

## KHASI KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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Irawati Karve, the acknowledged authority on Indian kinship, who admits to unfamiliarity with the Khasi language, lists twelve Khasi words in her study of kinship (Karve 1965), but none of these words are included in U.R. Ehrenfels (1953) paper, nor are they recorded in the four Khasi dictionaries (Nissor Singh 1906, 1920; *Leemuel* 1965 (= Diengdoh); and Kharkhongngor 1968) known to me. Since these same twelve words were also never mentioned by any of my Khasi informants, they should probably be considered as non-existent in the Khasi language; Karve's erroneous listings may be understandable, however, as her only sources were Roberts (1891), Grierson (1904), and Gurdon (1914). U.R. Ehrenfels' article (1953) is, therefore, the only modern treatment of Khasi kinship terminology; it had apparently not come to Karve's attention.

Ehrenfels includes an almost complete list of kinship terms in four dialects -- Plateau Khasi, that is, the standard language; War Khasi; Pnar (or Jaintia); and War Jaintia -- indexed under 43 English glosses, the purpose of which was one of comparison. Although the author collected the vocabulary in an actual field situation, aided by native interpreters, his spellings are not always reliable and the literal meaning of most terms remains hidden from the reader unfamiliar with the language. I, therefore, see my task as that of amplifying Ehrenfels' work, of correcting some errors, especially in the orthography, and of explaining the underlying morphemes occurring in the incredibly complicated Khasi system.<sup>2</sup>

Khasi kinship terminology is based on three principles:

- (1) a differentiation between blood relatives and relatives by marriage;
- (2) classification by relative age of each member with regard to the person they are related to; and
- (3) distinction between terms of address and terms of reference.

Khasi society is generally considered to be matrilineal and matrilocal; the kinship system could be called 'bifurcate merging' since mother is equated with mother's sister, father with father's brother, while mother's brother and father's sister are denoted by distinct terms. Ancestry is traced through the

mother's clan, ka kur, often used as an 'imitative'<sup>3</sup> ki kur ki kmie (lit. 'the clans the mothers'). Gender number<sup>4</sup> morphemes (called 'prefixes' by the Khasis) must precede each noun; ka indicates feminine, u masculine singular; ki is used for plural number and i for respect, endearment, and smallness, the latter two not distinguishing gender.

Upon marriage, the husband remains in his mother's clan while his children belong to his wife's clan. kur is used in three phrases: iadei kur 'to have a relationship on the mother's side, to be related within the same clan'; in the compound para kur 'children of mother's siblings', and in the verb tait kur tait jaid,<sup>5</sup> an imitative 'to be banished from the clan' (lit. 'reject clan, reject kind, caste').

The most respected member in the clan is the mother's elder brother, u kfi or kfi rangbah (rang-bah translates as 'adult male, an elder' and is composed of rang, the combining form of shynrang 'man' and bah 'older brother', probably based on the verb bah 'to be big'). The kfi is addressed as mama or ma, a word which seems to be of Indo-European (IE) origin since Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese use it for 'maternal uncle' as well. The kfi is consulted on all important decisions and acts as the ultimate arbiter in disputes. Mother's other brothers are referred to as kfi pdeng 'middle brother' and kfi khadduh<sup>6</sup> 'mother's youngest brother, the very last' respectively. The latter two uncles are addressed as ma-deng<sup>7</sup> and ma-khadduh or ma-duh; duh 'the last, the youngest' is used for blood relatives only, never for those related by marriage.

The word for 'mother' has two forms which are probably not related morphologically (see discussion below). kmie is used for reference and mei for address; mother's sisters are also addressed as mei plus the appropriate modifier for age-ranking.

Father is referred to as i kpa and addressed as papa or pa, a term strangely familiar to speakers of Indo-European languages. His brothers, as well as the husbands of his sisters and of his mother's sisters are all referred to as 'fathers' (pa- used in compounds is explained below). Father's sisters are all addressed and referred to as kha. kha is based on a verb meaning 'to give birth', thus, according to Ehrenfels (1953: 408), apparently recognizing the father's biological function in procreation. kha also functions as the second constituent in compounds designating father's mother, kmie-kha, and cousins on the father's side, shi para kha-shi is the numeral 'one' used for units and measurements (as opposed to wei 'one'); para designates brothers and sisters of one's own generation.

Parallel cousins and cross-cousins are distinguished both in terminology and in marriage practices; marriage between

parallel cousins is sang 'taboo', while marriage between cross-cousins is permitted though not common. Mother's brothers' children are also referred to as ba-kha, since by definition his children will belong to their own mother's clan.

All brothers and sisters within the immediate family are designated by terms that specify whether they are older or younger than the speaker; there are also terms to indicate a 'middle' brother or sister and terms for the youngest brother and sister (Table 1).

The oldest sister is kong or kong ieit, 'sister-beloved', the oldest brother is bah bah 'brother big', or bah rangbah 'brother grown-up man', terms that show a position of respect occupied by the elder siblings. There are actually two homophonous morphemes bah, one meaning 'brother', the other 'to be big'; and since modifiers follow the noun in Khasi, kong ieit would have to be translated as 'sister who is beloved' and bah rangbah as 'brother who is grown-up.'

Unfortunately, Table 1 shows some gaps. Also, no two of the young Khasi speakers who recently supplied me with information agree on all terms; they have all been living abroad for a long time and have become accustomed to our simplified Western terminology using aunt, uncle, cousin, etc. One speaker also suggested that address by name is coming into vogue among the younger generation.

khynnah 'child' is used for the youngest brother, bah khynnah 'kid brother'; i rit (lit. 'little one') and i duh (lit. 'the last one') are best rendered by 'kid sister'. One word glosses for hep and hynmen are difficult to suggest; older people, even non-relatives, can address young people as hep; it is a term of endearment and is roughly equivalent to the American usage of 'sonny' or 'kid' when used by men for little boys, or 'dear' when used by old ladies for younger women. The morpheme hyn- occurs in several other Khasi words that relate to 'time past, ago': folk-tales always begin with hyndai-hynthai... 'once upon a time...'; hynne means 'a short time ago', hynnin 'yesterday', so that hynmen could perhaps be rendered by 'born before, born some time ago'. The morpheme -men occurs in tymmen 'old man or woman', so that it may mean 'old human being'.

|             | <i>Elder S/B*</i>   | <i>Middle S/B</i>                | <i>Younger S/B</i>                         | <i>The Youngest</i> |
|-------------|---|----------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Sister      | 'kong ieit'**<br>kong, hymnen kynthei                                       | kong-deng                        | 'hep'<br>hep                               | i rit, i duh        |
| S's husband | 'hymnen kynsi'<br>kong heh, hymnen kynsi<br>(by female)<br>kyn-um (by male) | kong-deng                        | 'para kynsi'<br>'hep kynsi'<br>(by female) |                     |
| Brother     | 'bah, bah bah, bah heh'<br>'bah rangbah'                                    | 'bah khynnah'<br>hep (by female) |  | 'bah duh'           |
| B's wife    | hymnen shynrang<br>'kong kynsi'   |                                  |  |                     |

\* Abbreviations used here and in following tables are: B = Brother, F = Father, M = Mother, S = Sister  
 \*\* Quotation marks indicate terms of address

Table 1: *Khasi sibling terms of address and of reference*