

The Construction Of Gender Identity Through Material Culture: Khasi Perspective

Dr. Roplynedo Lyngdoh

Department Of Cultural And Creative Studies, Nehu, Shillong, Meghalaya

Abstract:

The background to this perception of gender is the distinction drawn by the social sciences during the 1970s between gender as a social construct and sex as a biological given. In general, gendered analyses in the humanities and social sciences sees gender as a social construction responding to socially perceived differences between people's bodies, differences commonly categorized as variations upon male and female. A focus on 'gender' can provide a powerful means of exploring how identity is formed at different times and within various contexts. In particular, we can use gender to look towards fundamental aspects of how identities change and negotiated. Identity refers to many different dimensions of the person and/or social groups, and its usage. In gender construction, identity refers to a range of specific dimensions of the person and his/her associated practices. Gender identity, for instance, often has a distinct relationship to the ageing process of the individual. Gender is always deeply involved in socio-cultural and religious life of the people. However, the role of material culture in the construction and performance of gender identity is through objects identified differently as male and female objects. Articulation of objects can be studied through socio-cultural and religious practices of the particular groups of people. For instance, in the Khasi traditional and religious practices, identification of ritual objects for male and female is done right from the time a child is born. These objects are consecrated during the naming ceremony performs by the family and remained to be identified as male or female objects throughout their lifespan. The paper will focus on the role and significance of objects and gender identity articulated through the study of material culture and gender.

Keywords: Material culture, gender identity, objects, male, female, ceremony

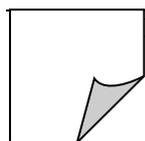
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I. Introduction

Material culture is one of the broad sectors of folklore and folklife which is visible rather than aural. This aspect includes concerns about traditional techniques of house constructions in tradition-oriented societies; concerns about variety of cultural aspects of life ranging from clothes the folk people wear, the food they eat, occupation they engaged in, and the skill of manufacturing tools and implements etc. In general parlance, however, the term 'material culture' emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity. Traditionally, however, the term material culture used to designate the interconnection of tangible human made forms as indicator of cultural ideas and traditions.

Material culture is, chiefly, something portable and perceptible by touch and therefore has a physical, material existence that is one component of human cultural practice. The term 'material culture' is often used in conjunction with 'things', 'objects', 'artefacts', 'goods', 'commodities' and, more recently, 'actants'. Material culture often refers to social relations among people mediated by objects, and therefore, involves connections to social systems in cultures. By studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning. A primary assertion of material culture is that objects have the ability to signify things – or establish social meanings – on behalf of people, or do 'social work', though this culturally communicative capacity should not be automatically assumed. Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, participation in a leisure activity, or social status. Furthermore, objects become incorporated into, and represent, wider social discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in norms and social institutions. In a complimentary fashion, objects also carry personal and emotional meanings; they can facilitate interpersonal interactions and assist a person to act upon him or herself. Objects can also assist in forming or negating interpersonal and group attachments, mediating the formation of self-identity and esteem, and integrating and differentiating social groups, classes or tribes.



By gender we mean the culturally and socially constructed difference between men and women that varies from place to place and time to time. It is a socio-cultural term referring socially to the defined roles and behaviours assigned to 'males' and 'females' in a given society. In the social and cultural aspects, gender is seen as a function of power relationship between men and women where men are considered superior to women. While defining the term gender, Bottigheimer writes that-'gender denotes the assignment of characteristics associated with masculinity or femininity. As a community category, it provides pre-defined and pre-ordained spheres of activity, modes of dress, forms of deference, expectations about behavior, and even parameters of design, for even architecture is subject to fundamental divisions of space into gender-defined areas' (Bottigheimer,1999).

The background to this perception of gender is the distinction drawn by the social sciences during the 1970s between gender as a social construct and sex as a biological given. In folklore, gender is expressed in interpersonal, familial and communal behaviour; public and private ritual; speech and song; food ways; costume; religious and other forms of belief and the like. Categories of gender are culturally defined, shaped and imbued with significance and sets of expectations. Gender, therefore, is a central organising category for experience; it emerges at various times and in various situations as a salient marker by which people identify themselves. In general, gendered analyses in the humanities and social sciences sees gender as a social construction responding to socially perceived differences between people's bodies, differences commonly categorized as variations upon male and female and their roles in the society. Based on these social construct responses, a focus on 'gender' can provide a powerful means of exploring how identity is formed at different times and within various contexts. In particular, we can use gender to look towards fundamental aspects of how identities change and negotiate.

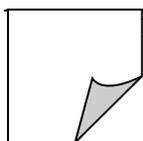
Identity refers to many different dimensions of the person and/or social groups, and its usage. Identities are meanings attributed to the self as an individual or group, male and female etc. Identity of a person is manifested through roles and behaviours, dress and ornaments, language, food, and even objects. These attributes reflect the gender identity of a person in the society. Gender identity is related to biological sex, cognitive development and cultural expectations. Further, societal factors such as norms about what constitutes the ideal male and female that are transmitted through language, religion or the educational system are important in the formation of one's gender identity. In gender construction, identity refers to a range of specific dimensions of the person and his/her associated practices. Gender identity, for instance, often has a distinct relationship to the ageing process of the individual. Gender is always deeply involved in the socio-cultural and religious life of the people.

As said in the previous paragraph, an identity or for that matter gender identity is manifested through different attributes of a person and the objects he/she use, the paper seeks to explain the significance of objects (as part of material culture) in relation to gender identity and identify these objects in terms of gender identity in the Khasi society.

II. Identifying Of Objects As Markers Of Gender Identity

Material culture plays a significant role in the construction of gender identity in any given society. In the Khasi society, objects are identified differently as male and female objects. Objects are the material things people encounter, interact with and use. They are commonly spoken of as material culture. The term 'material culture' emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity. Traditionally, however, the term material culture used to designate the interconnection of tangible human made forms as indicator of cultural ideas and traditions. Material culture often refers to social relations among people mediated by objects, and therefore, involves connections to social systems in cultures. By studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning. A primary assertion of material culture is that objects have the ability to signify things or establish social meanings on behalf of people. Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, participation in a leisure activity, or social status. Furthermore, objects become incorporated into, and represent, wider social discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in norms and social institutions. In a complimentary fashion, objects also carry personal and emotional meanings; they can facilitate interpersonal interactions and assist a person to act upon him or herself. Objects can also assist in forming or negating interpersonal and group attachments, mediating the formation of self-identity and esteem, and integrating and differentiating social groups, classes or tribes.

Let us now turn to the question of what roles objects as material culture has in the construction of gender identity. In any society, material culture was seen as essentially a reflection of various social concerns and qualities while objects as part of material culture were seen as reflections or marker of gender identity. While explaining the relationship between material and gender identity, Sorensen writes that "material culture



was still used as an essentially passive component of gender construction, seeing objects as the outward sign or representation of gender roles rather than as partners to the production of gendered meaning" (Sørensen 2007: 78). In any society, gender construction is not only seen and perceives through intangible attributes such as role and behaviours but also exist in tangible aspect as seen in material culture through the use of objects. Hence, material culture plays a significant role in the construction of gender identity of the people.

In the Khasi practice, almost every object denotes gender that is an object is identified as male and female object although both sexes may use it. The identification of object as male and female in the Khasi context has find a place of use both in the social and religious life. The articulation of such objects can be seen through customs and practices perform in different occasions and events including the life cycle ritual performances. For instance, in the naming ceremony performed after childbirth, certain objects are consecrated for the identification of the gender of the child.

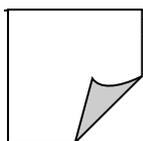
The naming ceremony is an important rite of incorporation in many cultures. It is one of the important ceremonies, which form a conjunction between man's social and religious life. The naming ceremony also has a community dimension, represented by the wider circle of family and friends. The name giving ceremony conferred upon the child the status of being a member of the family and some rights of inheritance. It is an excellent occasion for cultural expression- joy, hope and acceptance. It is therefore a special and unique occasion for every one which takes place in every society according to different cultures. The naming ceremony is also a socio-religious ceremony which is connected with the performances of some rites and rituals.

Amongst the Khasis, the name giving ceremony is known as *Ka Jer khun* or *Ka Jer ka thoh*. This ceremony has been embedded in their socio-cultural and religious life since time immemorial and is passed on from generation to generation. In earlier times, this ceremony is done in a simple way in which a baby is named immediately after birth in the morning or before noon. Thus, in order to secure the baby in the family and the recognition as such, the name giving ceremony is conducted. By giving a name to a child it also means to secure his or her identity and also to connect with the faith and religion in which he or she was born.

The naming ceremony is compulsory, firstly, when a name is given to a child, it is believed that the name would protect the child from negative influences. Secondly, a name would also enhance *ka mgiew* or the essence of the child that the protective forces would be enhanced and gradually build up the inner personality force and strengthen the mind and the body as the child grows up. When a child is born, a sharp splinter of bamboo cuts the umbilical cord. The child is then bathed in hot water from a red earthen pot and the same pot should be used till the umbilical cord being tied falls off. The ceremony is held at home in the inner part called *ka rympei*. The one who conducted or performed is the maternal uncle or any elderly person who knows to perform the rites and rituals.

The naming ceremony is accompanied by some meaningful objects known as *u klong* (gourd), *u prah* (bamboo winnower) and *ka 'laliar* (plantain leaf). In the evening of the day a child is born, fermented rice is prepared and some females are invited to come and pound the rice in a mortar into flour (Gurdon 1907). The rice should be given by *Ka Meikha* (father's mother) or the paternal kith and kin. This pounded rice called *u pujer-puthoh* is placed on a bamboo winnower and mixed it with water or rice beer and is placed in a gourd for the purpose of marking in the feet of the paternal as well as the maternal relatives. It is important to note that there are some ritual objects that are placed near the child of both the sexes. If the child is a boy, they place near him a bow and three arrows (the implements of a Khasi warrior); for a girl, they place *ka khoh* (a conical basket), *u star* (a cane head strap) and *ka waitbnoh* (a *dao* or a slashing knife) (Lyngdoh 1991). But in the present times, because of the importance of education, a book and a pen are added to be placed near a boy or a girl child. The objects mentioned above particularly for a boy and a girl child are considered as the markers of gender identity which can be studied and understood through their roles and significance in the life of the Khasi people.

All the materials placed in the ceremonial altar would be mentioned in the words of prayers to invoke the blessings of God the Creator for the good conduct of the baby. These ritual objects convey a deeper meaning in the Khasi context. The objects chosen for a boy symbolizes the ideal man as a warrior, a protector and a hunter. The first arrow is to guard himself, the second arrow is to protect the family and clan and the third arrow is to protect the race and the territorial integrity of the village. The bow and arrow is considered to be the life-long companion of the male member signifying bravery and manhood as a responsible uncle *U Kñi* in his mother's home, as a guide and mentor to his nephews and nieces and as *U Kpa balah baiai* the bread earner in his children's home. The bow and arrows also plays a very significant role in the Khasi traditional dances as items of dancing attires in which male dancers hang on their backs while dancing. The attachment of the bow and arrows with male attributes in the Khasi society does not ends only when the person is alive, rather continues to in connection even at death. That means the performance of death rituals is considered incomplete without the use of bow and arrows. As is the custom, when a person (male) dies, three arrows are shot towards the north, the south and the west directions at the cremation ground. The Khasis believe that these arrows will protect the soul



of the dead person and shooting of arrows means to flee the evil spirits so that the dead man's soul will reach peacefully to the house of God.

On the other hand, the objects used for a girl child during the naming ceremony are a conical basket, a head-strap and a *dao* as mentioned above. These objects are an indication of a woman's role in the family. The objects are interpreted on the basis of a woman's attributes that is, a strong hardworking housewife and co-worker in agricultural activities. These objects also signify that the girl should bear the responsibilities and duties as a mother, to shoulder the hardships in the upbringing of the children. The basket means that she should toil to earn the fruits of labour to serve her husband and the children.

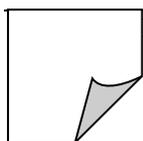
Looking at these objects, we see that the establishment of gender identity through objects is rooted in the Khasi society from the time a child is born. This means that much before a male or female child would know his/her own gender, the family has already creates the difference between male and female gender identity through the use of objects. Besides the above mentioned objects, there are objects made, modified, used by and associated with children, which allow individuals within this group to be identified as a part of it through the ownership and use of them. Such artefacts become identity markers of children and childhood and reveal aspects of the culture of the children's group. As children cover such a great range of ages and abilities, objects of material culture also varies considerably between younger and older children as well as between opposite sexes. These objects such as toys are used by the children as per their gender identity.

III. Conclusion

In any society, children's toys are considered as the most common form of material culture representing children's nature and behaviour in the real world. Collections of toys may vary different types of objects such as dolls, balls, kites, spinning tops, etc. Of particular interest, handmade objects such as wooden toys also got a special place of significance in the games played by children. Such type of toys are designed, made, collected, named and used solely by children of the opposite gender. These toys played during childhood time represent the future position, roles and responsibility of the user when they grow up. Here, the question arises as what sort of gender roles and significance have been defined or pre-defined through children's toys? The possible answer that can be derived from the use of objects as toys is that the various types of children's toys can reveal the social practices of gender identities in any given culture. This is also applicable to all types of toys whether manufactured by hand or machines. It is a general tendency for the manufacturers and producers to construct separate spaces for boys and girls and introduced gendered toys in order to explore issues of gender identities. Hence, it is true to say that manufacturer who makes toys also make gender identity.

De Beauvoir in his book 'The Second Sex' emphatically claimed that manufacturing industries had been manipulating parents and girls via dolls in order to help girls adjust and learn about their future roles as wives and mothers. He suggested that dolls indoctrinated young girls to become caring, maternal and passive (De Beauvoir 1957). This claim suggests that a girl mirrors her mother and the toy she uses, that is a doll, signifies her concept and understanding of future parenthood. In contrast, a boy loves to play outdoor games such as football, kite flying, top spinning, etc where girls are not supposed to play. Just as a girls, the boy also mirror the father and when he grow up, he therefore has to learn how to separate himself from his parents and then is forced to move to public arena as a man. Looking at this unequal distribution of objects as toys, we understand that, if playing with dolls, kitchen toys and other girl's objects promotes indoor activities, then the conditioning for young girls or for that matter women may be focussing only on indoor activities. In contrast, the outdoor activities meant for boys show that they may become an explorer, hunter, sportsman or an army man as a protector of his family and the society.

The use of objects as markers of gender identity continues even after the children have reached adulthood. In the Khasi Society, the gender role through the use of objects is clearly seen. This is evidenced by the fact that male and female adults are able to think and understands their own responsibilities bestowed upon them whether at home and outside. For example, female adult was given the responsibility to help her mother in doing all the household works, to take care for brothers and sisters and other members in the family. Besides household chores, a woman was also expected and taught to weave. Weaving, in most societies is popularly known as women occupation as traditionally, there is no male member involved in this job although all the tools used for weaving are made by men. The classification of weaving as a woman's occupation indicates that even in work, gender identity applies. The work that men are supposed to do includes agriculture, architecture, hunting, fishing and archery. In addition, it is seen that even the tools (such as spear, arrow, bow, sword, hammer, etc) used for performing these works are considered and identified as male objects. Hence, it can be seen that through the use of objects, there is the social construction of male and female identity and the differences between their social roles not only in the Khasi society but in every society of mankind. It is also true to say that objects are classified separately and accordingly for both the sexes, which at the same time gender construction is evidently understood through the relation of objects and gender identity in the society.



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