



Plants Associated with Rituals and Beliefs of Indigenous Khasi Religion of Meghalaya, North-East India

Ebelmon Nongbri¹, S.K. Borthakur² and D. Bokolia³

^{1,3}Department of Botany, St. Anthony's College, Shillong-793001, Meghalaya

²Department of Botany, Gauhati University, Guwahati-781014, Assam

³Correspondence : devajitbk@gmail.com

People of indigenous Khasi religion of Meghalaya perform a number of rituals in different occasions to pray and communicate with God or to satisfy other deities. A number of plant species are used in those rituals and thus considered sacred. Present study was conducted to record the plants associated with the rituals and traditional beliefs of Khasi people. During the survey, 35 different plant species belonging to 22 families were recorded. The plant species used in rituals are grown in home gardens or nearby places which serves as a method of conservation.

Keywords : Ritual plants, Indigenous, Khasi, Meghalaya.

INTRODUCTION

Rituals are part of human life since time immemorial. A ritual is defined as a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests (Turner, 1973); India is exceptionally rich in rituals owing to its great diversity in religious cultures and traditions. Plants are important components of these traditional rituals which are used for some definite purposes.

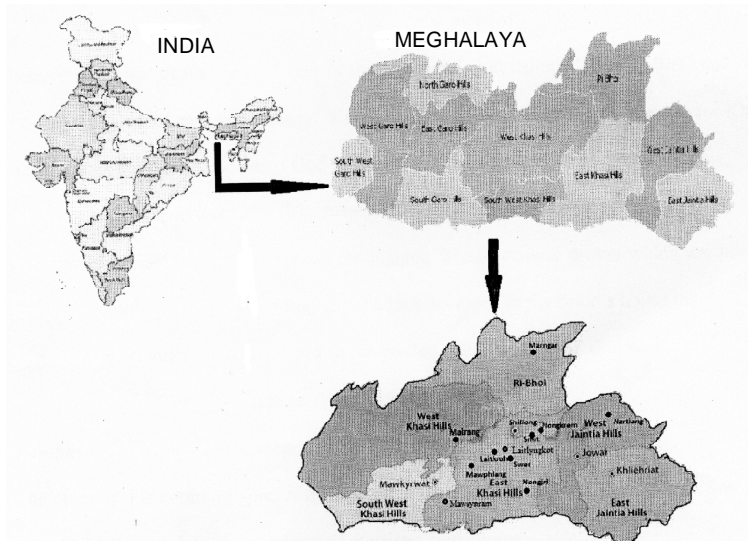
The North-East Indian state of Meghalaya (25°47' - 26°10' N latitude and 89°45'-92°47' E longitude) is predominately a tribal state, 86.1% of the total population of the state is tribal (Census of India, 2011). There are three main tribes in the state- Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. The Khasis form the dominant part of the population, about 56.4% of the total tribal population is Khasi (Census of India, 2001). They are said to be of Indo-China origin and related to Mon-Khmer linguistic family (Gurdon, 2012). Khasi people have their own traditional religion known as "Ka niam Khasi", "Ka niam tynrai" or "Ka niam tre." Although majority of the Khasis are Christians, about 13.2% of the total tribal population still practices their traditional religion. It is purely monotheistic and believes in one supreme God, commonly called as 'U Blei Trai Kynrad Nongbuh Nongthaw' (God the Loard, The Designer and the Maker) who is formless in nature. The religion also has the concept of the other world ('Ka dwar U Blei), this world ('Ka pyrthei shong Basa') and the spirits ('Ksuid'). The religion also prescribes certain rituals to be performed to propitiate God on various occasions, to propitiate various spirits and also at the time of other important activities like thanksgiving, agriculture, change of season etc. (Nongkynrih, 2002). Ritual are also performed on the occasions like death of women in pregnancy or during

childbirth or any such kind of misfortune happens in the family or to get rid of 'Thlen' -a legendary serpent which is considered as devil. During these rituals different plants and plant products are used.

Ethnobotany of different tribes of Meghalaya has been carried out in a considerable detail by various workers (Jain and Dam, 1979; Rao, 1981; Maikhuri and Gangwar, 1939; Ahmed and Borthakur, 2005; Hynniewta and Kumar, 2008). However, botanical works highlighting the plants associated with ritual and beliefs of traditional Khasi religion could not be found during literature survey. The present survey aimed at studying and identifying different plant species associated with rituals and beliefs of Khasis.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted during the year 2015-2016 in fourteen different Khasi villages of Meghalaya. These villages are Swer, Laitkroh, Mawphlang, Smit, Nongrij, Laitlyngkot, Nongkrem, Jowai, Nartiang, Mairang, Mawkyrwat, Marngar, Khliehriat and Mawsynram (Fig- 1), These sites were chosen because in these places traditional rituals of Khasi religion is still performed every strictly and most of the people still believe in Khasi traditional religion. Preliminary information about different rituals was collected from the available literatures. Elderly people from the villages were approached and information was collected from them. The priests who perform different rituals were interviewed to know the steps and significances of the rituals. We attended a number of such functions to get acquaintance. The plants used in these rituals were collected and herbarium specimens were prepared and identified with the help of regional floras (Kanjilal *et al.*, 1934-40; Haridashan and Rao, 1985-87).



Map showing study sites

Fig-1 : Map showing study sites

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the survey, rituals like naming ceremony of a newborn, marriage ceremony, death rituals, harvest rituals and thanks giving ceremonies were attended. The plants used in those rituals were recorded which are enumerated below in alphabetical order by botanical names, family, local names and their uses in different rituals.

***Areca catechu* L. (Arecaceae). LN: 'Kwai'**

Betel nut and betel leaf are inevitable in Khasi culture. Most of the traditional ceremonies of Khasis are incomplete without these two. Betel nut (*Areca catechu*) and betel leaves (*Piper betle*) applied with lime (called as 'Kwai') are offered to guests for chewing and as mouth freshner. In traditional Khasi weddings there is an exchange of betel nut and betel leaves between the bride and groom symbolizing an ideal married couple bound together, Khasis believe that after death the soul rest in the House of God called 'Dwar U Blei' and chew 'Kwai' with utmost ease and ecstasy. 'Kwai' is thrown in the funeral pyre because for Khasis death means to go to the house of God to chew betel nut.

***Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. (Moraceae). LN:'Dieng sohphan'**

The timber of jackfruit plant is used for making Khasi musical drums which are used in marriage ceremony. On the wedding day the groom comes to the bride's house together with his uncles and other male relatives accompanied with beating of drums and blowing of 'Tangmuri' - a Khasi traditional flute.

***Bambusa balcooa* Roxb. (Poaceae). LN:'Wah iong'**

The culm of this common species of bamboo is used for making winnowing trays known as 'Prah' which is used during naming and marriage ceremonies.

***Bambusa tulda* Roxb. (Poaceae). LN: 'Siej Skong'**

A bamboo bier called 'krong' is usually made from *Bambusa tulda* to carry the dead bodies to the cremation ground. A bow and arrow made of this bamboo is used to keep during naming ceremony of a male child symbolizing his strength and as a protector of the family and the society.

***Bambusa pallida* Munro (Poaceae). LN: 'Shken'**

A conical basket which is kept during naming ceremony of a female child symbolizing that she will use it for carrying things especially food items when she grow up is usually made from this bamboo.

***Brassica rapa* L. (Brassicaceae). LN: 'Tyrso'**

Mustard oil is used during marriage ceremony. The mother of the bride blesses the couple by applying mustard oil on the head.

***Carex spiculata* Boott (Cyperaceae). LN: 'Kenshriang, 'Lasier'**

This plant is used in the rituals for driving away devils and evils like 'Thlen' and 'Ka tyrut'. This ritual is known as 'Knia' and also performed if valuables are lost and to prevent recurrence of accidents in the family.

***Castanopsis tribuloides* (Sm.) A.DC. (Fagaceae). LN: 'Diengsning'**

This plant is associated with many customs considered as sacred. It is used as the holy dwelling post at Khasi king and queen's house. During funeral ceremony the leaves of this tree are kept at the altar where sacrifices are performed as part of thanks giving ceremony to God and the deceased.

***Cortaderia selloana* (Schult. & Schult. f.) (Poaceae). LN: 'Lynseng'**

The rhizome of this grass is used in the rituals performed to drive away the evil influence of 'U Thlen.'

Curcuma longa L. (Zingiberaceae). LN: 'Shynrai'

During egg divination performed by a Khasi priest or 'Nongkhan', the egg is broken on a rectangular wooden slab known as 'ka Dieng Shat'. Turmeric powder is applied on the broken shell. The 'Diengshat' or the wood which is used for breaking the eggs is also rubbed with turmeric.

Dendrocalamus giganteus Munro (Poaceae). LN: 'U Ktang'

A longitudinal peel from the internode portion of *Dendrocalamus giganteus* is used for cutting the umbilical cord of a new born baby. In villages the decidua after childbirth is kept in a basket usually made of this bamboo.

Docynia indica (Wall.) Decne (Rosaceae). LN: 'Dieng soh phoh khasi'

The stem is used for making wooden mortar and pestle for grinding rice into rice powder which is used in naming ceremony of a child.

Eleusine coracana (L.) Gaertn. (Poaceae). LN: 'krai'

The grain of this plant is used for making millet beer and this beer play very important role in different rituals like death rituals, marriage ceremony and naming of a child.

Entada scandens Benth. (Mimosaceae). LN: 'Ka nub'

The matured seeds from the pods of this tree are used for washing the dead body during death ritual.

Eryngium foetidum L. (Apiaceae). LN: 'Dhania Khlaw'

This plant is believed to drive away evil spirits called 'Ka taro' and 'Thlen.' People believe that chewing of the leaves of this plant help to get rid of 'U Thlen' - the legendary serpent.

Eurya acuminata DC. (Theaceae). LN: 'Pyrshit'

The branches of this plant along with leaves are used as a carpet for crossing the river or any water body while carrying the dead body for cremation.

Ficus benghalensis L. (Moraceae). LN: 'Dieng jri'

This tree is considered as a sacred plant by the Khasis. In 'Nongiri' - a Khasi village in East Khasis Hills, the death rituals known as 'Ka phur' are performed below this tree.

Glycosmis arborea Roxb. (Rutaceae). 'Dieng soh sning'

This plant is grown near the dwellings to get rid of evil spirit. It is believed that evil spirits trying to visit someone's house are afraid of this tree.

Lagenaria siceraria (Mol.) Standl. (Cucurbitaceae). LN: 'Klong'

The dried fruit shell of gourd known as 'klong' is used in naming ceremony of a new borne child. It is also used in marriage ceremonies by Khasi priests while communicating with God. The dry and hard shell (the outer cover) is generally used as a container to keep things used during rituals.

Musa balbisiana Colla (Musaceae) LN: 'Sla Kait'

Leaves of banana are predominantly used by Khasis as a decorative element is special functions, marriages, and in naming ceremony. In most of the traditional ceremonies these leaves are used as plates for offering food items.

Nepenthes khasiana Hook. f. (Nepenthaceae). LN: 'Tiew rakot'

The Khasis generally believe that if the pitcher plant is brought from its natural habitat and grown in home gardens, it would bring bad omen to the residents.

Phrynium pubinerve Bl. (Marantaceae). :N: 'Lamet'

Leaves of this plant are essential for sacrificial ceremonies and festivals like 'Pomblang' during 'Nongkrem' dance - a religious dance festival of Khasis.

Oryza sativa L. (Poaceae). LN: ' Khaw'

Rice is considered as a sacred plant by Khasis. It is also called as 'Sohkhaw Blei' which means 'Gods grain', since they believe that God has sent the information or messages through rice grain. Khasis also believe that rice has the power to protect a man from clutches of evils. It is used in almost all Khasi rituals during prayers to communicate with God. The Khasi priest use rice grain during the prayer known as 'Khan' by reading the sign and symbol which appear in the form of the number of grains they ask. Rice beer is used during marriage and naming ceremonies. In marriage ceremony rice beer from bride and groom side is mixed on the day of marriage symbolizing the union of two persons. Rice beer is provided to the people who are involved in the rituals of the dead.

Phragmites karka (Retz) Trin.ex Steud. (Poaceae). LN: 'Japung'

The culm of this plant is used during rituals to drive away evil spirits. It is also used in making a kind of traditional flute known as 'Tangmuri.'

Pinus kesiya Royale ex Gordon (Pinaceae). LN: 'Dieng kseh'

The wood of Khasi pine is used for making traditional musical drums and drum beating sticks.

Piper betle L. (Piperaceae). LN: 'Tympew'

Most of the traditional ceremonies of Khasis are incomplete without 'tympew' (betel leaf) and 'kwai' (betel nut). The betel nut (*Areca catechu*) and betel leaves (*Piper betle*) applied with lime rubbed on the dorsal side are offered to guests for chewing and as a mouth freshener. Betel leaf is used in may other rituals together with betel nut as aforementioned in the description of *Areca catechu*.

Prunus domestica L. (Rosaceae). LN: 'Dieng soh plum '

The stem of this plant is used for making 'Diengshat' - the piece of wood used in egg divination ritual for breaking the egg. The wood is also used for making drums and 'Tangmuri' a Khasi traditional flute which are played during marriage ceremony to welcome the groom to the bride's house and as a sign of joy.

Quercus dealbata Wall . (Fagaceae). LN: ' Dieng Sai'

The stem is used for making drum beating sticks.

Rhododendron arboreum Sm. (Ericaceae). LN: 'Tiew saw'

The stem is used for making Khasi drums is played during marriage ceremony and other dance festivals.

Schima wallichii (DC) Korth. (Theaceae). LN: 'Dieng ngan'

Before harvesting of rice Khasi people perform some rituals inside the kitchen where a pillar made of this tree is kept. The priest tie a bunch of rice inflorescence and ritual is done before harvesting. The trunk of this tree is also used for making pestle and mortar used for grinding rice during naming ceremony.

Symplocos racemosa Roxb. (Symplocaceae). LN: 'Dieng Jamayang'

The stem of this plant is used for making the sticks for beating the drums during marriage ceremony and other dance festivals.

Thysanolaena latifolia (Roxb. ex Hornem.) Honda (Poaceae). LN: 'Synsar'

The panicle is made into broom stick which is kept at the entrance of the house to drive away evil spirit. The panicle is also used in one ritual known as 'Mait Tyrut' meant to drive away the queen of the devil when unnatural death occurs in a family.

Viburnum foetidum Wall. (Caprifoliaceae). LN: 'Sohlang'

It is used for making 'Tangmuri'- a Khasi musical flute which is used to play during marriage ceremony as a sign of joy.

Zea mays L. (Poaceae). LN: 'Riewhadem'

It is considered as a sacred plant by the Khasis and used in prayers. Khasi people believe that the right message from God can be received through its seeds.

Zingiber zerumbet (L.) Sm. (Zingiberaceae). LN: 'Syng makhir'

The rhizome is used in rituals performed to drive away an evil influence of 'U Thlen.'

The present investigation revealed 35 different plant species belonging to 22 families used in different rituals of indigenous Khasi religion. Out of these, 10 species belong to Poaceae followed by Fagaceae, Moraceae, Theaceae and Zingiberaceae with 2 species each. Rest of the families has one species each. It is also observed that almost all the plant species used in rituals is also economically important, signifying that economically important plant species are sacred.

With the effects of globalization and a change in the belief systems, most of the traditional rites and rituals are being forgotten. Documentation of plants associated with rituals is important as it signifies the age old relationship of human with plants. Another important aspects is that the rituals and associated beliefs also help in conservation of plants. The plants associated with rituals and beliefs are generally planted in home gardens for easy availability for different ceremonies. Another interesting aspect of rituals of indigenous Khasi people is that some specific rituals are performed in a kind of forests called sacred forest or sacred groves. Sacred forests or groves

are community forests which are set aside for religious purposes. The followers of indigenous Khasi religion believe that these groves are abode of deities locally called as 'Ryngkew', 'Basa' etc. They believe that gods and spirits residing in the forests protect the people, cattle and land and keep the evil spirit away. It is believed that extracting resources (except for cremation purposes) from the forests will offend the deities and will lead to a negative impact on the person or on the whole community or village (Tiwarei *et al.*, 1998; Gurdon, 2012). Various religious rites and rituals are performed in these groves to satisfy the Gods and deities. Due to these religious beliefs attached to the groves, the later are almost free from anthropogenic disturbances and thus well conserved. Thus, it can be concluded that rituals performed by people of indigenous Khasi religion do play an important role in conservation of plant species and in the long run, conservation of the biodiversity of the state.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our deepest gratitude goes to all the informants including the Khasi priests and traditional musical instrument makers of different villages. We would also deeply acknowledge the families who permitted us to enter their premises during different occasions, like naming of the child, marriage and dead ceremonies to collect information.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A.A. and Borthakur, S.K. 2005. Ethnobotanical wisdom of Khasis (Hynniew Treps) of Meghalaya. Bishen Singh and Mahendra Pal Singh, Dehradun.
- Gurdon, P.R.T. 2012. The Khasis. Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi (reprint), pp 33-34.
- Haridashan, K. and Rao, R.R. 1985-1987. Forest flora of Meghalaya, Volumes I and II. Bishen Singh and Mahendra Pal Singh, Dehradun, India.
- Hynniewta, S.R. and Kumar, Y. 2008. Herbal remedies among the Khasi Traditional healers and village folks in Meghalaya. Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, 7 (4) : 581 - 586.
- Jain, S.K. and Dam, N. 1979. Some ethnobotanical notes from North East India. Economic Botany, 33 : 52 - 56.
- Kanjilal, U.N. , Kanjilal, P.C., Das, A., De, R.N. and Bor. N.L. 1934-1940. Flora of Assam Vol : I-V, Government Press, Shillong, India.
- Maikhuri, R.K. and Gangwar, A.K. 1993. Ethnobiological notes on the Khasi and Garo Tribes of Meghalaya, North-East India. Economic Botany 47 (4) : 345 - 357.
- Nongkynrih, A.K. 2002. Khasi society of Meghalaya: A sociological understanding. Indus publishing company, New Delhi, p.130.
- Rao, R.R. 1981. Ethnobotany of Meghalaya; Medicinal plants used by Khasi and Garo Tribes. Economic Botany, 35 (1) : 4 - 9
- Tiwarei, B.K., Barik, S.K. and Tripathi, R.S. 1998. Sacred groves of Meghalaya. In 'Conserving the Sacred for Biodiversity Management' (eds. Ramakrishnan, P.S., Saxena, K.G. and Chandrashekhara, U.M.) Oxford and IBH publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. , pp. 253 - 263.
- Turner, V.W. 1993. Symbols in African rituals. Science, 179 (4048) : 1100 - 1105.

(Received on 01 Feb., 2017; Accepted on 10 March, 2017)

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.