Young Scholar Section-2

Traditional and Modern Khasi Riddles: An Analytical Study
- Rimika Lanong

Riddles constitute a very important genre of folk literature. They have also occupied a very important position in folklore in so far as expression and articulation of folk wisdom is concerned. They have well designed structures. “A riddle is a question, direct or indirect, complete or incomplete, in traditional form whereby the questioner challenges a listener to recognize and identify the accuracy, the unity, the truth, in a statement that usually seems implausible, or self-contradictory, but that is in its own peculiar light always true” (Jansen 1968:231). Archer Taylor says in his book English Riddles from Oral Tradition “we can probably say that riddling is a universal art” (Taylor 1951:1) and cites examples of riddles from hundreds of different cultures including Finnish, Hungarian, American, Indians, Chinese, Russians, Dutch and Filipino sources amongst many others. Riddling is a kind of game involving deep and quick thinking which increases the intelligence and sharpens the mind. It put into play semantic and folk logic. The practice of riddling can be traced to the dawn of literary expression. Folkloristic studies of riddles dated from the late eighteen hundreds. And since the beginning, riddle studies have generally followed the main direction of folklore studies.

All folklorists agreed that the riddle as a genre of folklore is a proper subject to be studied and analyzed. Scholars and folklorists from Aristotle to the present days have considered the riddle as an expression of traditional wit and wisdom. The form and contents of the riddle have been of special importance to the scholars from ancient times. The riddle usually has two aspects, the ritualistic and recreational. Perhaps Frazer was one of the first to study it scientifically. The usage of the riddle on divergent occasions among the different races, both savage and civilize seem a mystery to him” (Frazer 1906: 194).

Riddling is an independent art and it is more popular among the children and youth. Riddles are classified according to specific structures and functions and these traits are diversified in different social setting. As an oral communication system, riddles have their origin in the psyche of a particular community and they involve a close observation of nature and things around it. In this paper I am going to discuss the traditional and modern Khasi riddles and to explore how the traditional practice of riddling as a conventional art is dwindling among youth and children, but riddles through Short Message Service (SMS) and Internet (soft technology) is coming into use today and how this plays a very important role in transformation this important genre of folklore.

The Khasis of Meghalaya, like all other communities all over the world, have a rich tradition of riddles which forms an important component of their verbal arts. The Khasi equivalent for the word riddle is Ka Jingkynitip. The word Jingkynitip is derived from the word Jingtip which means knowledge or information or to know. So we may say that Jingkynitip to the Khasis means to test the prior knowledge or the information that one possesses in relation to the riddles. The practice of riddling among the Khasis usually takes place in informal settings, in social gatherings, in family circles, among friends and colleagues. Riddling is more popular among the children and youth.
The riddles taken up for discussion in this paper will be divided into two parts viz. the traditional and modern riddles that are widely circulated in Shillong and other parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

**Traditional Riddles**

Khaskan traditional riddles mainly refer to bodily functions and derived from close observation of nature and things around it. Some examples will be given here and they will be fitted into different categories viz. oppositional and non-oppositional, metaphorical, riddle parodies and conundrum, riddle poems, riddle jokes and verbal dueling.

**Oppositional Riddles**

Oppositional riddles are but one of the several kinds of the Khasi riddles. In oppositional riddles, the first and the second descriptive element do not appear to form an integral whole or unit. Only upon formal enunciation of answers, the two separate elements can be properly and logically joined. In oppositional riddles, the riddle will always deny the main function of a common object. It is in this sense that riddles play cognitive boundaries, creating tension by denying the familiar function of a familiar object (Lieber 1976: 255-265).

- **Ka khlaw khlem mrad,**
  - **Ka bneng khlem khlur,**
  - **Ka pung khlem dohkha.**
  
  Riddle referent: *U soh snepkor.*

  **Translation**
  
  A jungle without wild animals,
  A sky without stars,
  A pond without fish.
  
  Riddle referent: The Coconut.

In this riddle we see there is a contradiction between three pairs of descriptive elements. In the first pair, the descriptive element *jungle* denied the descriptive element *without wild animals*. In the second one, *sky* contradicts with the descriptive element *without stars*. And in the third, *pond* is contradictory to the descriptive element *without fish*. The coconut is covered on the outer part by some fibers in green colour when it is fresh or brown when it is dried. The coconut milk and the white portion which is edible are inside.

**Kat ba nang bam katta nang raikhoh.**

Riddle referent: *Ka nap.*

**Translation**

The more she eats the more she becomes thin.

Riddle referent: The tong.
The above riddle shows one pair of descriptive elements which are contradictory to one another. Usually the more people eat the more they will tend to gain weight. So the first descriptive element *kat ba nang bam* (the more she eats), is a contradiction of the second descriptive element, *katta nang raikhoh* (the more she becomes thin). The Khasis usually used the tong for taking out hot charcoals from the hearth in the kitchen as well as for roasting dry meat and fish. So when the tong is manipulated for this purpose, it gives the appearance of becoming smaller as the two hands are brought closer to each other.

**Non-oppositional riddles**

In Non-Oppositional riddles, the descriptive elements are not contradictory to each other.

*Ynda la hmiet lah kwah suhthliew.*

**Riddle referent: U huk jingkhang.**

**Translation**

Only at night he wants to enter the hole.

**Riddle referent:** The door hook.

Door hook which is found in almost every Khasi household is the answer here. It is seen that Khasi home especially in the rural areas hardly close their doors during the day. This is because the elders never allowed the doors especially the main door of the house to be kept close as it is believed that only the *Duhjait* (family who has no girl child to carry the title of the mother) used to close their doors to friends and relatives. But once the night descends, all doors used to be closed by using a traditional latch.

*U stem najrong, saw napoh.*

**Riddle referent:** *U sohpriam.*

**Translation**

Yellow from outside, red inside.

**Riddle referent:** The guava.

The guava, which is found in abundance in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, is a very popular fruit among the children. Usually there are two varieties of guavas found in these hills. One variety is yellow in colour, from inside as well as outside and another variety which is yellow from outside and red inside.

**Metaphorical Riddles**

In this category the riddle referent and the topic of description are different. Many Khasi riddles consist of an elaborate metaphorical question and answers that are very short. These riddles pose questions to the riddlee and ask them to see the literal base for the metaphor.

*Tang shu kha ka kmie ia ka, ka lah pynkyrshah ia ka.*

**Riddle referent:** *Ka siej.*
Translation
As soon as her mother gives birth to her, she wraps her with a Khasi traditional apron.
Riddle referent: The Bamboo.

This is an example of metaphorical riddle. In the spring season, tender bamboo shoots sprouted from the earth around the bamboo groove. These tender shoots are covered by some kind of brown barks, which usually fall off when the bamboo shoot become bigger and taller. Here a bamboo shoot is a metaphor which refers to a young daughter wrapped in a Khasi traditional apron. Traditionally, jainkyrshah (a traditional Khasi apron), which is a checked cloth (one and half meter in length and one meter in breadth) is used by Khasi women and grown up girls as an apron. Bamboo grooves are found in abundance in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Hence this riddle derived from close observation of nature. The above riddle is collected from the War-Jaintia area, where the bamboo is given a feminine gender (ka). So the bark which covers the tender shoots is referred to as an apron used by Khasi women.

Arngut ki khun synrap, ki iaknieh bei man ban iaid shakhmat.
Riddle referent: Ki kjat.

Translation
One pair of identical twins, one will always try to go ahead of another.
Riddle referent: A pair of legs.

In this riddle, a pair of legs is a metaphor. Here the two legs of a person are compared to identical twins. It is often observed that though there are many physical similarities between many identical twins, yet we can also see many differences in their nature. There is always sibling rivalry and competition among them. So here a pair of identical twins who always try to outdo the other is referred to a pair of human legs.

Riddles Parodies
Riddle parodies are a sub-genre that tries to make fun of riddles. The riddle referent in a riddle parody always upsets the expectation because answer is straightforward and aims at making fun of the riddle and the riddlee.

U syiar halor u dieng u kha pylleng,
Shano ka pylleng kan hap?
Riddle referent: U syiar um ju kha pylleng.

Translation
A cock on the tree lays an egg,
Where will the egg fall?
Riddle referent: The cock never lays an egg.

This riddle is an example of riddle parody. Everyone knows that only hens lay eggs. A cock being male can never lay eggs.

Balei u ngaptung u rwai eh?
Riddle referent: Ban pynbiej ia ki kynthei ba dang samla.

Translation
Why does a drone sing so loud?
Riddle referent: To fool the young female bees.

The above riddle is an example of riddle parody. It has been observed that a drone hums louder than any other bees in the beehive. He is also a lazy one because he never did any useful work like collecting nectar from flowers. In many cases also, it is found that lazy and worthless fellows always tried to talk big in order to impress others, especially girls in the hope of winning their heart. So those who observe this behavior of a drone create this kind of a riddle.

Conundrum
A conundrum is something that is mysterious and puzzling. It also used to explain riddles that are known as riddles of multiple classifications. These types of riddles also play on or manipulate words.

Ka khoh te ka khoh, tangba ym lah ban kit ia ka.
Riddle referent: Khohsiew.

Translation
It is a basket, but nobody can carry it.
Riddle referent: The knee.

This is an example of a conundrum. In Khasi language ka khoh, the first part of the word khohsiew means a conical basket which the people used for carrying things on their backs along with a traditional strap.

Ka ksing te ka ksing tangba ym lah ban tied iaka.
Riddle referent: Ka ksingshkor.

Translation
It is a drum but we cannot beat it.
Riddle referent: The eardrum.

This is another example of conundrum. The Khasis called a drum as ka ksing in their language. Here the drum which cannot be beaten by any one refers to the eardrum of a person.

Riddle Poem
The Phawar, which is a good example of Khasi folk poetry and other riddle poems appear to contain some riddle elements in the versification system which reveals the metaphorical structure of the quintessential riddle. Below is an example of a riddle poem.

Dohkha ha nanpolok ki iabiej ia u shana
Da peit ho parari ioh phi biej ia u mama.

Translation
Fish at Ward’s lake are crazy of chanas
Look my compatriots lest you are crazy of uncle.

This *phawar* when analyzed reveals the hidden meaning embedded in the text. Wards Lake is a beautiful man-made lake located in the heart of Shillong, behind the famous Shillong Club. This picturesque lake was constructed by the then Governor of Assam, Sir William Ward in the year 1893-94. This lake is also locally known as Nan Polok (after the name of the engineer Mr. Pollock, who built it). The lake abounds in fish of different colours and sizes. People who throng this beautiful lake used to feed the fish while standing on the wooden bridge in the middle of the lake. It is said that the fish of Nan Polok or Wards Lake are very fond of *moogh dal*, a variety of lentil. In the context of this *phawar*, fish is a symbolic representation for young girls who have attained marriageable age. The Khasi males always used the phrase *Leitkhwai* or to go fishing when trying to court young girls. In this *phawar*, the word *dohkha* (fish) refers to young and naive Khasi girls who like the fish of Ward’s Lake can be easily lured and swept away by the false promises of love and uncle symbolizes any non-tribal male or men from mainland India. Here the false promises of love means the promises of the non-tribal men to love and respect the young Khasi girls only later after marriage to be left alone as the man would return to his native place and marry a woman from his own community. It is to be mentioned here that the Khasis always fondly call any nontribal male as uncle irrespective of his age. In the above *phawar*, the youth had seen in many cases the plight of the Khasi women after being abandoned by their non-Khasi husbands. So, seeing the danger awaiting the community, the young Khasi males warned and cautioned the girls not to be fooled by the non-Khasi males into marrying them.

**Riddle jokes and Verbal dueling**

Khasi riddle jokes serve as a setup for the punch-line answer. Some riddle jokes draw their sources from riddle conundrum as they depend on word play. Parody riddle jokes extend the nature of riddle joke and humour into absurdity and nonsense. They are acceptable for people as they provide tools for disputing ideas, social practices and making fun of all these conditions. Riddles offer appropriate linguistic means for transforming the people necessity to dispute into a linguistic play with words results in a purifying process through parody and laughter. Riddle jokes often occur in topical cycle. They explore a single topic develop as a fad; eventually, interest in that set of jokes declines and replaced by the next set of joke fad.

Traditionally, the Khasis used riddling as a mind game to sharpen the mind and test the wit of the people, especially the children. But sometimes it is also used as a joke or satiric commentary by the people of one village or region about the others. Typically riddle-jokes attribute a ludicrous and socially inappropriate trait to the people allegedly about whom the joke is told. Riddling, as part of evolving strategies sometimes turn into verbal dueling.

Ritualized verbal dueling is found in all culture in the world and the description and analysis of verbal dueling in several cultural and social settings have attracted scholarly attention. Hoebel noted that song duels are used among some Eskimo groups to “work off
grudges and disputes of all orders, save murder” (Hoebel 1967:93). Scholars are of the view that verbal dueling is a substitute behavior for physical fighting which is often engaged for entertainment and for the sure fun of insulting other members of the group in front of an appreciative audience. Roger D. Abraham studied verbal dueling among Black urban males and is of the opinion that these encounters are verbal battles in which teenage participants are trained for speech contests and build their reputations in the male community (Abraham 1962: 209-220).

\[ \text{Katba ki nang thung siej katta ki nang khlain} \]
\[ \text{Hynrei katba ki nang leit sha skull, katta ki nang luin.} \]

Riddle Referent:  **Ki Nong Rimen.**

**Translation:**

The more they grow bamboos, the more they become strong
But the more they go to school, the more they become dull.

Riddle referent: Rimens.

Rimens are Khasis settling under the *Hima* or the traditional state of *Nongkhlaw* located in the West Khasi hills District of Meghalaya. This riddle-joke was created by neighbouring villagers of Rimens’ region. They ridicule the people of the Rimen region by saying that they are not fit be educated as they are not good in studies. But they are fit to work as cultivators and farmers as physical work make them stronger and physically fit.

\[ \text{Ki Nong Mawlai ki shait sympat khun da uei?} \]

Riddle referent:  **Da u tdong masi.**

**Translation:**

What do the people of Mawlai use when they spank their children?

Riddle referent: A cow’s tail.

*Mawlai* is the biggest locality in the city of Shillong. The residents of *Mawlai* are said to have come from different parts of Khasi and Jaintia hills. It is a locality resided only by Khasis as no non-Khasi is allowed to reside there. The people of *Mawlai* are engaged in different occupations. But one of the main occupations of the people is butchery, especially beef. *Mawlai* is well known as most of the beef butchers at *Iewduh*, the biggest market in Shillong, are from this locality. Many people of *Mawlai* are engaged in this trade in one way or the other. Due to this, a place has been set up in one corner of *Mawlai*, for the butchers to wash and clean their meat, especially beef before selling them in the market. It is joked that since many cows are slaughtered in a day in *Mawlai* to meet the demand of the consumers of Shillong, so the locality is littered with the tails of cows. In such situations, cow tails are available in plenty. So, the parents from *Mawlai*, when they need to discipline their children, they use the tails of cows for spanking instead of a stick.

**Modern Riddles**

Historically many riddles were found to have evolved during the colonization of Khasi and Jaintia Hills by the British. The coming of the British to these hills led to the
evolution of new sets of riddles whose descriptive elements come from observation of the western culture and which showed impact of foreign culture on the Khasi culture as well. In this category of riddles, we observe descriptive elements which reflect colonial influence in day today life.

\[ U \text{ Phareng, u Khasi bad u Dkha rki iashoh hapoh kawei ka kper haduh ba kin da mihsnam, katba u Negro pat u nangpeit na shabar ka kper.} \]

Riddle referent: \( \text{Bam kwai, tympew, shun bad u duma sla.} \)

Translation
The white man, the Khasi and the non-tribal are fighting till they are covered in blood inside a fence, while the African is watching from outside.

Riddle referent: Chewing of areca nut, betel leaf, lime and tobacco.

In this riddle the descriptive elements refer to white men and Africans. The white man refers to lime which is white in colour, the areca nut (Kwai) to a Khasi and a betel leaf (tympew) to anon-tribal. The Khasis are very fond of chewing areca nuts along with betel leaf and lime. Area nuts and betel leaves play a very significant role in the life and culture of the Khasis. The Khasis always show their hospitality and welcome guests to their homes by offering Kwai and tympew (area nut and betel leaves) to the visitors to chew. So areca nuts and betel leaves along with lime is a symbol of hospitality and goodwill in Khasi culture. Along with areca nut and betel leaf, there are some people who also chew tobacco leaves by putting the same in the outer pat of the gums. Chewing of areca nut along with betel leaf and lime will turn the saliva in the mouth to red colour. So the act of chewing areca nut and betel leaf along with lime is compared to three persons from different races fighting with one another till they shed blood, the red saliva in the mouth likened to blood and the African who watches the three people fighting inside the fence refers to the tobacco leaf.

\[ Ka \text{ don kawei ka pung, don arngut ki briew ki ba wan sum, uwei u dei u dkhariong bad uwei pat u phareng. U tang shurynkoh u dkhariong shapoh um, ka um ka lah iong ngain, hynrei tang shuryngkoh u phareng pat, ka um ka lah lieh phar.} \]

Riddle referent: Ka sha.

Translation:
There is a pond; two people, an Adivasi and a white man came to bathe in the pond. The moment the Adivasi jumped into the pond, the water turns black, but the moment the white man jumps into the pond the water turns white.

Riddle referent: Tea.

In this riddle, the pond refers to the tea kettle where water is boiled for brewing tea; the Adivasi refers to tea leaves and the white man to milk. It is seen that when tea leaves is added to boiling water, the colour of the water will turn black. But when milk is added to black tea, the colour will turn to off-white. It is to be noted here that the Khasis did not have any concept of tea and never drink milk before the British came to these hills. So we may assume that this riddle was created only after the colonization of Khasi and Jaintia hills by the British.
Riddles through Short Message Service and the Internet

Modern communication especially mobile phone technology has brought in a very interesting mode of information exchange by means of Short Message Service which reveals that there is a folkloric text which can be developed and used. The use of internet and mobile phones for generating folklore genres has been observed very closely by folklorists and they have cited instances to show how traditional narrative structures of certain genres such as jokes and riddles have undergone a dramatic transformation in presenting text and context. There are riddles that have evolved with the advancement of modern technology especially those created through Short Message service (S.M.S) and Internet in the present day. These may be considered as genuine items of folklore because they are anonymous, circulated and popular within groups sharing common factors thereby qualifying them as folk group.

Internet and SMS riddles typically use pun and double entendre for humorous effect rather than to puzzle. Another characteristic of these riddles is that most of circulated riddles are found to fall under the purported obscene riddles. Riddles created through internet and SMS will be put under three categories. 1) Riddle jokes 2) Purported obscene riddles 3) Real obscene riddle

Riddle Jokes

When is the door not the door?
Riddle referent: When it is a jar (ajar).

In the above riddle we see there is a play upon words. The word ajar is written as a jar (glass) which led to the change in the meaning of the answer. This riddle joke depends on word play and therefore draws on the resources of riddle conundrum.

What is the similarity between students during exams and Amir Khan in Ghajini?
Riddle referent: Both suffer from short term memory loss and wrote answers on their bodies.

It has been observed by many teachers that those students who always study for their exams only at the eleventh hour tend to forget many important parts of their answers during exams. They always complained that their minds became blank and could not recall what they have learned. Some of these students even resort to many unfair means. One of the most common ways of cheating is that students usually write important gist of the answer they expect to be asked during exams on their body especially on their palms, arms and thighs. In the Hindi movie Ghajini, Amir Khan, the main lead of the movie also suffered from amnesia as he was struck on the head by his assailants. To remember the important events that occur during this period of his life, Amir Khan also wrote whatever he remembers on his body. He tattooed the name of the persons who killed his girlfriend etc. so that he could remember what had happened to him while suffering from short term memory loss.
Pretended Obscene Riddles

Many riddles circulated by people through SMS are found to fall under a special subtype called the purported obscene riddles. In this category, the descriptive element(s) suggests something risqué, usually having sexual connotation, but the answer is quite innocent and tame.

When that skin meets skin  
Hair meets hair  
And balls disappear?

Riddle referent: It’s when you blink your eyes.

This is a very popular riddle among the youth. The descriptive elements in the riddle seems to suggest something very risqué and to have sexual connotation, but in fact the answer is very innocent. When we blink our eyes, our eye lashes and the skin that cover our eyes come into contact.

I am 7 inches long; I have hair at my base.  
When I move in and out of the hole, white fluids come out.  
Who am I?

Riddle referent: The Toothbrush.

The above riddle falls under the purported obscene riddle category. Here in this riddle the descriptive elements seem to refer to the private part of a male. But in fact, it refers to a toiletry item, a toothbrush. The hole in this riddle refers to the mouth of a person and the white fluids to the saliva mixed with toothpaste. The simple act of brushing one’s teeth here seems to refer to sexual intercourse.

Real Obscene Riddles

In real obscene riddles the riddle referent always have sexual connotation.

What is the height of laziness?
Riddle referent: The couple adopting a child.

The above riddle falls under the real obscene category. Here, the childless couple who adopt a child is ridiculed as those who are the laziest people on earth as they are alleged to be too lazy even to get intimate to conceive a child of their own.

What do ugly girls wear in their lockets?
Riddle referent: A picture of a candle.

This riddle joke ridiculed and targeted the girls, especially those who are not pretty and who have passed their prime but still unmarried. A candle has always been identified as a symbolic representation of the male sexual organ. Usually people especially girls used to
keep pictures of their boyfriends or husbands inside the locks of their lockets. But in the case of the sexually frustrated women, they are ridiculed that they put the picture of the candle instead of their lovers as no men want to have them.

Some of the examples mentioned above are not what we called true riddles. But they do have riddle elements in them. SMS and Internet riddles may also be called Contemporary riddles.

**Conclusion**

Khasi riddles have undergone a significant change not only in their forms but also in their contents. Khasi traditional riddles are different from modern ones in many ways. One of the differences is the mode of transmission. Traditionally up to the last decade of the twentieth century, Khasi riddles are transmitted orally. There was no evidence that Khasi riddles have seen the light of the day in print. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century, riddles are mostly transmitted through the modern communication system, namely the internet and mobile phone technology. Messaging through e-mail and mobile phone started characteristically as a youth custom. The emergence and widespread practice of sending message en masse made the internet and mobile phone technology a new medium for the spread and popularity of riddles.

Today, the traditional practice of riddling as a conventional verbal art is dwindling gradually due to many factors but riddling through SMS is growing vigorously and this play a very important role in the transformation of this genre. The popularity of riddles cannot be compared with other genres of Khasi folk literature such as tales and proverbs. For instance, proverbs are commonly shared in the sense that their applicability is more or less appreciated and understood. Riddles in many cases are idiosyncratic and arbitrary often being coined, used, applied and improved through the individual agency. Therefore a limited applicability does not open up scope for a shared experience and in this manner an idiosyncratic and arbitrary riddle dies out quickly and is abandoned. Today many people had lost touch with nature. Modern technology and urbanization also greatly affect the use of riddling as a verbal art. A deep study of this should be carried out and riddles of all varieties should be collected and published to provide possibilities for the study and analysis of this genre. Such studies will answer questions about the changes that take place in Khasi riddles and riddling as a whole.
References

About Author: Rimika Lanong is a Ph. D. Research Scholar in the Deptt’ of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Mawkynroh, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.