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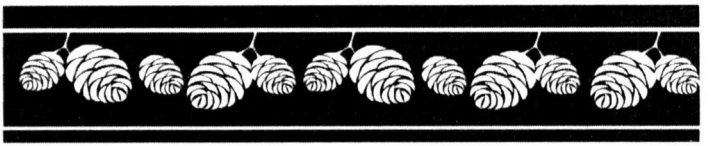
ound the Hearth
KHASI LEGENDS

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih



Around the Hearth

Khasi Legends

KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

Illustrations by Pankaj Thapa

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Prelude

The Khasis, by which I mean all the seven sub-tribes—Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and the now never-heard-of Diko—of the Khasi tribe of North-East India, are a great storytelling people: 'telling', because their alphabet is of very recent history, no older than when Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary, introduced the Roman script in 1842, to form the essentials of the Khasi written word.

But the alphabet is nothing to judge the Khasi people by. Enlightenment did not come to them with schools and colleges. The Khasis, before the white man came, were not a band of barbarians roving the hills for heads and scalps. They did not live up trees like monkeys, nor hunt for food like savages. They knew how to till the earth and sow their crops. They knew how to make things out of wood and iron; they knew trade and commerce—and yes, industry.

Theirs was a society of great wisdom and civilized conduct at a time when brute force held sway. True enough, they had their fair share of wars and bloodshed, but more importantly, they wanted peace and togetherness with other people, for

theirs was a culture that worshipped God through respect for both man and Nature, and indeed all animals and animated things, as creations of God that were equal to each other.

That is why the Khasi stories always begin with 'When man and beasts and stones and trees spoke as one....' This shows the Khasi world view, that sees the universe as a cosmic whole that receives its animation and force from the one living truth, their God, U Blei.

The great storytelling tradition of the Khasis goes back to the time of their creation myths. One of these myths tells us about how one of our ancestors had lost a manuscript, made of a very delicate material and containing our philosophical and religious teachings, as well as the script used to record these teachings. The man was returning from a communion with God at the summit of a very tall mountain. Here, he was familiarized with the history of his race and initiated into certain religious rites and moral principles which were to govern the spiritual, moral and even daily activities of his community. With him was a representative of the people from the plains of Surma. Both were carrying with them precious manuscripts bestowed by God Himself, to make the propagation of His teachings easier. But as they were approaching home, they encountered an overwhelming hurdle in the form of a wide, raging river. The man from Surma, used to swimming in turbulent water, attached his document to a tuft of hair on his pate and contrived to swim across safely.

The Khasi, not wanting to be left behind, took his document between his teeth and, against his better judgement, attempted to cross the river too. But being a hillman, not accustomed to swimming in surging torrents, he soon found himself floundering midstream, with his head bobbing in and out of the water. In trying to save himself and gulping air through his mouth, he accidentally swallowed his document,

which by then had been reduced to a pulpy mass. And although, after a huge struggle, he managed to save himself, he had to return to his people empty-handed.

On reaching home, the errant ambassador recounted everything that had happened to a very disappointed people. But he quickly appeased them by assuring them that all God had revealed to him was still fresh in his mind, and that he could easily pass on the teachings to the people by word of mouth. Therefore, a council of all members of the Khasi tribe was convened, wherein the man instructed each person on the teachings of God and His divine laws.

It was from that time that the tradition of storytelling among the Khasis was supposed to have started. The stories began with an exposition showing how the world was created and how Man had come down from heaven to inhabit the earth and populate its wilderness. From here they progressed to the Khasi world view, their concept of God and religion, their concept of good and evil, their matrilineal social structure, their clan system, their democratic governance—and so forth. These constitute the creation myths, or what the Khasis call *khanatang*, or sanctified stories,

The function of such stories is to elucidate the Khasi philosophical thought on every aspect of Khasi culture and make sure that it reaches and holds captive even the simplest of men. The stories are therefore invested with symbolical significance and deliberately rendered interesting so as to beguile listeners into believing that they are hearing a story and not listening to a sermon. For example, when the Khasis speak of *Ka Jingkieng Ksiar* (the Golden Ladder) located at *Lum Sohpet Bneng* (the Mount of Heaven's Navel) and how the Khasi people, in a Golden Age of their existence, used to travel between heaven and earth through the Golden Ladder, they only mean to impress on the listener that the Golden Ladder is actually a golden heart, a virtuous soul, which

stands as the only link between Man and God. And when they speak of the Mount of Heaven's Navel, they only wish to illustrate their belief that the relationship between Man and God is like the sacred relationship between mother and child, with the navel and the umbilical cord as the central symbols. It is very important, therefore, to understand the allegorical nature of the stories, so that they are not simply read as fantastic tales from yet another exotic tribal culture.

Thus far, I have been talking only about the khanatang and their function. But the intentions of the Khasi folk stories cannot be confined to philosophical and religious enlightenment alone. Having realized the tremendous potential of the khanatang, the Khasis invented a story for everything. The phenomenon of lightning and thunder; a gigantic boulder that looks like an overturned conical basket; the name of a waterfall; a hill; a forest; a village...everything. To explain the inexplicable, to comprehend the incomprehensible, they always found a story. A moral lesson? They invented another. Young Khasis were instructed in this way by elders, and their school was always the hearth around which they gathered after a day's labour, entertained by both fire and tales. Entertainment was, in fact, the overt purpose, the overriding factor and the informing soul of such stories. And the Khasis may be said to have taught with delight.

In order to serve this twin objective of instruction and entertainment, the old Khasis had to invent many, many stories indeed. In fact, there are thousands of stories floating in each Khasi *hima* (a democratic state governed by a *dorbar hima* or council of state, which is led by a *syiem* or king, who is only a titular head), *raid* (province) and village. These stories were handed down orally, through successive generations, from village raconteurs to the community; from uncles to nephews; and from parents and grandparents to children. And they include among them *khana pateng* (legends),

purinam (fairy tales), *puriskam* (fables), *khana pharshi* (parables) and, sometimes, true stories that have worked their way into the hearts of one and all. All these may be found in this volume, which may be treated, however, merely as a prelude to other, much more substantial collections in times to come.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Shillong,
6 June 2006