GENDER STUDY IN KHURKHUL: BASE ON ITS PROVERBS

LOURIYAM BEBICA DEVI*

*EFL Department, Tezpur University, Assam, India

Abstract

The study of the relationship between the language and the society is the primary aim of the sociolinguistics study. This paper aims at exploring and analysing Khurkhul proverbs limited on ‘gender’ from a sociolinguistic perspective. The study of proverbs gives a sight of how the Khurkhul society conceptualises ‘gender’; its culture, its belief that relates to its view on ‘gender’. Khurkhul is an endangered Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Khurkhul village, Manipur. This is the first attempt to carry out a research on proverbs of Khurkhul in the field of linguistics.

Keywords: Gender, Proverbs, Metaphor, Khurkhul

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach is applied in this study. It consists of the sources of data, research design, and the process how the data is analyzed.

- Date collection: the primarily source of data comes from the native speakers of Khurkhul who are between the 70-90 years of ages, and partially from the present author of the paper, who happens to be a native speaker. They are the people who are not (less) contact with other language speakers, especially standard variety. Part of the data comes from secondary sources.
- Research design: interview, group discussion, and observation are the key method of research design.
- Data analysis: the collected data is analyzed within the framework that ‘linguistics structure influence social structure’ and vise versa (e.g., Wardhaugh, Gumperz)

Introduction

Khurkhul is spoken by the inhabitants of the Khurkhul village. McCulloch (1980) writes the language of Khurkhul as Khooreekool Shan language. However, at the present context, this language no longer exists. They believed that the only context where the word san is used in one of its holly song called hoi laoba (shouting hoi).
Vocalist/Singer: *ibungo koubru asukpa*
Choir: *san nasi san*
Vocalist/Singer: *Poirei khunda hanba –o*
Choir: *San nasi san*
Vocalist/Singer: *Charik mapal thariba*
Choir: *San nasi san*

The current language is a variety of meiteilon. Thus it comes under the Kuki-Chin language family. It is also endangered due to frequent contact with other languages especially standard variety. It is the oldest generation who use it in all the domains, while the majority of younger generation use standard variety. The current research is done on the spoken form of Khurkhul use by the native speakers who is between 70-90 years of ages, who are not (less) in contact with standard variety (or any other language).

**Geographical and Historical account of Khurkhul**

Khurkhul is located in Imphal west-1, district of Manipur, one of the nine districts of the state of Manipur in the north-eastern India. It is 15/16 km from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. It is in the northern side of the valley in the West of Imphal Dimapur Road. The entire village is divided into *Awang Leikai* (North locality) and *Makha Leikai* (South locality). They are again divided into sub *leikais* (localities). Silk rearing is the most important occupation next to the rice cultivation in Khurkhul.

According to 2011 population Census, the Khurkhul village has 6450 of which 3300 are males while 3150 are female (which includes the present author). Khurkhul has higher literacy rate compared to Manipur. In 2011, the literacy rate of Khurkhul was 78.16% compared to 76.94% of Manipur.

The Khurkhuls come under the community called Chakpa *Loi*. The *Lois* is classified as Schedule Castes in Manipur. The population distribution of Manipur is such that the valley is inhabited by the meiteis, the majority group, whereas the surrounding hills are inhabited by the various hill tribes. And the *Lois* are spread about thirty villages located in the foot hills. They thus live between the meiteis in the valley and the tribes on the hills.
The origin of Khurkhul

There is no written record of how Khurkhuls began to inhabit in the Khurkhul village. However, there are many oral stories are passed on generation to generation through oral. The following are some of the examples

- Khurkhuls are believed to be descendents of those people who came out from a leikhun (cave) that is behind the Ichum Lairembi Temple. According to this oral story, when one dies, he comes back home after five days of burial. Thus, one day, a mother in law instructed her daughter in law to keep warm water ready as her husband is coming back from the cave. Her daughter in law was supposed to pour the water on him. However, she fainted when she saw her father in law who stood in their courtyard carrying his coffin. This embarrasses her father in law and he went back to the cave. After this incident, Yendrembam sagei (Yendrembam lineage) close the cave for the safety of children and women folk. According to this story, Yendrembam sagei (Yendrembam lineage) is the first lineage who inhabited in the Khurkhul village.

![Image: (i) the descendents of caveman, and (ii) Ichum Lairembi Temple.](image)

- Khurkhuls are believed to be descendents of the people who came from Kabo. According to this story, the Khurkhul inhabitants are of the decedent of fifteen Kabo slaves and fifteen slaves of Moirang Princess Thoibi who came with Thoibi when she was exiled from Moirang to Kabo as she refused to marry Nongbal (in the epic of Khamba Thoibi). When she was called back from Kabo by her father, the chief of Kabo presented her fifteen slaves to be her dowry. These fifteen slaves and other fifteen slaves of Thoibi’s from Moirang proceed on their journey throwing an egg. This egg was broken at the location of Ichum Lairembi temple, since then they began to settle there (Lairen lakpam, 2002: 16).
One of the evidence that supports this story is that like those Kabos who search a place to settle by throwing an egg, Khurkhul practices a ritual in which an egg is thrown to find the burial place. The death body is buried where the egg is broken (Louriyam, 2004). Though there are many of such oral stories of the original inhabitants of Khurkhul, the exact origin is not known.

The relation between language and society

The relationship between the language and the society is the primary aim of sociolinguistic study. Many linguists and scholars have propagated the influence of social structure on linguistic structure and the influence of linguistic structure on social structure (e.g., Wardhaugh, 2001, Gumperz, 1971).

Proverb is the knowledge that a group of people earned through many experiences in their live. Later such experiences are set down as a kind of rule of their society, in the form of language. Such knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. Thus, proverb carries how a particular community views the world, its culture, its belief and so on. Mieder rightly says, “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder, 1985: 119, 1993: 24, quoted by Mieder 2004:3).

Proverbs are an essential part of the society of Khurkhul. They influenced in individual, family, and the whole village. The proverbs furnish the sight how Khurkhuls view the world, its culture, its belief and so on. The ‘concept of gender’ in the Khurkhul society is not an exception, many of its proverbs signified how Khurkhul conceptualised ‘gender’. The notion of gender and its roles in its social structure is noted in many of the proverbs.

The study of Gender base on its proverbs

The term “gender” is originally a grammatical term, which denotes whether an entity is a male or female or neuter (gender). Many people often tend to use sex and gender interchangeably; however, they are different notions. According to Holmes (2013), sex is a biological category which distinguishes biological characters, while gender is distinguished by people’s socio-cultural behaviour which encompasses speech. For instance, the fact that men have lots of hair on their chests and women don’t is due their difference in sexes.
(biological characters), and the fact that women wear lipsticks and men don’t marks the difference in their gender.

In Khurkhul, ‘biological sex’ is the medium to determine whether a child is a male or female. For instance, if a child is born with a man’s sex organ, he is a male; if the child is born with a woman’s sex organ, she is a female. In case of + human, the suffix –a is used to denote male, and the suffix –i to denote female. For example

- nupa ‘man’
- nupi ‘woman’
- əhəibə ‘knowledgeable man’
- əhəibi ‘knowledgeable woman’.

However, in most of the animal nouns the lexical term-labə is used to denote male, and -əmom is used to denote female. For examples,

- hui labə ‘male dog’
- sən labə ‘ox’
- sən əmom ‘cow’.

In the Khurkhul society, the presence of a male child is considered obligatory. If there is no male child in a family it is called sagei mutpa (the extinct of linage).

Some of the Khurkhul proverbs are analysed in this paper in order to understand the concept of gender in the Khurkhul society. For examples,

- əwa nuŋai piba pʰəm nət-te
  sorrow happy male child position no-NEG
  Sorrow and happiness is not in male position. (Literal)

This proverb means that both sorrow and happiness are not permanent. If they come, they also go.

In the Khurkhul society, only the male child has a permanent identity, i.e. his father’s sagei (lineage). He is given this identity the moment he is born, and it remains unchanged till his death. However, the female child, unlike her male counterpart, has no permanent sagei (lineage): before marriage she is dependent on her father, and then on her husband.

Thus, this proverb, which uses piba (male) to metaphorically mean permanence, indirectly shows that the Khurkhul society is rather a patriarchal society. So it is considered necessary to have male child in their families.
nupa-lɔi-tə-rə-di  sagai-mut-le  
male-be (exist)-NEG-PERF-if  lineage-extinct-ASP  
nupi-lɔi-tə-rə-di  pʰʉŋka-mai-mut-le  
female-be (exist)-NEG-PERF-if  hearth-fire-off-ASP

If there is no male the lineage is extinct, if there is no female the fire of hearth is off.

(Literal)

The term *mutpa* means two things i.e. ‘extinct’ and ‘light off’. In this proverb it is noticed that the meaning ‘extinct’ which is permanent loss associates with the absence of male, whereas another meaning ‘light off’ which is temporal loss is associated with the absence of female.

The two meanings of the term *mutpa* are metaphorically used to denote that in the Khurkhul society it is obligatory to have a male child in order to continue its descendents. It is only the male child who is eligible to carry or inherits the *sagei* (lineage) which is the identity of its group. Thus, this proverb means that the fire in the hearth can get lit by any one, but *sagei* (lineage) can continue only by the male child.

*əlu  mat’el  nupi-gi  sagai*

potato variety  woman-GEN  lineage

The lineage of woman is like the variety of potato. (Literal)

This proverb means that woman has no independent *sagei* (lineage) i.e. identity. She is known by her father’s *sagei* (lineage) until she is married to her husband. Once she is married, she is known by her husband’s *sagei* (lineage). If she keeps on marrying different husbands, she keeps on changing it. Her identity depends on male either her father or husband throughout her life.

Potato is used metaphorically to give the connotation of a woman’s ‘lack/temporal identity’ in the Khurkhul society. The potato is the only vegetable that can cook with any other vegetables, meat, and fish etc. It absorbs in to the curry, and becomes a part of the curry. In a similar way, woman can belong to any *sagei* (lineage), she can keep shifting from one to another. Like the potato, she has to merge herself into the *sagei* (lineage) of her husband.

*məwa-tak-tə-na  səmtən-kək-pə*

her husband-inform-NEG-ADV  hair end-cut-NZR
Women involving into something (work) without informing her husband. (Literal)
This proverb means that a wife is supposed to live under the supervision of her husband. She ought to take permission on anything she does either it is small or big. If she did not, she is considered to be disobedient and disrespectful wife. For instance, in most of the society it is very normal for woman to cut her hair end. However, in some societies like the Khurkhul society, due to the authority husband has over his wife, she is viewed as disobedient and disrespectful wife.

The authority a man has over his wife is metaphorically denoted in this proverb by using the ‘act of cutting hair end’. This is one of the usual things one can do, but the restriction imposed on such acts shows the authority a man has over his wife.

Male is the sole hirer of the property of the father. Thus, one of the prime reasons of this authority over the woman by the man is the economic condition. The woman depends on man throughout her life economically. She depends on her father, then husband, and son

- iwamarə-nok-na-ca-i
  my husband wealth-laugh-ADV-eat-ASP
- ica-məaran-kəp-na-ca-i
  my son/child-wealth-cry-ADV-eat-ASP

Husband’s earning is used without restriction, son’s earning is not. (Literal)
This proverb means that a wife uses the earning of her husband as if her own money, whereas in case of her son, she cannot.

The ‘act of eating on her husband and sons’ earning’ metaphorically denotes her dependency on them economically. In the Khurkhul society a husband is expected to give his earning in the hand of his wife. She uses the earning without restriction. Whereas, her son’s earning is given to his wife, so, she cannot use it freely.

This proverb shows a special bond between a husband and a wife, however, it is also observed that the woman is never independent economically. There is always a male figure who is the owner of the economy.

In the Khurkhul society, when one talks of gender, it is either male or female. However, Khurkhul created two kinds of females in the society. One is mou (affinal woman) and another is ningol (consequineal woman). The mou (affinal woman) is seen as a threat to the harmony of the family, whereas, the ningol (consequineal woman) is seen as a blessing. Some of proverbs is analysed below to understand how these two kinds of female are viewed in the society. For examples,
It is not the son but the daughter in law who looks after the parents. (Literal)

This proverb indicates a contrast notion of its social structure i.e., it is the son who looks after the parents. According to this proverb, literally it is the daughter in law who looks after her husband’s parents. For instance, the son can only provide them financial help, but the rest of the needs like what they eat, wear and so on are look by the daughter in law. Thus, what is brought might be done by the son, but what is served is done by the daughter in law.

‘Stomach’ is metaphorically used to denote the meaning of ‘care’ in this proverb. The stomach feels full when it is fill with food, in a similar way the parents feel satisfy and happy when the daughter in law takes care of them well.

In this proverb it is observed that though affinal woman is considered as a threat to the harmony of the family, the society acknowledges its importance too.

The male cannot be happy if the conseguineal woman cry at her family of orientation. (Literal)

The proverb means that conseguineal woman is to be treated affectionately in her *family of orientation*. According to the social norm it is the male child who inherits both the property and the *sagei* (lineage) of the father. On the other hand, after the marriage, the female child began to keep distance socially, economically, and physically from the *family of orientation*. For example,

she is prohibited to hold night in her *family of orientation* if it is not emergency, she is considered impolite if she visits there frequently etc.

This kind of social norm where the daughter is not given the property, *sagei* (lineage) and expected to maintain least contact with her *orientated family* might create a situation where her connection to the family is ignored especially by the affinal woman. So, in order to prevent from such situation, this proverb reminds that the conseguenal woman should be treated affectionately with respect as she is always a part of the family.
The ‘tear’ is metaphorically used to denote the emotional state of consanguineal woman, as one sheds a tear when she is upset, and one gets upset when ill treated.

- nupa-di-təra-gi-ŋəm man-TOP -ten-GEN-owner
  nupi-məŋ-ənisuhəide
  woman-TOP graveyard-taboo to reach two graveyard

Man is the owner of ten, but it is tabooed for woman to have more than one husband. (Literal)

This proverb means that the Khurkhul society permits polygamy system of marriage, but polyandry system of marriage is prohibited.

‘Graveyard’ is metaphorically mean sagei (lineage) in this proverb. In one of the ritual related to death ceremony, lu (a part of forehead) is buried according to his sagei (lineage).

Each sagei (lineage) has its own place to bury it.

When a woman changes her sagei (lineage) by marrying different man, it means she is changing the place to bury her lu (a part of forehead).

Thus, the number of graveyard is metaphorically used to denote the number of marriage. Another word which is observed in this proverb is ‘owner’. It shows that in the Khurkhul society, husband is seen as the owner of his wife. Thus, they can say nupi louba (taking wife), but they do not say nupada lieba (staying to husband).

So, from this proverb it is noticed that the Khurkhul society might allow polygamy but not polyandry.

- nupa-nə-ŋəm-də-bə-nupi-lai-te
  man-NOM-can-NEG-NZR-woman-be (exist)-NEG
  nupi-nə-ŋəm-də-bə-nupa-lai-te
  woman-NOM-can-NEG-NZR-woman-be (exist)-NEG

  Both man and woman depend on each other. (Literal)

This proverb means that it is not only woman who depends on man but man also depends on woman.

The word ngamba (can/win over) is metaphorically meant to denote that though it is a patriarchy system of society, woman is given its space both affinal and consanguineal woman. Male child is considered more important but the female child is not ignored either.
Conclusion

The proverbs in the above examples enable to observe that the Khurkhul society practices a patriarchy system in which male child is considered the sole eligible to inherit the sagei (lineage) of his father. Man has authority over woman but her importance is also not denied. Woman is economically dependent, however, she is also given the liberty to use her husband’s earning as she wishes. Thus, the Khurkhul society is a patriarchy society in which the role of woman is also acknowledge. It needs further studies since it is the first attempt.

Abbreviation
NEG: Negation Marker
PERF: Perfect
ASP: Aspect
GEN: Genitive case
ADV: Adverb
NZR: Nominalizer
NOM: Nominative case
LOC: Locative
TOP: Topicalization

References