

The Khasi System of Calculating Time

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The Khasis like the rest of the people in the world have their own method of calculating time, that is calendar. They followed their own system of calculation long before they came into contact with the British and other neighbouring calendars. The word calendar is derived from the Latin word *calendrium* meaning interest register. *Calendrium* is derived from *Calendae* or *Kalendae*, the first day of the Roman month, the day on which future market days, feasts and other occasions were performed.¹ Literally, calendar is the day on which the accounts are due. The term calendar in the present usage refers to an accounting, usually for civil purposes, of days and other division of time. Although the Khasis use the word calendar, their own equivalent is *Ka khein snem* or *Ka khein por*. They have definite ideas about a day (*ka sngi*), a week (*ka taiew*), a month (*shi bnai*), and a year (*snem*). A calendar in the words of Durkheim expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the sametime, its function is to ensure their regularity.² The Khasi calendar reflects the way of life of the people, a proper reckoning of time is very essential to them to regulate individual and group activities. The calendar is essential for their agricultural activities and their collective life. The names of the months of the Khasis are calculated on the basis of nature and agricultural activities and the days of the week are based on market operations. The calendar which is now used for civil and for all practical purposes throughout the world is called the Gregorian calendar, after Pope Gregory XIII who introduced it in the sixteenth century.

The Khasi calendar is a lunar one based on the complete cycles of phases of the moon. The Khasis have an eight days week which is based on the market days, as market plays an important role in the social, economic and political life of the people. The people had no watches in ancient days, but they observed the most obvious phenomena such as the appearance

of day and night, they watched the position of the sun and the moon and could tell the approximate time. They know which is the period of sowing, weeding and harvesting. They have been fixing their festivals, dances and other activities since time immemorial. They calculated their age by referring to important and notable events that took place in their time. Till today, old people used to ask each other about how old were they when *u Khyntiuh* or *u Jumai bah*, that is the great earthquake of 12th June 1897 took place, and they accordingly calculate their age. The Khasis have a high regard and respect of the soil which feed them and their children. So, when they sow or harvest, they should always go with a happy and peaceful heart, if they go with a angry or sad mood, that will affect the production of the crops and will not get a good harvest. That is why some festivals and dances are held, before the sowing season, and others after the harvesting season, to pray to God for a bountiful harvest and general prosperity and also to thank Him for all the blessings that He has showered upon them. The Khasis do not sow when the moon is waxing, that *haba shai bnai*, always they sow, when the moon is waning, *haba ngen bnai*, because when the night is clear the insects and caterpillars will eat up the seeds.

The Khasis have four seasons in a year, namely, *Ka Pyrem*, *Ka Lyiur*, *ka Synrai* and *ka Tlang*, corresponding to the spring, summer, autumn and winter respectively. The moon or *u Bnai* is regarded as a male and the sun or *ka Sngi* as a female. In olden days, the people were not conscious of the rotation and revolution of the earth. They just observed the appearance of the sun in the day time and began to call the day in the morning as *ka Step* or *Mynstep*, in the afternoon as *Mynsngi*. The appearance of darkness in the evening is known as *Janmiet* and at night as *ka Miet* or *Mynmiet*. Most of the Khasis are agriculturists, so they are more closely attached to the soil. Their agricultural cycle and activities depend very much on the condition of the seasons, such as temperature, rain, moisture, heat, etc. throughout the year. These characteristics and changes follow one season after another, till a year is completed. A year is known to the Khasis as *u snem*, a month as *u bnai* or *shibnai* and a week as *ka taiew* or *shitaiew*.

According to a tradition prevalent among the Khasis, God the Creator at the beginning created *ka Ramew* or mother

earth and her husband *u Basa*. *Ka Ramew* gave birth to five children named *ka Sngi*, *u Bnai*, *ka Um*, *ka Lyer* and *ka Ding*,^s corresponding to the Sun, Moon, Water, Wind and Fire respectively, all except the moon were females. When the moon is full and clear, the Khasis have a special name for him known as *u 'nai khatsaw synnia* whose beauty is compared to a very handsome man.

The eclipses both solar and lunar have legends behind them. Eclipse is known as *ka bam hynroh*, meaning eaten by the toad. The solar eclipse is known as *ka bam hynroh ka sngi* and the lunar eclipse as *ka bam hynroh u Bnai*. The story tells us that once upon a time, a girl named *ka Nam*, who was a very good, beautiful and innocent girl ran away from home as she was frightened of the tiger. To hid her beauty, she covered her face with a toad's skin, she went first to the house of the morning star and then evening star who refused to give her shelter. Last, she went to the house of the Sun, who being a female herself had pity on the girl and gave her shelter. Nobody knew that *ka Nam* was a beautiful girl; later on, the moon came to know of her beauty, when he saw her after she had taken bath and washed her clothes besides a river. The moon went to his eldest sister, the sun, and asked her to arrange his marriage with *ka Nam*; the sun did not agree as the girl was ugly. Next time, the Moon hid himself near the river, and when he saw *ka Nam* was bathing, he took the toad's skin and threw it, so that the girl would not cover her face anymore. After finishing her bath, *ka Nam* looked for the toad's skin, and at that time, the Moon caught her hand, the girl shouted and all came running to help her. A *Dorbar* was summoned to try this case; the sun came, she was very angry and scolded him. She brought some ashes, spat on his forehead, and threw the ashes on his face. From that time onward, whenever the Moon passed by that river, where he threw the toad's skin, the toad caught and eat him, hence occurred the lunar eclipse. Since then there was an enmity between the Moon, the Sun and the toad. Another version tells us that the five children of mother earth lived together in perfect peace and harmony, when later the moon became a wicked man and fell in love with his eldest sister, the sun. Knowing his bad intention, the sun became very angry, she took ashes in her hands, rebuking him angrily for his daring and wicked intention towards her, who was like a mother,

who took care of him, threw the ashes on his face. The Moon felt very much ashamed of himself that he left the house and walked only at night. Before the Moon was as bright as the sun, but after this incident, he gave out a pale light because the sun had covered him with ashes. When the Moon is full, we could see something like clouds, these the Khasis believe to be the ashes that were thrown by the sun.

The eclipse of the sun has another story. The Moon was very angry with the sun, as she had disgraced him in public. So, he went to the Thunder, and borrowed a sword from him. Unknowingly, Thunder gave him the sword, as he thought that the Moon wanted it for dancing purposes. Early in the morning, the Moon went to the Sun's house, hiding himself near the window. The Sun did not know the bad intention of the Moon, she came out and the Moon threw the sword at her and ran away. The Sun was wounded, she fell down with blood all over. Mother earth gave her medicine to be put on her wounds; she became very sad that there was no harmony among her children, she became very sick. After a few days, the Sun recovered, but mother earth died. From that time onward the eclipse of the Sun took place whenever she felt the pains from those wounds, and could not come out and remain hidden, as she has to sleep and rest. Since then lightning and Thunder never occurred when the sun is shining, as the Thunder felt very much ashamed, and at the same time feared that the Sun might snatch the sword from him.

Eclipses whether solar or lunar, total or partial, are believed to have very bad effects on the people on earth; for example, plague, bad harvest, famine, diseases and other calamities would befall on the people. During the occurrence of eclipses, the people up to the present day, use to come out with shouts, beating of drums and tins, in olden days they even fired their *suloi tynsah* or locally made gun. By doing so, they want to frighten the toad, so that it will not eat up the whole sun or moon, as they fear of the eclipses which have very bad effect on the people on earth. Not only the Khasis but another Indian mythology has a story behind the eclipses. The moon's orbit cuts the ecliptic at two points which are called Moon's nodes. Rahu and Ketu are the Indian names for these nodes. The eclipses occur when the sun and the moon appears in the vicinity of the moon's nodes. Thus the Indian mythological view tells us that the lunar and solar eclipses occur when Rahu and Ketu swallow the Moon

and the Sun respectively.⁴

The Khasi Calendar is now used in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. 'Nai is the short form of *u Bnai* meaning Moon, for example *u 'Nai Kyla Lyngkot* is *u Bnai Kylla Lyngkot*. The names of the months of the Khasis in their equivalent to the English Calendar are as follows :

Khasi	Corresponding months
1. 'Nai Kylla Lyngkot	.. January
2. ,, Rymphang	.. February
3. ,, Lber	.. March
4. ,, Iaiong	.. April
5. ,, Jymmang	.. May
6. ,, Jylliew	.. June
7. ,, Tung	.. July
8. ,, Lar	.. August
9. ,, Lur	.. September
10. ,, Risaw	.. October
11. ,, Wieng	.. November
12. ,, Nohprah	.. December

The Khasi Calendar has sometimes a twelve months year and sometimes a thirteen months year. Some said that the Khasi year starts from the month of October, others said that the Khasi New Year starts from the day that follows the longest night. The Khasi Calendar ends with the shortest day and begins with the longer day.⁵ If this view is to be taken, the longest night is the 22nd of December, in that case the Khasi Calendar starts from the 23rd of December. The coming of the British with the Gregorian calendar changed the Khasi calendar and the Khasi months are conveniently calculated on the basis of the Gregorian calendar. The new moon appears twelve times in a year, sometimes it appears thirteen, in that case the twelfth month is known as *u 'nei Shonglad* and the thirteenth month remains the same, *'Nai Nohprah*. In 1971 the new moon appeared on the 28th December 1970, but did not affect the calculation of the year. The year was calculated from the day that followed the largest night and the new moon appeared as follows.⁶

1. 'Nai Kylla Lyngkot	.. 28th December 1970
2. ,, Rymphang	.. 26th January 1971
3. ,, Lber	.. 25th February 1971
4. ,, Iaiong	.. 26th March 1971

5.	..	Jymmang	..	25th April 1971
6.	..	Jylliew	..	24th May 1971
7.	..	Tung	..	22nd June 1971
8.	..	Lar	..	22nd July 1971
9.	..	Lur	..	20th August 1971
10.	..	Risaw	..	19th September 1971
11.	..	Wieng	..	19th October 1971
12.	..	Shonglad	..	18th November 1971
13.	..	Nohprah	..	17th December 1971

In 1971, the moon appeared twelve times and it appeared as follows :—

1.	..	Nai Kylla Lyngkot	..	16th January 1972
2.	..	Rymphang	..	14th February 1972
3.	..	Lber	..	15th March 1972
4.	..	Iaiong	..	13th April 1972
5.	..	Jymmang	..	13th May 1972
6.	..	Jylliew	..	11th June 1972
7.	..	Tung	..	10th July 1972
8.	..	Lar	..	9th August 1972
9.	..	Lur	..	7th September 1972
10.	..	Risaw	..	7th October 1972
11.	..	Wieng	..	5th November 1972
12.	..	Nohprah	..	5th December 1972

'Nai Kylla Lyngkot is the first month of the Khasi Calendar which corresponds to January, the first month of the Gregorian Calendar. *Kylla* means change and *Lyngkot* means short. This month derives its name from the change of day and night. In December, the days are very short and the nights are very long. In the month of January, the days have become longer and the nights shorter. So the name of u 'Nai Kylla Lyngkot derives its name from this change. It may also mean turning the pieces of firewoods known as *lyngkhot* or *lyngkot* in the fireplace. This is because this month is very cold, and the people are fond of sitting near the fireplace and keep on turning the pieces of firewood to keep themselves warm. In the Khasi traditional house, the fireplace or the hearth, is in the middle portion of the kitchen, and the people sit around it warming themselves up, especially at night when the day's work is done, and it is here that the old people especially the grandmothers and grandfathers used to tell beautiful stories, which is handed down from generation to generation, until the children would fall asleep listening to these stories.

It is also a place where they play their musical instruments like *duitara* or harp and *hisli* or flute. Rymphang corresponds to the month of February, it is a dry and windy month, the severe cold has become less. The word *Rymphang* derives from the Khasi word *raphang* when nature looks bald and barren,⁷ as the leaves of trees and plants dry out and fall. *Lber* corresponds to the month of March, the third month of the Gregorian calendar. This is the period of the year when leaves of trees and grass sprout out and nature wears a green look. *Iaiong* is the fourth month which corresponds to April. *Iaiong* means dark, *iaiong iangit* is the term used by the Khasis for darkness. This month's name is derived from the heavy storms that occur during this period of the year, causing darkness around. On this month the Khasis do not usually hold any festivity like engagements, marriages and others. *Jynmang* is the fifth month corresponding to May, this month's name is derived from a flower called *U 'tiew Jynmang* which blooms in plenty during this month. This is the time when other flowers bloom and the rainfall is not much. *Jylliew* corresponds to the month of June, which is the sixth month of the year. *Jylliew* means deep, so it is the month, when all the rivers, wells and waterfalls became big and deep because of the heavy rainfall. *Nai-tung*, that is July is the seventh month of the year. This is the month of bad odours and ill smelling or *iewtung* because of the decay of vegetation after the heavy rain in June. This is the period, when the people use to get bad diseases like cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea etc. Even the clothes do not dry up well and produce a sort of bad smell. *Nailar* corresponds to August, the eighth month of the year. This month's name is derived from a flower known as *u 'tiew janailar* which blooms in plenty during this month. This is a very nice period of the year because the weather is clear or *synlar*. *Nailur* is the ninth month of the year, corresponding to September of the Gregorian calendar. *Lur* has several meanings, one means plough and the other is a short form of *khlur* that is *'lur*. *Lur* also means to work hard, this is not the period that the people begin ploughing, because in this month rice in the fields starts ripening to be harvested. In this month, there is no more heavy rain, and the sky becomes clear and the stars are visible at night. The other interpretation is that the people are working very hard during this period before the coming of the cold months of winter. Another interpretation is that, there are people who keep the *thlen* or the snake or serpent which feeds on human blood. This is the time of the year when *u nongshohnoh* or a

man who seeks or tries to kill human victims to get the blood of the victims to be offered to *u thlen* as the latter will hide itself or spend a period of hibernation till the winter months are over.⁸ *Risaw* is the tenth month of the year corresponding to October, this is a period when the country becomes red. *Ri* means country or land and *saw* means red. This suggests that the fruits are ripened and the rice fields look red and rice is ripened to be harvested. It is also during this period that rainfall has become less, and the dry weather begins. It is the time when the people begin their favourite past time of arrow shooting. As a preparation for this sport, they begin to make coloured arrows with canes or small bamboos called *thri*. So they make arrows out of *u thri saw*, the short form which is '*risaw*' that is red cane or bamboo. *Naiwieng* is the eleventh month which corresponds to November. This is the happy and joyous month of the Khasis because their harvesting job is done, and their granary is full. To celebrate the harvesting period, the people use to cook rice and different kinds of *ki kpu* or Khasi rice cakes in earthen pots called *wieng*. This is to show their happiness, festivity and jubilation when harvesting is done. Another interpretation is that there are hilly parts of the lands which are slashed and burnt or *wiang*, this applies to jhum cultivation carried on in the hills. So the word *wieng* might have derived its name from the word *wiang*, which as time passes is pronounced as *Wieng*.⁹ *Nohprah* is the last of the twelve months of the year which corresponds to December. This is the month, when the people *buhnoh* or put away their *prah* or bamboo sieves and baskets which are used for carrying crops, as their harvesting work is over. This is the period of rest to the people, as the old year will go away and the new year is coming. According to another interpretation, during this month winnowing work is carried on with the help of *ki prah* to separate the husked rice, this work suggests that the granary is full after the harvesting work is over.

The Khasi *ka taiew* or week consists of eight days and the names of the days of the week are places where the principal markets are held in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. For example, *ka lawrynghep* in the *Hima* or State of Myllem, *ka Iew Musiang* in the *Hima* Sutnga or Jaintiapur, and it is *ka Iewbah* at the *Hima* Sohra or Cherra and it is *ka Iew Khlawduh* at the *Hima* Nongkhlaw. *Iew* means market and market plays a very important role in the life of the Khasis. To them market is not only a place for buying and selling goods, but it is also a place where they have all sorts

of transactions relating to their economic, social and political life. The following are a few names of the Khasi days of the week.¹⁰

Mylliem	Khyrim	Sepngi	Bhoi	Sohra	Jaintia
Iewduh	Lyngkurdem	Rangblang	Iewduh	Iewrit	Hat
Lyngka	Dawki	Nongstoin	Mawhati	Mawlong	Khyllaw
Nongkrem	Pynursla	Sangshong	Umden	Shella	Pynsin
Mawlong	Pyngkhat	Khlawbah	Nongpoh	Tyllap	Mulong
Rynghep	Lyngkyrdem	Khlawduh	Iewrynghep	Iewbah	Musiang
Shillong	Dawki	Maram	Umroi	Mawlong	Mushai
Pamtiah	Pynursla	Mawngap	Pamtiah	Shella	Pyngkat
Umni	Lyngkhat	Langstieh	Umsning	Tyllap	Thymblein

The modern Khasis are using a seven days week which was of recent invention, with the coming of the christian missionaries. The people especially in the villages, still follow the old system of an eight days week rather than the present seven days week, as the old system is more convenient and more practical to them. Till now the Khasi farmers rely more for his agricultural activities on the natural phenomena such as the phases of the moon, the sprouting of leaves, rain, wind and heat etc. rather than the calendar dates. The modern names of the Khasi week and their English equivalent are as follows :

Saxon	English	Khasi
Sun's Day	Sunday	Sngi U Blei
Moon's Day	Monday	Sngi Nyngkong
Tiw's Day	Tuesday	Sngi Baar
Woden's Day	Wednesday	Sngi Balang
Thor's Day	Thursday	Sngi Palei
Frigg's Day	Friday	Sngi Thohdieng
Saterne's Day	Saturday	Sngi Saitjain

Ka Sngi U Blei or Sunday is a special day for the christians. Christianity brought about important changes in the life of the Khasis. Before the Khasis used to take rest on the day that followed the big market day in their villages, but now Sunday has become a day of rest and it is known as *ka sngi U Blei* or the day

of God. This is a special day for the christians ; on this particular day, they go to church to pray and listen to the sermons. Sunday is considered as a special day for God, as they have devoted the six days of the week to other works. *Ka Sngi Nyngkong* means the first day which corresponds to Monday, is also known as *ka lah sngi U Blei*, that means the day which follows Sunday, but now *Sngi Nyngkong* is more popularly known for Monday and it denotes the first day after Sunday. *Ka Sngi Baar* or *ka sngi hat Majai* corresponds to Tuesday. The British Government and the Welsh Mission started at Cherrapunjee which was the headquarter of the Cossyah Hills Political Agency. From Cherrapunjee, the people used to go to Majai or Bholagunj for a market day known as *ka hat Majai* which takes place on Tuesday. But now Tuesday is more popularly known as *ka sngi Baar*. It may be the Catholic Mission which came after the Welsh Mission which gave the name of *ka Sngi Nyngkong* and *Sngi Baar* for Monday and Tuesday respectively.¹¹ *Ka Sngi Balang* that is Wednesday, is the day when the christians of the Resbyterian church used to have their religious gathering or prayer meeting. *Ka Sngi Balang* means a day of the *Balang* or church. *Balang* has another meaning that is gathering together. This is the day when the christians belonging to the Presbyterian denomination gather together and pray to God.¹² *Ka Sngi Palei* corresponds to Thursday. This day is in the middle of the week, when, the people are not much overburdened with works and they are somehow a bit leisurely. Some people are also happy and peaceful and have peaceful minds after they had prayer meeting on the previous day that is Wednesday.¹³ *Ka Sngi Thohdieng* is Friday, Thohdieng means to cut firewood. In the olden days till very recently, kerosene stoves, electric and gas cooking system were unknown to the people and they rely mostly for their cooking purposes on firewood. So on this particular day, most of the people went to the forest to cut firewood which would be sufficient for the whole week. *Ka Sngi Saitjain* is Saturday in its English equivalent; *Saitjain* means washing clothes, this is the day when the people do all the manual works like cleaning the house, utensils and clothes, so that everything will look clean on Sunday. Saturday has become very important now, particularly in Shillong. Before the weekly labourers used to get their wages on *ka Sngi Jewduh*, that is the big market day of the *Hima Myllem*, but now, this system is changed and the weekly labourers get their wages on Saturday. Saturday has also become an important week end

day, as the people in or around Shillong do all their weekly marketings on this day, which before it was done mostly on *ka Sngi Iewduh*.

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