early works recorded are those that are translations of the Christian stories, Jyrwa suggested that “Most of the early literature pieces, however, were translations from the works of western Christians. Attempts were not made to chart an independent course for Khasi literature. This is understandable because the missionaries’ chief motivation was always evangelization” (Jyrwa 156).

The statement by Dr. J. F Jyrwa suggested that there might be an influence of the Christian stories to that of the Khasi on the main basis of the lack of documentation. And since the Khasi literature has not bloomed as of yet which came only after the establishment of the Seng Khasi, it can be assumed that the moral stories have similarities. According to Indian folklorist Sadhana Naithani, the exertions of the missionaries and British officers to accumulate local stories was “not to uphold native values but to be able to replace them with so-called modern ones” (Sadhana 116). Many studies suggest the resemblance of the Christian stories to the indigenous stories and due to the lack of written records, it is nearly impossible to not relate the two due to the assertion of

Christianity towards the life of the people. The Khasis story of origin itself has various narrations and at least two of the same are Christian in nature.

The Khasis origination story is similar to that of the Christians, unlike the Hindus, Buddhists, or Jain. The Christians believe that God made Adam and Eve and placed them in the beautiful Garden of Eden to call it home and make use of the many blessings of God. The Khasi also have a similar belief of origination, the establishment of the earth by God was the perfect garden for inhabiting. Mei Ramew or Mother Earth was pleased with her growth and wished God place someone who takes care of her. Thus, seven clans of the sixteen were sent to earth to reside.

The tree of life in the Garden of Eden and 'Diengiei' the covenant tree both are the reason for man being cast out of God's sight. Indeed it is the power and influence of external force in both the stories for man was too simple to think as such. This external force results in the birth of sin where each Adam and Eve and the seven class were cast out of God's guidance. The birth of sin in both the stories is due to man's disobedience. This has led to them living life dangerously astray from God which then led to their downfall. The Khasi believed that darkness covered the earth wherein they performed the sacrifice of the rooster to bring back light.

The Khasi's story of Diengiei and its fall has a very similar context to that of Lucifer and Christ. Although the record of these stories shows conflicting ideas, the essence of it remains the same. The story tells of after man has come down to earth to live as instructed by God. He uses the 'diengiei' the covenant tree to travel to heaven to converse with the other clans and God himself. The 'diengiei' was then informed to be a tree that might cover the earth and in it, the world would not receive sunlight bringing destruction to man and the earth. This information according to H. Elias in *Ki Khanatang U Barim* (2017) refers to a creature who defiles man and is seeking ways to destroy his connection with God.

In *Around the Hearth- Khasi Legends* (2007) by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, there was no such creature but it was solely man's wrong doing that brought him down. While other stories narrate the presence of a 'Iakjakor' a devil-like creature.

The Khasi description given to the creature is similar to that of Lucifer. In the Christian faith, Lucifer was God's angel who challenged God and was cast out of heaven. *Paradise Lost* (1667) by John Milton explains the character sketch of Lucifer, a being that was jealous of man and attempted to stray man away from God, to which he successfully did so. The 'iakjakor' or the creature alike also was successful in bringing down man and breaking his covenant with God. This similarity however is seen only in few translations while in others it depicts man consumed with greed, thus straying away from God, Lyngdoh also observed that "In Khasi tradition, Thlen manifests himself as a snake. This close likeness with Satan helped to support the associations made between Satan and Thlen" (Lyngdoh 172). The other depiction of Lucifer in the Khasi narratives is in the legend of 'U Thlen' as narrated by H. Elias,

Naduh dang nyngkong ka sngi, u Blei, Trai Nongbuh- Nongthaw, Nongsam-Nongbynta, Nongpynlong-pynman, u la don uwei u kynja myntri, ha ka dorbar bneng jong U; hynrei n aka bynta ki katto kattne ki daw kiba sakhi pyrshah ia uta u myntri, u lah beh lah shop ia u arsut shapoh khyndai- pateng- niamra (Elias 88).

In translation, Elias narrated about a celestial who enjoyed the position of being powerful and next to God himself who went against God and challenged him. This act angered God and he was cast out of heaven into the nine-storeyed hell which is similar to Dante's nine circles of hell. The form that he chose to take is also that of a snake, an animal that in Christian faith is seen to be a deceiver according to the shape of Lucifer in the Garden of Eden as narrated by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*

or an evil creature. This narration however is not depicted in other books. Kynpham Sing in his narration said of 'Thlen' to be a bastard child of 'Kma Kharai' an evil deity. The essence of the legend is of the same, to rid mankind. These stories have a different interpretation of beings which is not uncommon due to the lack of textual records. The influence of external forces is deemed to fit it given the course of time and place.

The fall of the 'diengiei' brought darkness to the earth. People had lost their connection to God and are clueless as to how to move forward. The 'Hynniew-Trep' convened a 'durbar' to consult on the possibilities of what can be done. After a unanimous decision, a sacrifice was to be done. The sacrifice of the rooster is parallel to 'Aslan' of The Chronicles of Narnia (1949) by C S Lewis and consequently Jesus Christ himself. The rooster took it upon himself to right the wrong doings of man and in doing so carries the burden of mankind and his sin. C. S Lewis's Aslan, the mighty Lion is a symbol of goodness and peace, he sacrificed himself for the salvation of the four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. In doing so, his righteousness is rewarded and he was resurrected. This narration is undoubtedly influenced by the Christian faith for C S Lewis himself is a Christian philosopher. He used the medium of fantasy to bring deliver the message of good triumph evil. Jesus Christ, in the bible also died for the cause of man. He took upon himself the burden of saving mankind and giving new life to the believers as stated in the Bible, which reads, "For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him" (Bible 317). There is an influence of the Christian faith to the Khasis for they draw similarities of Jesus and Rooster alike for according to P. T Marwein, "Once they had understood that God is moved with pity for them and had raised Jesus Christ to be their Simpah Simkaroo they would begin to accept the faith. When this eventually occurred, the Khasi Church began to grow" (Marwein 7). This similarity has led to the conversion of at least

78% of the Khasi. Riewphona Mawblei herself commented that “the salvific longing for the One who is to come, expressed in the Simpah Simkaro analogy, is believed to have been completed in Jesus Christ (Mawblei 7).

The folktales of the Khasis all have moral values attached to them. They instruct people on how to live life and how goodness triumph over evil. Their way of life is reflected in their stories. Some of these stories are drawn from life while others have supernatural elements in them like talking animals or humans conversing with the sun or moon. The Khasis believe that there was once a time where the earth was filled with goodness and animals and he spoke of the same tongue.

Another legend that the Khasis have that can be drawn similarities with the Christians concept of belief is the existence of giants. The Bible speaks of a man named Goliath who is a fearless warrior and who destroyed the forces of God's faith. David a small-statured person defeated Goliath with just his sling bag with God's guidance. The story as narrated in the Old Testament is a testimony of God's power that miracles can happen even with the smallest of the lot challenging the so-called Giant. The Khasi story has a similar legend called Ramhah, meaning giant, who eats and drinks the size of ten people and who does not understand social manners. He is depicted to be rude and impatient with people. He was a man of good nature and help people but because pride and greed consumed him, he started to abuse his giant nature. He would steal from the market and no one would dare approach him or question him. People became more and more afraid of him and this brought to him an advantage in abusing his giant nature.

Ramhah in his abusive nature visited the celebration of a 'mahajon' and ate to an extent that none is left for the other people. However, the food was mixed with small sharp metallic objects that pierced through his intestine after the meal killing him instantly. The people rejoiced over his death and is restored peace. The Khasis always

believe that there is always danger approaching if pride has taken over, like the Goliath, Ramhah was consumed with pride and it paved the way to his destruction. King Solomon, as represented in the Book of Proverbs, in the Bible also speaks of how pride precedes a fall. The mode of the Khasi thought is seen through folktales, legends, and myths. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick comments that “the importance of the myth lies in the way in which it encapsulates and expresses beliefs and values that are shared by, and definitive of, a particular cultural group. Thus, a myth may explain the origin of the group (or of the world in general), the place of that group in the world, and its relationship to other groups, and illustrate or exemplify the moral values that are venerated by the group” (Edgar and Sedgwick 127). These tales are embedded with moral values pertaining to pride, family, and the life skills of life. According to Mawblei,

On the other hand, with the arrival of Christianity, Khasi religion accommodated itself without much difficulty because of its underlying similarities of Christian faith and teaching. In fact Christianity came to be seen as the reinterpreted of Khasi beliefs particularly with regard to the understanding of God, creation, the estrangement of humanity from God, the hope of salvation, and many social and cultural traits. At the same time, Christian gospels also challenge certain Khasi beliefs and practices. (Mawblei 67 & 68)

Her findings suggest that the Khasis readily accepted the Christian faith for they are similar in thought and understanding. This is also seen in the factor of the ‘simpah simkaroo’ where they identified the sacrifice of the animal to that of Jesus himself. Margaret Lyngdoh commented on the change of belief of the Khasi stating, “Within the framework of discourses in the Khasi milieu, deriving from the advent of Westernisation and its concomitant phenomena, modernity serves to

introduce literacy, Christianity and civilisation, replacing older ideas in Khasi cosmology and life ways” (Lyngdoh 25).

The westernization of the text is inevitable since the Khasis have no scripts of their own. Also, with the use of the Roman letters and the exertion of Christianity, it is unlikely that the influence could have not taken place. Rana comments,

The Khasis of the Khasi Hills do not have their own scripts, although they have many dialects. They have adopted the scripts of their rulers. Later on in 1841, when foreign missionaries with the intention of spreading Christianity, came to these secluded and backward people, developed the local dialect of the Khasi as spoken in Cherrapunjee into Roman scripts. The missionaries also had compiled a Khasi Anglo vocabulary and introduced Khasi literature. In the course of time, the Khasi men of letters (means intellectual Khasis) themselves started writing and composing their own literature. (Rana 104)

The lack of records weighs heavily on the authenticity of the text and the narratives. However, one cannot negate the original concepts and ideology of the Khasis for the moral values of the world are alike in many aspects.

Conclusion

The exploration of Christian moral stories alongside narratives from other cultures reveals the shared moral fabric that unites humanity. Despite diverse religious and cultural contexts, the fundamental principles of virtue, creation, redemption, and ethical conduct permeate through these tales. Recognizing these commonalities encourages a broader understanding of shared human values, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and promoting cross-cultural appreciation. Ultimately, the universal threads of morality, woven into the narratives of different

cultures, reflect the enduring human quest for ethical guidance and spiritual enlightenment.

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How to cite this article?

Dr. Ehboklang Pyngrope “The Universal Threads of Morality: The Khasi and Christian Stories” Research Journal Of English (RJOE)9(1), PP:120-133,2023,DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.9.1.133