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The Divine Ancestress in a Matrilineal Society: The Imprints of Khasi Matriliny on the Legend of Ka Pahsyntiew

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Abstract

The Khasi people in the state of Meghalaya, Northeast India, observe matrilineal customs. Among the Khasis, descent is traced through the female line. Women hold an esteemed status of the persons who continue lineages and promote the welfare of their families and clans. This paper examines the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew – a Khasi legend that explains the semi-divine origin of a Khasi ruling clan – to discern cultural notions that underpin Khasi matriliny. The legend portrays Khasi outlooks on female generative power, wifehood/motherhood, and women's vital roles in the formation of a secured and wholesome society. The imprints of Khasi matriliny on the legend become apparent via a comparison with the swan maiden story – a tale type found in numerous variants among diverse cultures. I posit that the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew and the swan maiden story are different elaborations of the same narrative pattern. This narrative pattern produces a legend that extols female generative power and virtues when told and received in Khasi matrilineal society. It, on the contrary, turns into multiple variants of the swan maiden tale that portray female subordination in a male-dominated world when passed on in patriarchal societies.

Keywords

Matrilineal society, Khasi folklore, Swan maiden, Northeast India

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Introduction

The Khasi and Jaintia Hills district in the state of Meghalaya, Northeast India, is the home of the Khasis – an ethnic group that speaks an Austro-Asiatic language notably similar to the Mon-Khmer languages of the Southeast Asian peoples. The Khasis, being one of the three matrilineal groups in Meghalaya, observe social customs that place primary importance on female procreation. The Khasis hold that offspring are born from their mother's womb while their father merely facilitates and complements female generative power. Hence descent is traced through the female line and kinship ties are formed among the descendants of the same ancestress. Inheritance passes from the mother to her youngest daughter, who also inherits the ancestral home and takes charge of all mandatory family rituals. The son, on the contrary, moves into his wife's family. The children he fathers belong to his wife's clan.

The special status of Khasi women is evident in the Khasi tales that portray the marriage between a celestial maiden and a mortal man. Sexual relations and gender roles portrayed in these stories are remarkably different from those depicted in the folktales of patriarchal cultures that build on the same motif. In this paper, I examine several variants of a Khasi legend that narrates the union between a female deity and a mortal man. In this legend, a divine maiden comes to the mundane world, meets a human, marries him, and then returns to her natal realm. A similar sequence of narrative events has been found in tales told by diverse cultural groups across the globe. A widely distributed tale type that features the earthly visit of a celestial female followed by her marriage with a mortal man is the swan maiden story. Diverse variants of the swan maiden story can be found in Europe, Asia Minor and the Far East. These stories typically portray a supernatural female who shapeshifts into a bird or possesses bird attributes (such as a pair of wings or a feather-robe).[1] She is then captured by a mortal man during her excursion to the human world. In the human world a man withholds her wings, robe, or other prized possession without which she cannot return to her natal realm. In this manner the swan maiden is detained in the mundane world and must cohabit with her captor, or with another man to whom the captor grants her, as his wife. In different versions of the tale the ending varies. Some versions end with the swan maiden's escape and her permanent separation from her husband. In the more elaborated versions, the deserted husband embarks on an adventurous journey to bring back his wife. After numerous daunting tasks and trials, the tale ends with the hero's reunion with his swan wife.

[1] See A. T. Hatto (1961) for cultural and geographical areas in which variants of the swan maiden story were found. See Miller (1987) for the structural analysis of the swan maiden story in Japan and Inge (1962) for the swan maiden myth among the Eskimo.

The Khasi legend that is the object of my inquiry shares several motifs with the swan maiden story. Yet, in the Khasi legend these motifs are configured differently and thus the narrative yields a distinct scenario of gender relations one does not see in swan maiden tales from non-matrilineal societies. I also note that certain motifs that constitute typical swan maiden stories do not appear in the Khasi legend under scrutiny because these motifs portray the celestial maiden as the object of desire possessed or pursued by her human spouse. As a story that justifies and maintains the continuity of the matrilineal tradition, the Khasi legend discussed in this paper enshrines female character. Instead of the wretched wife captured by her mortal husband, she is heralded as the divine progenitress whose generative power and virtues strengthen human society. This Khasi legend, when examined in contrast to the swan maiden story, reveals the plasticity and contextual sensitivity of oral literature. A cluster of folktale motifs, when fleshed out and passed on in patriarchal societies, turns into swan maiden tales that portray female subordination in a male-dominated culture. The same sequence of motifs, however, produces a legend that extols female generative power and virtues, thereby validating the matrilineal descent system when adapted to the Khasi cultural environment.

In the following sections, I intend to show that Khasi matriliny leaves its imprints on the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew – a Khasi legend that explains the origin of a royal clan. These imprints are not simply the realistic reflection of matrilineal customs that the Khasis practice in the real world. Instead, I construe such imprints as cultural notions regarding women's pivotal roles in the formation of a secured and wholesome society that underlie the legend. The marriage between a divine maiden and a mortal man as depicted in the legend resonates with Khasi matrilineal values that herald women as originators and preservers of lineages, while swan maiden tales that feature the same sequence of motifs portray women's loss of autonomy and demoted status once they enter into wedlock. Besides, certain motifs that imply female subordination commonly found in swan maiden stories do not appear in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew. Based on these observations, I contend that the relationship between the divine wife and her human spouse in the legend is presented in the manner that warrants the legitimacy of matrilineal tradition.

I elaborate this argument in the following sections. After this introduction I review precedent studies whose approaches to folklore and gender inform my analysis of the Khasi legend. Then in a separate section I explain the methodology. The sources of the tales being discussed in this study and the aspects of the tales that are the objects of my comparative analysis are outlined in this section. Following the methodology section, I describe social customs and cultural notions that make up the Khasi matrilineal system, after which I present my analysis of the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew in comparison with swan maiden stories from non-matrilineal societies. Via this comparison I intend to reveal matrilineal notions that

underlie the legend, as well as the function of the legend as a verbal folklore that validates social custom. In the conclusion I discuss ramifications of this study. I posit that an analytical perspective that pays attention to the constant absence of particular motifs from diverse variants of a tale can reveal cultural logic of the people who recount and receive the tale. Also, comparative method can be employed to reveal such absence and its cultural implications.

Folklore and Gender

Tales, notwithstanding their invented plots and characters, are embedded in the social reality of the people who produce and transmit them. Tales may comment on the established gender norms via a concrete representation of fantasies about means of escaping from such norms. Barbara Leavy, studying tales from diverse cultures that figure supernatural beings and their mortal mates, notes that two groups of tales, albeit their differing plots, similarly reveal "woman's role in culture and fantasies of escaping that role" (1994, p.15). Stories about a demon lover who tempts his human mistress to leave her husband and elope with him envisages an alternate reality in which women are offered a chance to make a choice. Likewise, many swan maiden tales that depict the swan wife's flight from the mundane world away from her husband and children mirror a wishful imagination about an escape from conventional female role and duty. The swan maiden and the demon's mistress in these tales have magical means of escaping from tedious family life and domestic drudgery, which is a wishful getaway that real women can vicariously experience by telling and listening to folktales. As Leavy's comparative study has shown, the tales of the swan maiden and the demon lover are verbal renditions of fantasy about means of evading prescribed gender roles. As such they cast light on suppressed discontent and weariness of women under the constraint of the established gender norms.

Tales also provide means of fantasizing sexual conducts or behaviors that are censured by social norms. Ruth Benedict, in her seminal *Zuni Mythology*, notes that "…folklore tallied with culture and yet did not tally with it" (1935, p. xii). Myths and tales of the Zuni, Benedict remarks, picture behaviors that are at odds with the rules regarding sexual propriety that the Zuni observe. Polygamy, which is prohibited and rare among the Zuni, is vividly portrayed in numerous Zuni tales. Also, children deserted at birth by mothers who engage in illicit sexual relation is a recurrent motif in Zuni tales in contrast to the fact that such behavior attracts humiliation in reality, and that illegitimate children are not abandoned but cared for by the mother's family. Via her study of Zuni oral tradition, Benedict reveals that folklore is "a means of gratifying fantasies and expressing hostilities of the culturebound [*sic*]" (Dorson, 1972, p. 21). In its folklore, a group finds license to take pleasure in fantasizing prohibited desires and illicit behaviors. In this respect Benedict's and Leavy's views of folklore

in relation to gender converge. They concur that folklore functions as a psychological outlet for repressed anxiety and frustration arising from being restricted by rigid gender norms.

From Leavy's and Benedict's studies, one can extrapolate two salient points regarding the relationship between folklore and gender. First, folklore provides means of imagining and discussing non-normative sexual conducts that society strictly prohibits. Second, via folklore one can picture a different scenario of gender roles and relations that deviates from the norms. I review Leavy's and Benedict's studies here because their approaches to folklore and gender inform my comparative analysis between the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew and the swan maiden story. Leavy and Benedict concur that folktales do not mirror social reality in a transparent manner. Narrative events that have no basis in reality or are apparently at odds with norms and values of the society, still, encapsulate talebearers' attitudes toward certain socio-cultural conditions. The swan maiden story and the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, via their representations of "fictional images of gender" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 173), reveal disparate gender realities experienced by women within patriarchal cultures and a matrilineal society, respectively. The swan wife personifies female autonomy that is lost once she is subject to male dominance justified on the basis of love and marriage. The divine maiden in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, on the contrary, embodies matriarchal authority that Khasi women acquire once they become wives and mothers. Despite their fantastical elements, the two stories cast light on women's status in the cultures that produce the tales.

In this paper, I examine different versions of the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew collected from written and oral sources. I consider both recurring motifs and those that are conspicuously absent, by which I mean the motifs that loom large in typical variants of the swan maiden story but do not appear in any versions of the Khasi legend. Based on similarities in terms of plot structure, character types, and social function, I propose that the Khasi legend and the swan maiden story are different elaborations of the same narrative pattern. This narrative pattern, when passed on and embellished in patriarchal cultures, results in numerous variants of the swan maiden story that typically portray female subordination and women's ordeal in the male-dominated world. However, when adapted to the Khasi social environment, the same narrative pattern produces the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew that validates matrilineal tradition via the representation of female authority and its paramount role in the formation of a strong society. Based on this premise, I construe the motifs that are characteristic of the swan maiden story but conspicuously absent from the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew as alternative elements that could have been added to the legend. These missing motifs cast light on alternative endings and turns of events that Khasi talebearers could have invented for the legend but did not because of cultural reasons. Taking this analytical perspective, I follow the path taken by precedent scholars of folk literature who stress cultural significance of variation in folktales. Leavy (1994) contends that

variation is reflective of choices among various possible motifs made by narrators who hold culturally derived notions of what is sensible and what is not for a particular tale in a particular circumstance. Therefore, studying variants of a tale as told and received within a specific culture casts light on what talebearers in that culture consider culturally meaningful (Leavy, 1994 p.30). Along the same lines, David E. Bynum contends that variants of a folktale are not deviations from a complete and static narrative pattern but different ways of combining the rudimentary pattern with complementary elements. A finished and meaningful story emerges from such combination (1978, pp.78-79). Therefore, variation in folktales reveals a range of possible meanings a narrative pattern could acquire within a cultural community rather than narrators' memory lapse or the natural tendency of oral narratives to degenerate.

Drawing on Leavy's and Bynum's ideas, I construe the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew as a variant of a widely distributed narrative pattern made up of three principal motifs: 1) the union between a supernatural female and a mortal man 2) the supernatural wife's cohabitation with her human spouse in the mortal realm and 3) the abrupt separation of the couple as the supernatural wife returns to her natal realm. The swan maiden story, as I previously mentioned, is another embellished form of this narrative pattern. As the product of a matrilineal society, gender roles and relations presented in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew notably differ from those depicted in the swan maiden story. As Leavy (1994) posits, choices among various motifs indicate what talebearers consider intelligible and meaningful in their cultural worldview. I propose that in case of the Khasi legend discussed in this paper, matrilineal notions influence such choice-making. The Khasi matrilineal system rests on cultural values that revere women as originators and preservers of bloodlines. These values constitute cultural logic that delimits a range of conceivable relations between the divine wife and her mortal husband as depicted in the legend. They are internalized cultural assumptions that define what is meaningful and what is not for the Khasi talebearers who pass on the legend.

Methodology

Variants of the swan maiden tale and the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew discussed in this study were collected from two major sources: 1) scholarly works and 2) published folktale collections. However, a few variants of the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew were collected from a one-week field research in Shillong – the capital of Meghalaya, a state in Northeast India – in May 2019. The informants were professors and graduate students from North-Eastern Hill University, who were Khasi and recounted the legend to me in English. I primarily use thematic approach in my comparative analysis, that is, I mainly focus on the content of each narrative and look into shared and distinct motifs among the tales under scrutiny. In this

comparative study, I treat folktale motifs, the most basic components that make up a complete and meaningful story, as the units of analysis and the basis for comparison.

Khasi Matrilineal System

The Khasi saying "*long jaid na ka kynthei*" (from the woman sprang the kind) expresses the Khasi matrilineal principles in a nutshell (Roy 1936, p.383). Among the Khasis, descent is traced through the female line. Family is primarily construed as a group of brothers and sisters born from the same mother, while membership of a clan is defined by the blood relation one has with the ancestress from whom the clan originates. Kinship tie is held among individuals who are children of the same mother and grandchildren of the same maternal grandmother. They are *shi kpoh*, or one womb, which means the offspring of the same womb (Gurdon, 2012, p. 82). In this kinship system the husband moves into his wife's family. Even though the husband has a certain degree of authority over his wife and children, tradition stipulates that *U Kni* – or the elder brother of his wife – is the official male head of the family. *U Kni* oversees major life events of his nieces and nephews. He presides over their naming ceremonies, negotiates their engagements and marriages, and bears liability for their misconducts (Kelian Synrem, 1992, pp. 27, 32). *U Kni*'s vital roles in his sister's family are warranted by matrilineal descent which rules that children belong to their mother's clan, therefore maternal kinsmen are primarily in charge of their well-being. Within the Khasi matriline, the father is called *U Shongkha* (the in-marrying affine, or the sister's husband). He permanently belongs to his mother's clan, thus he is of different clan from his wife and children as the Khasis strictly observe exogamy (Ryndem, 2017, p. 54). The husband "at least in theory, is a stranger in his wife's home" (Gurdon, 2012, p. 82). He plays a peripheral role in rituals and ceremonies of his wife's family. Also, his ashes are returned to his maternal family after death.

In the Khasi matrilineal system, men's position in a family or a clan is defined by their relationship with female members of the group. Via his mother a man acquires right and duty as a male member of her clan. Via his married sister he becomes *U Kni* – the legitimate guardian of her children. Via his wife he becomes *U Kpa* – the father who marries into and produces offspring for a clan not of his own. This gender positioning within the Khasi kinship system is the reversal of what transpires in patrilineal society, in which women's status within their consanguineal and affinal kin groups derives from their blood tie or matrimonial bond with men. The Khasi matrilineal concept of kinship evinces high value given to female generative power in the Khasi worldview. Women are valued above men because of their role during the procreation process, therefore lineages are construed as originating from women and continuing via them.

Since the Khasis hold that lineages originate from women, the hierarchy of ancestresses or *kiaw* (grandmother) forms the foundation of their tribal organization. Clan is a

social unit made up of the people who relate to *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* (grandmother of the root) by blood. The descendants of one ancestress are members of the same *kur*, or clan. At the level of sub-clan or *kpoh*, membership is held among the offspring of one great grandmother, whom the Khasis style *Ka Iawbei Tymmen*.[2] Then within a family or *iing*, the living grandmother (*Ka Iawbei Khynraw*, the young grandmother) is the head of her household. The membership of an *iing* extends to her male and female children, including the offspring of her daughters but not to those sired by her sons because they belong to their mothers' clans.

Such matrilineal descent stipulates the distinct laws of inheritance. Among the Khasis, the youngest daughter inherits ancestral property because she is designated by tradition to oversee family rituals and ceremonies. By virtue of her gender and order of birth she becomes *ka bat ia ka niam*, or the keeper of religion, of her family (Roy, 1936, p. 555). She inherits *ka inn seng*, the ancestral house, where all family rituals are conducted. She performs ancestral worship, cremates her deceased mother, and places the bones of family members in the clan ossuary. The youngest daughter abides by the tradition to ensure the safety and well-being of her matrikin. She is obliged to provide shelter for her widowed and childless siblings. She holds the custody of her late sister's children even though their father is still alive. Aged parents, including ill and disabled maternal relatives without a family of their own, are entrusted to her care (Augustine, 2007, pp. 51-52).

The importance of the youngest daughter as the legitimate guardian of her clan is more pronounced in contrast to the supportive role assigned to her male siblings. The Khasis practice matrilocal residence. Therefore sons, precisely their services and the fruits of their labor, are divided between their natal clans and their wives' clans upon marriage. The property a Khasi man earns before marriage belongs to his mother, which his youngest sister inherits after their mother's passing. The wealth accumulated after marriage is entrusted to his wife in favor of his children, especially the youngest daughter (Gurdon, 2012, pp. 83-84). Underlying this female-oriented inheritance law is a cultural notion, which holds that the continuation of bloodline primarily relies on women. Thus, the woman designated as the head of her kin group is entitled to hold and control family resources, which are to be used for the security and collective well-being of the clan. To support this ultimate cause a man is obligated to yield what he earns, either to the heiress of his biological family (his youngest sister) or to the heiress of his conjugal family (his youngest daughter).

[2] I note scholars' varying explanations of the Khasi terms that denote the hierarchy of ancestresses. P.R.T Gurdon describes *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* and *Ka Iawbei Tymmen* as the ancestresses of clan and sub-clan respectively (2012, p.56). War treats *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* and *Ka Iawbei Tymmen* as synonymous. Both terms refer to "the first mother of a clan (2020, n.p.). Mawrie, on the contrary, explains that the first known ancestress of the clan is simply styled *Ka Iawbei* while the succeeding grandmothers are indiscriminately referred to as *Ka Iawbei Khynraw* (1981, p.37).

The paramount importance of women as the preservers of their lineages in Khasi culture is also notable in a custom called *rap iing*, or adoption. The absence of female offspring poses the threat of lineage extinction, which is a grave misfortune for the Khasis. The end of the female line also means the termination of family rites and ceremonies. This is especially alarming in the context of Khasi funerary rites, which stipulate that only the designated female descendant can place the bones of deceased members in the family ossuary and perform requisite funeral rituals. To prevent *iap duh*, or clan extinction, the family without female child may adopt a girl from another household and appoint her as the heiress (Gurdon, 2012, pp. 85-86). The *rap iing* custom testifies to the pivotal status of female descendants upon whom the security and continuation of their bloodlines depend. Women bring forth lineages as well as manage and maintain them. In this matrilineal paradigm of descent, the security of a clan hinges on the presence of female descendants who do not simply continue the lineage but also abide by the tradition to care for physical and spiritual well-being of all clan members.

Khasi women are still expected to perform the conventionally female duties as wife and mother. In this respect they do not differ from women in patriarchal cultures. However, given the central and esteemed role assigned to them in the welfare of their families and clans, they are respected wives and mothers who are not subject to male authority or relegated to an inferior position vis-à-vis their menfolk. As Khasi matriliny values female above male functions in the procreation process and the maintenance of kin groups, Khasi wives and mothers hold the authority allocated to the persons who are principally in charge of the well-being of their families and clans. Two aspects of female role in Khasi worldview – the dutiful wife to one's husband and the conscientious guardian of the people under her care – is represented by the sun goddess in a Khasi folktale about an ungrateful peacock and his fall from heaven. A male peacock married the sun goddess and lived with her in the celestial realm. Despite all kinds of pleasure he received from his divine wife, the peacock was displeased because the sun goddess was usually away on her mission of shining her nourishing ray on earth and its creatures. Eventually the peacock decided to leave his wife for a bed of mustard flowers which he mistook for a gorgeous maiden when seen from afar. The sun goddess pleaded with her husband to stay, but to no avail. Her tears fell upon his tail and turned into beautiful spots borne by all peacocks to the present day (Nongkynrih, 2007, pp.31-34).

The sun goddess in this folktale, though a devoted wife, is first and foremost the nurturer of all creatures on earth. Their survival depends on the warmth and light that she emits. She is committed to her principal duty as the vital force that sustains the universe which surpasses her secondary role as the loving wife to her husband. In my view, the central position of Khasi women in the welfare of their families and clans vis-à-vis their

duty as wife is presented via the sun goddess. As wife, one has certain obligations to one's husband. Nonetheless, such obligations do not render Khasi women subservient to their husbands since they hold an authoritative and vital status of the person who preserves and fosters the lineage. The supernatural wife in the Khasi legend discussed in the following sections, like the sun goddess, is not simply the romantic partner of her human spouse. She is the divine progenitress who gives birth to a semi-divine lineage. Given such esteemed status she notably differs from the swan maiden who is first and foremost the object of men's romantic desire and the attendant of her husband's demands and whims. I describe notable features that distinguish the divine wife in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew from the swan maiden in the following sections.

The Khasi Divine Wife and the Swan Maiden

Many variants of the swan maiden story, as Leavy puts it, depict female subordination in "a fierce marital struggle" (Leavy, 1994, p.33). Constant elements shared by numerous swan maiden tales are the swan wife's involuntary submission to her captor and her alienation from the human world. A Chinese swan maiden agreed to marry her captor only because he withheld her heavenly robe. After persistent and earnest pleading, she was allowed to have a glimpse of the stolen robe. Then "her heart was cut to the quick, her tears fell like floods of rain, and she longed to ride off through the air" (Waley, 1959, pp. 2-3). She fled as soon as her mother-in-law fell for her trick and let her put on the robe. In comparison to her Chinese counterpart, the Bulgarian swan maiden seems to be bolder. When she, by trickery, retrieved her magic dress, she immediately left the mortal realm but not before telling her husband how she felt about being forced into a relationship with a mortal man. A celestial female like her, she taunted, does not befit the roles of housewife and mother (Leavy,1994, p.63).

The divine maiden in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, however, is not subject to a forced marriage nor does she feel alienated from the human community or resentment against her human husband. Her union with a mortal man is based on mutual consent, not coercion. For a length of time she resides among human beings, yet she never pines for her celestial home. Neither does she feel self-pity or remorse as she becomes the wife and mother of a human family. Additionally, unlike the trapped swan wives in Chinese and Bulgarian swan maiden tales, the Khasi divine wife returns to her heavenly abode unimpeded. She separates from her mortal family in a relatively more placid manner in comparison with the abrupted flight of the wretched swan maidens. These differences are notable in many versions of the legend presented below.

Ka Pahsyntiew: The Divine Maiden Lured by Flowers

The legend of Ka Pahsyntiew explains the origin of the royal clan that once ruled Hima Shillong (Diengdoh, 2016, p.26). In modern days this traditional Khasi state has become the city of Shillong – the capital of the state of Meghalaya. The story exists in several variants. Each variant invariably features a celestial maiden who gave birth to the lineage of *siem* – or kings – of Shillong. The story has it that the daughter of U Lei Shyllong – the god of Shillong peak – descended to earth and stayed in a cave called Krem Marai. The versions retold by Nongkynrih (2007, pp.73-79) and Gurdon (2012, pp. 165-167) concur that the goddess appeared as an exceptionally beautiful maiden. Another version, recorded by Rafy (1920, pp. 18-23), has it that she took the form of a young girl. The goddess was seen by young herders who grazed their cattle near the cave. Rumors spread about a mysterious woman living by herself in Krem Marai. Then a wise old man (called U Sati Mylliemngap in Nongkynrih's version and simply U Mylliem Ngap in Rafy's version) went to Krem Marai to verify the rumors. Upon seeing a strange man approaching her, the goddess fled into the cave. The wise man coaxed and enticed her to come out but to no avail. So, he made a bouquet of wildflowers and placed it on the ground, then went into hiding. When the goddess left the cave to take the flowers, he seized her. This capture by trickery evolved into a cordial conversation as the man assured the goddess of his harmless intent. The goddess revealed to him her celestial origin and the mission she received from her divine father who had sent her to be the progenitress of Shillong's ruling clan.

The old man took the celestial maiden home and adopted her as his daughter in some versions or as his niece in others. In both cases, the wise man serves as the male guardian of the goddess rather than her romantic partner, unlike the captor in typical swan maiden stories who take the captured maiden as his wife. In the version retold by Rafy, the parent-child relationship between the old man and the divine maiden is conspicuous as the goddess came to earth in the form of a young girl. In this version the wise man raised her until she reached a marriageable age. However, all variants of the legend concur that since the goddess was lured out of the cave by flowers, she was called Ka Pahsyntiew. *Ka* is an article in Khasi language placed in front of a noun to indicate its feminine gender. *Pahsyntiew* means "lured by flowers."

Just like swan maidens, Ka Pahsyntiew then became the wife of a mortal man. Her foster parents married her to a young man of intelligence and prowess. The couple lived a happy married life as Ka Pahsyntiew gave birth to many sons and daughters. All of them were admired for their beauty, intelligence, and noble character. After a long period of blissful life on earth, one day Ka Pahsyntiew told her husband and children of her divine origin and the reason she came to live among the mortals. She had completed her duty thus she had to return to her world. Her family grieved at the idea of losing her, yet they did not detain her.

In the end Ka Pahsyntiew disappeared into Krem Marai and was never seen again. Her children later became the rulers of Hima Shillong.[3]

At this point one may note that the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew shares major motifs with the swan maiden story. Firstly, both stories figure a celestial female who descends to earth and takes a human spouse. Secondly, the divine maiden in both tales settles in the mortal world among humankind, which is an alien tribe to her. Thirdly, after a period of residence among the mortals, the divine maiden returns to her natal world, leaving her husband and children behind.

Nonetheless, one may also note that these shared motifs are presented differently in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew. Firstly, the non-consensual or quasi-consensual relationship, which the swan maiden reluctantly forms with her human spouse only because he withholds her prized possession, is absent in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew. Even in a few versions (Gurdon, 2012, pp. 165-167; Pakrasi, 1969, p. 74) in which the wise man does not adopt the divine maiden as his daughter or niece but marries her himself, the marriage takes place with the divine maiden's consent. Likewise, in the typical variants in which the wise man acts as Ka Pahsyntiew's foster father or maternal uncle, there is no clue of forced marriage or marriage by capture. On the contrary, the narratives highlight Ka Pahsyntiew's blissful and fulfilled married life which results in many exceptional sons and daughters. Secondly, in the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew the portrayal of female subordination and the acute sense of alienation felt by the captured wife that characterize many swan maiden narratives are missing. The bird wife in a Melanesian tale wept bitterly as her husband's brothers scolded her while she toiled away in his garden (Codrington, 1891, p. 172). The Lithuanian swan maiden, despite a wealthy life in her husband's palace, constantly wept and grieved. The maiden asked every swan that flew over her head whether they had seen her parents and siblings (Zobarskas, 1958, pp. 58-59). Unlike Melanesian and Lithuanian swan maiden tales, the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew portrays the well-assimilated and content divine maiden who is treasured by the human community she lives with. By taking a human spouse and giving birth to his children, Ka Pahsynytiew fulfils the sacred role of the god-appointed progenitress who empowers humankind by planting a semi-divine lineage among them. Thirdly, Ka Pahsyntiew's peaceful and unimpeded departure at the end of the story stresses her sacred status. Her sojourn on earth and departure from it were decreed by the deity of Shillong mountain who sent her to earth to fulfil heaven's mandate. Therefore, whether she

[3] This plot summary of the legend is based on the following sources: Nongkynrih (2007, pp.73-79), Rafy (1920, pp. 18-23), Bareh (1964, pp. 87-88), Barman (2016, n.p.) and Tynsong (2019, p. 970). Despite differences in minor details, these sources give consistent accounts about Ka Pahsyntiew's divine origin and her mission on earth, her role as the foster daughter of the man who lured her out of the cave, and her return to the divine realm unimpeded by grieving but respectful husband and children.

stays or leaves lies beyond the power of her human husband. In this respect she differs from the wretched swan maidens whose captivity and escape suggest their involuntary submission to their mortal spouses and a struggle to be free from it.

The following table gives an overview of three common motifs shared by the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew and multiple variants of the swan maiden story. It is notable that these fundamental motifs making up the narrative structures of the Khasi legend and the swan maiden tale are depicted differently in each story. Different depictions of shared motifs reveal distinct gender notions that underlie each tale. These underlying gender notions, in turn, cast light on the imprints of Khasi matriliny on the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew in contradistinction to the influence of patriarchal norms on multiple versions of the swan maiden tale.

Table 1 Different depictions of shared motifs and the gender notions underlying each depiction

The legend of Ka Pahsyntiew		**Shared motifs**	**Swan maiden stories**	
Gender notions: Khasi matriliny	**Distinctive depiction of shared motifs (in contrast to swan maiden stories)**		**Distinctive depiction of shared motifs (in contrast to the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew)**	**Gender notions: Patriarchal societies**
1) Women create and continue lineages. Wife and mother are positions of authority pivotal to the survival of society.	1) As decreed by heaven, the celestial maiden planted a semi-diving lineage on earth by marrying a mortal man.	1) A supernatural female marries a mortal man	1) A swan maiden was captured by a mortal man who withheld her prized possession and forced her to marry him.	1) Entering into a wedlock deprives women of their autonomy. Wifehood and motherhood imply female subordination.
2) By marrying a man and giving birth to his children, women acquire an esteemed and authoritative status of the person who empowers the society by her generative power.	2) The divine maiden was revered and treasured by the human community she lived with.	2) The supernatural wife lives with her human spouse in the mortal realm.	2) The swan maiden suffered an acute sense of alienation, as she lost her original fantastical self and led a weary life as a wife of a mere mortal man.	2) As a man's wife, women are demoted to the lesser status of a person bound by matrimonial commitment that privileges men. In marital relation women lose personal autonomy and become the mere attendants of their husbands' demands and whims.
3) Women are highly valued for their pivotal roles in the formation of a secured and wholesome society. Given such importance placed on women's contributions to society, they cannot be reduced to passive objects of desire that men can withhold or retrieve at their whim.	3) The divine maiden told her family of her decision to leave. She left peacefully, unimpeded by her grieving but respectful husband and children.	3) The supernatural wife returns to her natal world, leaving her mortal husband and children behind.	3) The swan maiden fled once she regained her prized possession. In many variants the deserted husband embarked on a journey to retrieve his wife.	3) Women are objects of sexual/ romantic desire pursued and possessed by men.

In the following discussion I examine these different depictions of gender relations found in the two stories to elucidate the relation between the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew and Khasi matriliny. I suggest that this relation is twofold. On the one hand, the legend encapsulates gender notions that underpin Khasi matriliny. The most salient among these notions is the idea that women are originators and preservers of lineages. Therefore, wife and mother are positions of authority pivotal to the survival of society rather than the socially sanctioned forms of female subordination. On the other hand, the legend justifies the matrilineal descent system by presenting it as heaven's mandate. The legend has it that the god of Shillong mountain decreed a progenitress, not a progenitor, to plant a semi-divine clan among human beings. Therefore, tracing descent through mother's line is justified, or even natural, since heaven grants that a new lineage is created via an ancestress.

I. The revered ancestress and the captured bride

A distinct motif that characterizes numerous variants of the swan maiden story is the theft of the maiden's prized possession. The swan maiden loses her wings, feather robe, or dress to her captor, who coerces or persuades her to become his wife. The scholars of swan maiden tales note that these prized possessions stand for the supernatural wife's autonomy and identity which she loses once she forms a relationship with a mortal man. Leavy posits that "the theft of the swan maiden's possession thus becomes a claim against her person; only when she retrieves what was lost can she assert autonomy" (1994, p. 40). Likewise, Carole Silver construes the theft of the swan maiden's possession as the domestication of her true, fantastical self. The swan maiden story, rather than a tragic tale of love and separation, portrays a forced marriage that rests on "the imbalanced power between sexes" (Silver, 1987, p. 284). Leavy and Silver seem to concur that as a wife, the captured swan maiden becomes an underling of her mortal husband.

Nonetheless, the legend of Ka Pasyntiew presents a different scenario of female autonomy. Ka Pahsyntiew is the divine progenitress decreed by heaven to empower the human race by marrying a mortal man and giving birth to strong and noble offspring. As such, she embodies two salient gender notions in the Khasi worldview: 1) women strengthen their communities via the roles of wife and mother and 2) these two female roles form the basis of matriarchal authority since they are pivotal to the continuation and security of society. Given the high value Khasi culture places on female generative power and matriarchal authority the culture allocates to wives and mothers, it would be unthinkable for Khasi talebearers to imagine, especially in a legend that validates matrilineal tradition, the helpless divine maiden being dragged into a forced marriage and turned into an underling of her mortal husband. Such portrayal would contradict Khasi matrilineal tradition, which holds that women hold an authoritative and esteemed status of the person who continues the bloodline and preserves the clan. As the divine ancestress whose story circulates in a matrilineal society, Ka

Pahsyntiew is notably different from the captured and subjugated swan maidens. She personifies matriarchal authority which has the basis in a distinct conception of wifehood and motherhood. Rather than a subordinate to her husband, a woman becomes the central figure in the welfare of her family and clan once she becomes wife and mother.

It is noteworthy that some swan maiden tales from patriarchal cultures account for the semi-divine origin of a tribe.[4] Like Ka Pahsyntiew, swan maidens in these tales are divine ancestresses. However, these narratives still figure the subjugated divine wife and her involuntarily submission to her captor as he seized her prized possession. Viewed in contrast to these tales of origin from patriarchal cultures, it is evident that the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew portrays female autonomy in a matrilineal society and not simply venerating the divine ancestress of a royal clan. Swan maidens are subject to male dominance even when they function as celestial mothers from whom royal houses descend. On the contrary, Ka Pahsyntiew is not simply heavenly wife and mother but the matriarch within the culture that highly values female functions in the safeguard of family and kin group. Considering the way in which Khasi culture enshrines wives and mothers, it is intelligible, if one adopts Khasi cultural perspective, that Ka Pahsyntiew is not relegated to an inferior position as a result of her marriage. The comparison reveals that swan maidens and Ka Pahsyntiew may mirror each other in all crucial aspects – they are both celestial maidens and their stories are passed on within their respective communities to account for the origin of a notable clan. Nonetheless, since they are divine ancestresses in the tales told and received in patriarchal and matrilineal societies respectively, their stories reflect distinct gender realities experienced by women within different social systems.

II. The female sage and the wretched housewife

Many swan maiden narratives give an account of the alienated divine wife. In these stories the captured swan maiden is poorly adjusted to her new status in the mundane world. Her failed assimilation is caused by 1) the acute and persistent yearning for her natal realm, 2) her aversion to banal life among human beings and domestic drudgery, and 3) the abuse and exploitation of the captured swan maiden, either by her mortal spouse or his people. These three elements, found either separately in different tales or in cluster in a single tale,

[4] Swan maiden as divine ancestress appears in the origin myths of several Mongolian tribes, such as the Buryats and the Dörbed (Bayer & Stuart, 1992, pp. 326-327). The Ainu of Japan, according to Hatto, also "trace descent from a swan mother" (1961, p. 337). The Bantiks, an indigenous tribe of the Celebes Islands, pass on the tale of a swan maiden who was captured while bathing with her seven companions and consequently became their ancestress (Hartland, 1891, p. 193). The royal lines of Ternate and Tidore in eastern Indonesia also claim to be the progeny of a swan maiden (Tuzin, 1997, p. 75).

stress the swan maiden's demoted status. The union with a mortal man is, to a certain extent, her downfall. The divine wife is no longer divine as she loses her fantastical self and becomes an ordinary housewife in the male-dominated world.

The legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, on the contrary, portrays the well-assimilated divine maiden revered by the human community that takes her in. In lieu of forced detention on earth and marriage coercion, the legend presents the deferential community and the dutiful divine maiden who cooperate with one another to fulfil heaven's mandate. In the version retold by Nongkynrih (2007, pp. 73-79), Ka Pahsyntiew revealed her true identity and the reason she came to earth to U Sati – her foster father. Then the respectful U Sati disclosed to the council of elders Ka Pahsyntiew's divine status and mission, which led to the search of a bachelor worthy to be the goddess's husband followed by their grand wedding. In this version of the legend, Ka Pahsyntiew's union with a mortal man is a communal concern since it is conducive to collective well-being and the betterment of the human race. Such union is intended by heaven to plant a clan of demigods on earth via the female generative power exercised by the divine maiden. Via this portrayal, the legend both expresses and justifies the gender notions that underpin Khasi matriliny. On the one hand, the legend presents matriliny as heaven's mandate rather than a convention invented by men. The legend has it that the god of Shillong mountain sent not a male but female deity to start a royal clan. In this manner the legend claims the sacred origin of matrilineal descent by attributing it to a deity. On the other hand, the legend illustrates the notion that marriage is a means of strengthening one's community and women are the central figure in this because it is women who produce offspring and fulfil the ultimate goal of marriage. In this scenario, marriage does not lead to the downfall of the divine maiden but to her acquisition of another venerated status, namely that of the ancestress whose generative power strengthens the society.

While the swan maiden in several tales suffers domestic drudgery and the banal life as a housewife, Ka Pahsyntiew enjoys reverence and privilege that a female sage is entitled to receive from the community benefited by her wisdom. In the versions recounted by Rafy (1920) and Barman (2016), Ka Pahsyntiew was brought up by U Sati and his wife since the goddess appeared at cave Marai as a young girl. She grew into a maiden of exceptional beauty and talent. She led all communal dances and festivals. She initiated the Virgins' Dance, which evolved into the Khasi custom of having only virgins in festive and ceremonial dances. Out of respect for Ka Pahsyntiew's good judgment and wisdom, the community consulted her on the issues pertaining to village administration. People also turned to her to settle unresolved disputes. Holding her in high regard, they called Ka Pahsyntiew *Ka Siem*, meaning the chieftess or the queen.

To appreciate the imprints of Khasi matriliny on the legend, I place Ka Pahsyntiew in contrast to the swan maiden. Both are heavenly females marrying into a human community. Nonetheless, Ka Pahsyntiew is the central figure in the security and progress of her earthly family and community. Via her procreative function the semi-divine progeny are produced. By virtue of her knowledge and wisdom the community becomes more civil and righteous. The legend construes female virtues, personified by Ka Pahsyntiew, as the cornerstone of a strong and wholesome society. This representation tallies with Khasi matriliny that places primary importance on female roles in the consolidation of lineage and the kinship group that I have outlined in the previous section. Khasi women, just like Ka Pahsyntiew, are valued by their culture as the bearers of the vital duty upon which the security of society is predicated. Swan maiden tales from patriarchal societies, on the contrary, espouse a different outlook on female tasks and roles. The Melanesian bird woman, whom I mentioned earlier, toiled away in her husband's garden only to be chided by his brothers. The bird wife, having lost her wings and power, could only weep in despair. Likewise, the swan maiden in a Java story managed to produce ample meals from a small measure of rice that her husband gave. She made him promise not to look into the pot while rice was cooking. Her husband, however, broke the taboo. As a result, the swan maiden lost the power that had enabled her to produce food via magical means and was obliged to toil away in the kitchen just like ordinary women. Sick of domestic drudgery, she flew away once she found her magic dress lying at the bottom of an empty rice barrel (Dixon, 1916, p. 209). In these stories, wifehood and housework are a burden and constraint to the captured swan maiden. They are the markers of her demoted status and the lesser person she has become once she marries a mortal man. Female tasks and functions in these tales are not vital contributions conducive to a thriving and secured society. Instead, they are services that wives in a male-dominated culture owe their husbands.

III. The object of worship and the object of desire

In many swan maiden stories, a new sequence of events begins after the swan maiden escapes. The deserted husband plays the leading role in the new narrative sequence that focuses on the adventure that the hero takes in pursuit of his wife. The hunter in a European swan maiden story followed his wife to the land East of the sun, West of the moon. To reunite with his wife, the hero was subject to a test. The king – the swan maiden's father – demanded that he correctly identifies his wife among her sisters. All of them look exactly alike in their robes of feather (Jacobs, 1916, pp. 98-105). On the one hand, the hero's pursuit of his swan wife denotes his loyalty and unwavering affection for her. On the other hand, it reveals that the swan wife is the hero's object of desire that he strives to win and keep her in his possession regardless of her opinion. In fact, the sexual attraction he feels towards her sets the stage for the story. The hunter in the abovementioned story, finding the seven swan

maidens "[…] all beautiful. But of them all the youngest and smallest pleased most the hunter's eyes" (ibid, p.98), seized the dress of the targeted maiden thereby compelling her to marry him. The hunter's theft of the swan maiden's garment and his resolute pursuit of her portray a marital relationship characterized by passivity and the lack of autonomy on the wife's part vis-à-vis possessiveness and egocentricity on the husband's part. In this relationship, the swan wife is the object of romantic/sexual desire that her mortal husband wins by force, loses, and eventually retrieves after a tenacious pursuit.

Ka Pahsyntiew, unlike the swan maiden in the aforementioned tale, did not escape. Neither was she pursued and then retrieved by her husband. All versions of the legend I examine in this paper agree that Ka Pahsyntiew simply told her family of her fulfilled mission on earth and her intent to leave, which they accepted with respect in spite of utmost grief. She then went into Krem Marai and disappeared. Her serene, unimpeded return to the upper world at the end of the story gives a clue to the intended function of the legend. The main point of the legend lies not in the romantic love or marital relationship between Ka Pahsyntiew and her husband, but in the contributions made by the god-appointed progenitress to a human community. Therefore, the motifs that cast the divine maiden as the object of sexual/romantic desire acquired by force and then retrieved by a tenacious pursuit have no place in the legend. Such motifs, if included, would turn a narrative that heralds a divine ancestress and validates matrilineal descent system into a story about a problematic relationship between a captured divine wife and her possessive husband.

As the progenitress who was sent to fulfill heaven's mandate, Ka Pahsyntiew is presented in the legend as the object of worship rather than the object of desire. Her temporary residence on earth followed by her peaceful departure at the end of the story are not subject to her husband's control or intervention because they are parts of the divine mission decreed by heaven. In this respect, Ka Pahsyntiew's relationship with her mortal husband stands in stark contrast to that between the swan maiden and her captor. While the swan maiden is the prized possession obtained by force and then jealously guarded by her captor, Ka Pahsyntiew is the god-appointed ancestress and her mortal husband an instrument that helps her complete the divine plan. This representation is culturally meaningful as it reiterates gender roles stipulated by Khasi matrilineal tradition. As I have outlined in the previous section, Khasi matriliny entrusts the pivotal tasks of maintaining a clan to women, especially to the youngest daughter who inherits the ancestral house. Men, either as brothers and maternal uncles in their own clans or as husbands and fathers in their wives' clans, also play vital roles in these pivotal tasks but as supporters rather than masters of their women folk. The legend reflects the esteemed status of Khasi women, who, like Ka Pahsyntiew, bear the sacred duty of creating robust lineages and laying the foundation of a strong society. The narrative also mirrors the supporting roles that the matrilineal tradition

assigns to Khasi men, represented by U Sati and Ka Pahsyntiew's husband who help her fulfil heaven's decree. Evidently, the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew bears the imprints of Khasi matriliny. It also validates the tradition via the representation of a scenario in which a woman bears heaven's mandate to uphold the society by her virtues and generative power, while men are relegated to supporting roles.

Conclusion: Interpreting the Absence

Examined in contrast to diverse variants of the swan maiden tale, the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew reveals gender notions that underpin Khasi matriliny. This comparative analysis also casts light on various possible alterations that Khasi talebearers could have made to the legend but did not. In all variants of the legend that I examined in this paper, Ka Pahsyntiew never appears as a helpless divine maiden held hostage on earth by her husband. Neither has she ever been presented as the wretched housewife or the target of her husband's controlling, possessive love. The absence of these motifs, which loom large in many swan maiden tales, could be simply attributed to Ka Pahsyntiew's status as the divine progenitress. However, many swan maidens play the same role. Their stories have been told to explain the semi-divine origin of a notable clan. Still, these swan maidens are portrayed as powerless and vulnerable at the hands of their mortal husbands. The motifs that portray female subordination are absent from the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew but constitute many swan maiden tales that fulfil the same function within their respective home cultures. Considering such absence in light of similarities of function and narrative pattern between the Khasi legend and multiple variants of the swan maiden story, I attribute such notable absence to the distinct socio-cultural environment that shapes Khasi talebearers' constructions and modifications of the legend.

To make sense of this absence I return to Leavy's idea, mentioned earlier in this paper, that variation in a narrative pattern indicates what is culturally meaningful and what is not for the people who pass on a particular tale. If we grant that the swan maiden story and the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew are different elaborations of the same narrative pattern – the one that figures a divine female who marries a mortal, lives with him on earth, and then returns to her natal realm – the motifs absent from Ka Pahsyntiew's story but characterizing many swan maiden tales shed light on what is unimaginable or culturally unviable for Khasi talebearers. Female subordination as a normative aspect of gender relations has no place in the legend, because in reality Khasi women hold an esteemed status sanctioned by matrilineal tradition. Even in Khasi tales that portray the female ordeal, such ordeal is attributed to the vanity or wickedness of the husband and not to the male-dominated culture that justifies men's

superiority over women.[5] A narrative pattern is fleshed out and transformed into the story of female subordination and "the imbalanced power between sexes" (Silver, 1987, p.284) when told and received in patriarchal societies. It, however, becomes the legend that heralds female generative power and virtues as the cornerstone of a wholesome society when passed on among the people who practice matrilineal customs. The imprints of Khasi matriliny on the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew can be made apparent via an inquiry into the pattern of recurring and omitted motifs that cuts across different variants of the legend.

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[5] For example, in the story of the sun goddess and the peacock discussed earlier, the peacock's vanity and unfaithfulness upset his divine wife. Yet she is a powerful deity and he a vain peacock. The tale portrays female superiority via the goddess's exalted status and virtues, which stand in stark contrast to her husband's conceit and folly.

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