

Violet

VIOLET

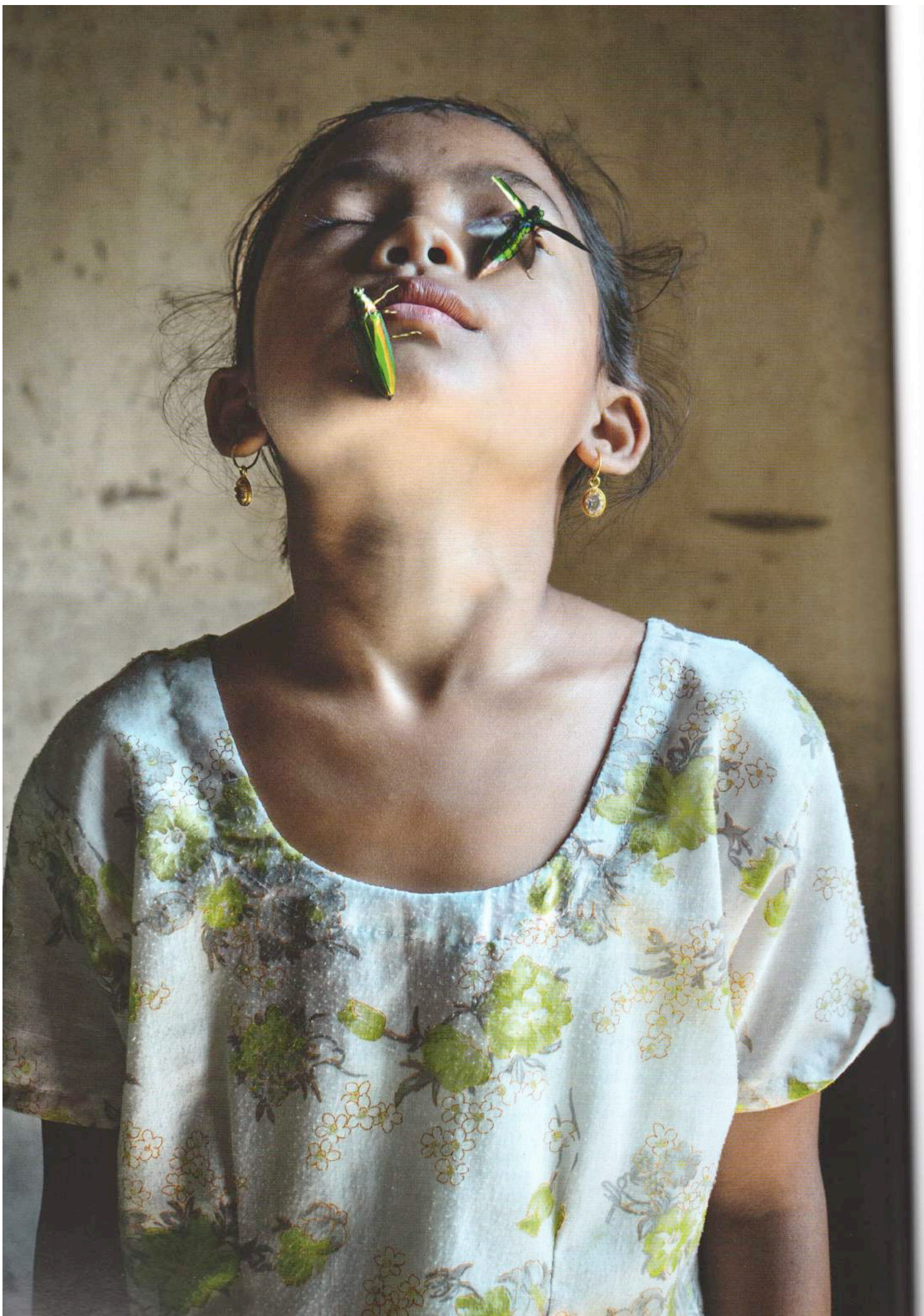


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It's interesting that for women in film the problems they face are generally in the sphere of home and family and not into the work place. Joan's real struggle was to get her rightful 'place at the table', and then once she was there, to have a voice which she never came close to." ON PLAYING JOAN CLARKE IN THE IMITATION GAME

-KEIRA KNIGHTLEY, ACTRESS



A
KINGDOM
OF GIRLS

Photographer Karolin Klüppel documented the young girls of Mawlynnong, India,
a village that operates under the principles of a matrilineal society.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAROLIN KLÜPPEL
INTERVIEW BY JENNY BAHN

She stands at the centre of a bamboo staircase, the yellow of her sundress matching the yellow of the pods that hang overhead, full and promising. The jungle spreads green and unobstructed behind her, and it is hers.

In a small, luxuriant patch of India's north-eastern state of Meghalaya, there exists Mawlynnong. Here, a village, comprised of just 95 thatch-roofed houses and a population of 500, operates under the principles of a matrilineal society. Children take the name of their mothers. Daughters inherit their parents' property. Women give birth into environments of their own making. There are no arranged marriages, no culture of rape or rape shaming, no subconscious by-products of the patriarch. The village is clean and peaceful, operating—philosophically, politically, sociologically, and environmentally—outside of the country of its provenance, not to mention most of the world.

For six months, German photographer Karolin Klüppel documented the young girls of Mawlynnong in a collection of photographs titled 'Mädchenland', translating, aptly, to 'Kingdom of Girls'. The resulting images feature sturdy, stalwart children, remarkable in their premature maturity. They pose stoically, feminine but strong, beautiful but unconsumed. Their small society, whether they know it or not, has provided them a safe haven, a kingdom where they will grow to be kings.

Of course, there is no such thing as true paradise, and the matrilineal village comes with its own unique problems.

The men, not burdened with what might be deemed the standard patriarchal weight of responsibility, tend to abuse drugs and alcohol. Without power or property, an undercurrent of male frustration plays out in other ways. In any hierarchical, non-egalitarian society, there is always someone at the bottom of that power structure—men, in the case of Mawlynnong—and they will react against that rule, no matter how the rule is held.

Below, Klüppel, who won Canon's 2014 Profifoto Förderpreis award for the project, talks to Violet about her experience.

How did you hear about Mawlynnong?

After I finished an artist-in-residency program in Goa, I decided to travel to Meghalaya to do a photo project on the Khasi [indigenous people of Meghalaya]. I stayed in Shillong for one week and decided for myself that it would probably be easier to get in close contact with people in a small village. Then I read about Mawlynnong and thought it could be worth it to see that place.

How does one get there?

From Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, it is very easy to get there. I decided on the cheapest opportunity: a shared

[Tata] Sumo. Because there is no railway in Meghalaya and the roads are in bad condition, all the locals travel by those over-packed, yellow Jeeps. In Shillong, there is one big Sumo stand at the market and you can find Sumos to nearly every village in Meghalaya there. The ride to Mawlynnong usually takes three hours with one short stop in Pynursla.

Where did you stay while you were there?

I lived in Mawlynnong for six months and, after a half year break back home, again for three months to finish the series. I was lucky and was able to stay both times with a Khasi family. Nowadays, several families in Mawlynnong have guesthouses or offer homestays for travellers. It was a great experience!

Is Mawlynnong the only matrilineal village in India?

In India, there are two indigenous tribes that are matrilineal, and one of them is the Khasi. Most of the Khasi live in the state of Meghalaya and they count 1.2 million people in total. Mawlynnong is near the border to Bangladesh in the south of Meghalaya and all inhabitants belong to the Khasi tribe. So, there are many villages in this area that operate matrilineally.

Have the Khasi always operated in a matrilineal way, or was there a shift at one point from the patrilineal?

There are a couple theories behind the origin, really. From what I've read of anthropologist Valentina Pakyntein's studies, the Khasi's matrilineal system can be traced back to when the Khasi had multiple partners, which made it hard to determine who the fathers were when the time came. Another theory comes from experts that claim the Khasi men were away too long during times of war to properly care for their families, and so passing property on to the daughters—and not the sons who would go on to fight themselves—seemed like a more logical idea.

Did you notice a remarkable difference in the way the culture operates?

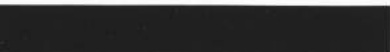
Compared to the Hindu culture, there are many differences. First of all, it is the matriliney, of course! Women are very respected in the Khasi culture. To disrespect a woman in this culture means to harm the society. Daughters are often more wanted than boys, and a family with just sons is considered to be miserable, because only daughters can assure the continuity of a clan. Also, the Khasi don't know the arranged marriage. When a woman and a man fall in love with each other, they just start to live together in the same house—usually the house of the woman because men rarely have property—and that means they are married. Most of the Khasi converted to Christianity and, nowadays, many couples decide to marry in church. Also, divorce and remarriage is common and totally respected. In Shillong, many young women even decide to live alone.

Was there any girl in particular who stood out to you?

There is one girl in Mawlynnong that I got to know very well because her family offered me a room as a homestay and we lived together for three months. Grace is seven years old and her personality really impressed me a lot. She has three little siblings and has to take care of them quite often, for example when her mother goes to the river to wash

the laundry. Grace is very mature and caring when she has to help her mum with the childcare and household, but she immediately turns into a young girl again when she has some free time to play with her friends.

Did you notice a difference in the relationships between the young girls and the young boys in the village?



“To disrespect a woman in this culture means to harm the society.”

—KAROLIN KLÜPPEL



Yes, I did notice a great difference in their relationships. Sometimes they play together, but often they do not mingle with each other. I guess just because girls and boys just like to play different games.

What were you trying to capture in each image?

In the Khasi culture, women and girls have a special standing in the society and, of course, this exceptional role 'produces' a great self-confidence. I did

not want to do a classical documentary on their culture, but tried to capture this outstanding role somehow. I decided to make a portrait series of the girls because I was so impressed by their self-assured appearance and thought that this must be how matriliney becomes visible. I also wanted to show the girls' everyday physical environment—where they live, how they play...

With the village being so seemingly removed, is it fair to say they don't get their photo taken often? How did they react to you and your photographs?

Mawlynnong is a very tiny village, with just 95 dwellings. Still, there are many Indian tourists coming every day to see 'the cleanest village of Asia', as Mawlynnong is often described. So the girls have some contact with strangers and even tourists from abroad. To me, they were very open and not very shy at all. Some girls really liked to be photographed; it was like a game for them. I spent a lot of time with the girls, not just photographing them. They often visited me in my room or we went to the river to take a bath. In the evenings we were often sitting together at the fire with the whole family and friends. In the first weeks of my two visits I was kind of an attraction, but after [a while], I became somehow a part of their village society, which was good because it was much easier to work then.

Was there a noticeable dynamic shift in the relationships between husbands and wives?

The family life seems quite conservative at first sight. Men are working in the fields and women usually stay at home and do the housework, especially when the children are young. Some women are also working and just take the children with them. But a man never stays at home, because he is earning twice as much as a woman in most jobs. But what was very striking to me was that the men (when they are good husbands) give all their earning to their wives, who are traditionally responsible for managing the expenses of a family. Men usually do not own any property in the Khasi society, and their children

do not belong to their clan. As a result, men sometimes feel unimportant and not very responsible for their families, and it happens that they have children with other women or just leave their families to move in with another family. I guess for them it is so easy to leave because they have nothing to lose. That is why many Khasi women would prefer a non-Khasi husband or just stay single, especially in cities like Shillong.

What do you think it means for a young girl to know she stands to inherit something greater than were she part of a patrilineal society?

I do not know if that is an important fact for a child because children do not know what it means to inherit property. But what is important is how they get treated by their parents, and I am sure girls of the Khasi society get much more recognition from their families than girls in the rest of India. And how you get treated is how you feel about yourself, especially when you are a child. So, the girls of Mawlynnong that I got to know were all very self-conscious and self-assured because they get a lot of respect from their parents.

Did it seem like this concept of 'girliness' is a quality imposed by the patriarch? Or are trappings of girliness everywhere, no matter what?

The girls of Mawlynnong can be very girlish! They love pink dresses, dolls, nail colour, playing kitchen. But it is difficult

to say if this behaviour is adopted from advertisements and television, which is made by patriarchal societies, or if it is natural. But isn't this the never-ending argument of gender studies, anyway?

Did things seem remarkably more peaceful there?

I cannot really compare it to other Indian villages, because I have no experiences, but it is very peaceful in Mawlynnong. Violence against women nearly never happens. All inhabitants are Christians and live a very religious life. They live a life full of charity and respect for one another. I felt very safe in Meghalaya in general. At the end of my last stay, I got very ill and a lot of people took care of me and organised everything I needed. They even brought me to the hospital and stayed there with me for two days! They felt responsible, but not in the way that it was their obligation; they just wanted to help.

Can you imagine the matrilineal concept ever taking over in societies with a well-established patriarch?

No, I think that is impossible. But I am afraid that some matriarchies will for sure die out in the future because their concept just functions in a certain area. If a Khasi leaves Meghalaya, he or she usually doesn't follow the tradition anymore.

Do you imagine you would be quite different today had you grown up in

a culture such as this, as opposed to patrilineal Western Europe?

Well, the Khasi are a matrilineal society and girls have some advantages there, but, still, in the Western societies there are much more opportunities for girls and women to live independently and self-determined. Many of the Khasi families are very, very poor, especially in the villages. Even if you are a Khasi girl it doesn't mean you are able to get a good education or go to the university; it just means that if there is some money left for education, it will probably be spent on the girls and not on boys. So even though I live in a patriarchal society, I still feel that I have many more choices in my life because of money issues.

But what really impressed me—and what I miss very much in Germany—is how much the Khasi and Indians generally care about their family and friends. Human relationships seem very strong there, which seems reasonable, because of the poverty and the little support from the government. If you do not help each other, you are lost. In the Khasi society, I am sure, no one would ever feel lonely because people just need each other. Whereas in my society, loneliness is something that a lot of people suffer from. Every culture has its trade-offs.

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