

**KHASI MYTHS**  
**AN**  
**INTERPRETATIVE STUDY**

**ABSTRACT**

**BY**  
**MISS BARRYLIA MESHA WOLFLANG**



**A THESIS**  
**SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE**  
**REQUIREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF**  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN KHASI**

**TO**

**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**  
**SHILLONG**  
**2003**

# **KHASI MYTHS: AN INTERPRETATIVE STUDY**

## **(Abstract)**

**SCHOLAR: BARRYLIA MESHA WOLFLANG**

**SUPERVISOR: PROF. B. L. SWER.**

Khasi Culture and Folkloristics offer wide scope for research. These areas deal with rich cultural heritage of the Khasis. After preliminary study of these two areas, I decided to take up an indepth study on Khasi Myth and the topic of my thesis is entitled: - Khasi Myths: An Interpretative Study.

**Organisation**:- The Thesis has been organised into five chapters as follows:-

### **CHAPTER - I: MYTH – AN INTRODUCTION**

This chapter is introductory in nature, where the meaning and types of myths is defined. From the various references it was observed that the term, "myth" is derived from the Greek word, "mythos", which means, "word, speech, story". It is usually regarded to be an unreliable definition, which leads one to the perception that myth is a fictitious narrative and something related to the extra-ordinary world. Later on, myths were regarded sacred oral narratives explaining how the earth and man came to be in the present form. Folklorists like Leach (1972) states that myths try to explain matters in 'the science of a pre-scientific age'. For example, myths try to explain the creation of man, animals, landmarks and try to explain why certain animals has its characteristics, why or how certain natural phenomena came to be, how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue. It appears therefore, that "myth" goes far beyond the word, "fictitious".

It is also found that, "myths" are narratives which attempts to generalise and explain different phenomena of nature and society. Besides, they give accounts of gods, demons, rites, superstitions and beliefs of the people. Edmonson (1971) observes that myths resemble etiological tales because 'they attest to the wide ranging curiosity of even primitive men and .....satisfy it with explanations of the origin of the

universe..... animals, wild and cultivated plants, people .... their inventions and their customs". Generally, the typical etiological tale answers the questions 'why' and the typical myth answers the questions, 'whence' and this indicates the basis of something on the validity of a custom. But what makes an etiological tale different from myth is the fact that the former has an entertaining quality while the latter is considered to be a living reality and deals with the beliefs, cultural traits and rituals of the people.

Myths have many forms and themes. Some of the most important themes include creation of the world, birth of gods and divine beings, death and the after life, rebirth of the world . For example, there are the Creation Myth which is also known as 'cosmogonic myth', which explains the origin of the world, the creation of man and the birth of gods and goddesses. They also describe the modes of creation such as creation from a cosmic egg, as found in the Pacific parts of Europe and Southern Asia. Creation from a metamorphosis of embryonic forms within the earth or water, creation due to the activity of divine beings such as earth – divers who dive the primordial waters which is found in North – American Indian myth as well as the Finno – Ugric tribes in northern Eurasia or due to the sexual union of world parents as found in the Egyptian myths.

There are also the Explanatory Myth which, explain natural processes or events. For example, such myths tell how the leopard got its spots, how the dog got its fur, how rivers, lakes and oceans are formed and so on. Handoo (1985) also observe that aetiological myths and religious myths are very common in India.

Besides the above, there are also myths of time and eternity, myths of culture heroes, celestial gods, kings and ascetics, myths of providence and destiny .

In this thesis, the Khasi myths that will be dealt upon have been delimited to only the creation and religious myths of the Khasis such as the myth of a **Sohpetbneng**, the myth of u **Diengiei**, ka **Krem Lamet Latang** and the **Daiñhlen** and attempts will be made to examine the deep thought embedded in them.

## **CHAPTER – II: KA DORBAR BLEI AND KHASI MYTH**

The word **Dorbar** literally means "conference, council, congress, legislative council". The term **Ka Dorbar Blei** literally means "Divine Council". It is the council in which **ka Hukum** or the Divine Decree allots certain powers to man as well as to the other creatures in the world. Traditionally, the Khasis believe that after the

creation of the world, four **Dorbar Blei** was held which are closely associated with the Khasi myths. It is believed to be a council where God convenes and listens to the plea of **u laiphew jingthaw** and gives His decisions. The concept of **Dorbar Blei** have not been discussed at length by Khasi authors except D. T. Laloo (1978) and R. S. Lyngdoh (1992) who have tried to provide a detailed account of **ka Dorbar Blei**.

The first council is the council of **Ki Khadhynriew Trep** or **Sixteen huts** who are believed to be the fore – fathers of the Khasis. This **Dorbar** is held in God's prompt response to the request of **ka Mei Ramew** for wise, honest and capable rulers to rule the world. It is here that the myth of **u Sohpetbneng** comes in where **u Hynñiew Trep** or **Seven Huts** were empowered to govern over the other creatures. This is similar to the Christian concept that man is to rule over the universe, to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over every living things that live on earth. Eventually peace and harmony prevailed and so the Khasis term this period as **Ka Aiom Ksiar** (The Golden Era) or **Sotti Juk** (The Age of Innocence).

As the entire universe flourished, the Divine Decree convened the second **Dorbar Blei**, so as to bestow certain powers to **u Hynñiew-Trep** and to the other creatures. The animals were bestowed with more strength while **u Hynñiew – Trep** were provided with language and intellect. The peaceful co-existence between God and man, man and animals did not last long because iniquity sprouted out in the form of **u Diengiei** thereby, leading the world into darkness. Meanwhile, a thanksgiving dance of all the creatures was held and it is said that the sun and the moon being sister and brother were derided for dancing together. The sun, being ashamed of the arrogant attitude fled away to a cave, known as **Krem Lamet Latang**. Attempts were made to bring back light, and so a third **Dorbar Blei** was held where a mediator was chosen to bring back the Sun. Tradition says that after many attempts, a cock was chosen by **u Hynñiew - Trep** to bring back the light. His attempts succeeded and so the cock occupies an important position in the Khasi religion in which man reads the signs and symbols on the cock's entrails in order to know God's will.

The fourth **Dorbar Blei** is **ka Dorbar Laiphew Mrad** (the council of all animals) in which the various creatures were given their names, empowered, provided with rulers and where their shares were distributed. Tradition says that a market place known as **Ka İew Luri Lura** was also selected for the various creatures. Later on, chaos ruled over man's heart especially after the dog was ill-treated by other animals

for selling **ka tungrymbai**. The dog's revenge on the various creatures became a base of **ka ksaw ka kpong** (literally meaning 'to accomplish something good and to pray for good fortune and prosperity'). Since then, **ka ksaw ka kpong** becomes one of the religious ceremonies all over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to remind of the vengeance of the dog. It is performed in order to cast off the oppression of the demon and to bring about a lasting governance. This ceremony also reminds that tyranny and oppression cannot stand on the way to or have a place before virtue and truth and any village, clan, **raid** (administrative unit) and **hima** (state) can observe **ka ksaw ka kpong**

### CHAPTER – III: THE GOLDEN AGE

This chapter deals with the myth of **u Sohpetbneng** and the thought that lies embedded in it. This myth explains the genesis of the Khasi race. Just as the Hebrews believe that life began at the garden of Eden, so also the Khasis regard **u Sohpetbneng** as the sacred place where life began. According to the Khasi concept of creation, **Ka Jingkieng Ksiar** (The Golden Ladder) at Sohpetbneng Peak was the ladder of life through which the progenitors of the Khasis could ascend and descend daily. This ladder forms a connecting link between man and God. As the term, "**Sohpetbneng**" itself means, "the navel of heaven", it implies that this forms the centre through which the progenitors of the Khasis known as **u Hynñiewtrep** began their journey into this world.

Interpretations of B. L. Swer (1995), M. G. Lyngdoh (1982), H. O. Mawrie (1991) show that **u Sohpetbneng** explains the close relationship between God and man. It signifies the age of peace and righteousness, the days when only the Creator was worshipped and when God's guidance was very important at every moment. For this reason, the Khasis refer to the age of **u Sohpetbneng** as the "Golden Age". Another interesting aspect of this myth is **Ka Jingkieng Ksiar** or the "Golden Ladder", which became the means through which **u Hynñiewtrep** made his route to earth and vice versa. Perhaps the word '**ksiar**' (gold) is agglutinated to the word **jingkieng** in order to explain the value of the relationship between God and man which is as precious as gold. It is the covenant which binds man and God upon the foundation of truth, righteousness and oneness. According to S. S. Sawian (1994) **u Sohpetbneng** and **ka Jingkieng Ksiar** are not strictly associated with the Golden Age alone but they also reflect the spiritual attachment which binds man with God

till the present day. He believes that **u Hynñiewtrep** should bridge across to God through the Spiritual Golden ladder whose chains include of worship, prayer and invocation. It therefore demands that man should walk along with God everyday, he should seek God's guidance and strengthen his **ka Jingkieng Ksiar** or spiritual attachment in every endeavour.

The myth of **u Sohpetbneng** also speaks about the snapping away of **Ka Jingkieng Ksiar** which H. O. Mawrie (1991) says has caused a chasm. It is here that the distinction between God and man, the Creator and His creation, the divine and the human is reflected. Though the chasm occurs yet **u Sohpetbneng** stands to remind mankind of his allegiance to God that he should uphold the covenant and forever follow the tenets of **tip – briew tip – blei** (knowing – man, and knowing God), **ka tip kur tip – kha** (knowing and respecting one's maternal paternal relations) and **kamai Ia ka Hok** (to earn righteousness).

The Khasis regards **u Sohpetbneng** with reverence and so members of Ka Seng Khasi undertake a pilgrimage to this peak every year usually during the month of February. It is learned that there is no specific reason why the pilgrimage takes place at this time of the year. However, it was thought of that this is the right month for the occasion because the weather during this time of the year is quite pleasant and also because it is an off season for the cultivators. The purpose for holding the pilgrimage is to seek God's guidance and pray for the well being of **u Hynñiewtrep** in every hearth and home, for peace and prosperity in the land of **u Hynñiewtrep** and also worldwide. Invocation is also made for good health both in body and mind, rich harvesting of crops, understanding ancient wisdom and attaining modern knowledge.

#### **CHAPTER – IV: POST GOLDEN AGE**

This chapter is divided into three sections as follows:-

##### **Section I: U Diengñei And Khasi Thought.**

Like the myth of **u Sohpetbneng**, **u Diengñei** too has a meaning of its own. The purport of this myth is to explain the dark age which occurred after the age of **u Sohpetbneng**. **U Diengñei** with its wide spreading branches symbolises the reign of evil which covers the symbolic sunlight of God's goodness. It actually stands for the

transgression of man and shows that he has to abide by the three basic tenets of **ka tip – briew tip – blei, tip – kur tip – kha** and **kamai ia ka hok**. This myth illustrates the impact of the symbolic overcast that became so great leaving the entire creation in a chaotic state of mind.

The myth of **u Diengïei** is also the story of man who walks in his own will and feels that he can live by himself. But because of his own waywardness, H. O. Mawrie (1981) says **u Hynñiewtrep Hynñiewskum** gropes in the dark as he has missed that peace, comfort and consolation which only his Maker can give. He suffers both an inward and outward loneliness and in every direction he turns, he discerns that the world is meaningless, vain and futile. But according to Soso Tham (1976), the darkness which befell man was due to his own action. Most interpretations show that **ka pap** originated from man's heart which is wicked and deceitful. This reminds us of what the *Bible* (Jeremiah 17: 9) speaks about the heart of man: "The heart is deceitful about all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?". Dwelling upon this subject, Soso Tham finds that there is no other deep murky pool which is as fearful and dark as the human heart. This poet has even recounted the evils of the human heart which leads man to the love of wealth and power and thus man is no less compared to Mammon in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, the heavenly bliss began to fade away thus leading to the fall of the Golden Age.

According to my observations, there are two factors which play a vital role in the growth and fall of **u Diengïei**. The two factors are – **u Khla** (the tiger) and **ka Phreit** (a small bird). The myth narrates that the tiger licked the tree whenever man tried to cut it down. The tiger is therefore taken as a symbol of evil, which entices man so that **ka pap** will reign, supreme. Moreover, the tiger does not want the tree to fall and wanted **u Diengïei** to remain, so that he could live freely on earth. On the other hand, **ka Phreit** is regarded as a divine messenger which reveals to the society the way to get rid of the evil tree. She is also considered mysterious for she sends a message that man should destroy **u Diengïei**. **Ka Phreit** is also a reminder that righteousness has not yet disappeared from man but continues to speak in his heart in order to revive mankind and lift him up from **ka pap**.

According to H. O. Mawrie (1981) the myth of **u Diengïei** also speaks of the "Age of Transition"; a stage of change from the evil to humility, self – domineering to repentance and darkness to light. This transition occurs because man still has a conscience which makes him realise that he has moved too far from God. He comes to

his senses after he has undergone a long spell of spiritual crisis. So if **u Diengiei** symbolises man in all his weaknesses and faults, it also symbolises man with his strong will power and determination to fight evil.

In conclusion, the myth of **u Diengiei** reflects the true character of man and the greatness of God. At the first instance, it reflects the fault of man for he has turned away from God and forsakes his position as a precious Creature of God. He commits **ka pap** but later realises that he has to turn his face to God who is his **Nongbuh Nongthaw** (Creator). Lastly, it is through bitter experiences which motivate man to draw himself once again to God.

## **Section II: Ka Krem Lamet Latang And Khasi Thought.**

This myth reflects the disappearance of **ka hok** during the dance festival of the living creatures. Hence, it can be considered allegorical of the darkness which overshadowed man after the sun had fled away.

It is observed that the word **Krem** literally means "cave" while 'La' comes from the word **sla** which means "leaf". In "Lamet" the word 'met' means "solid" or big size while 'tang' in "Latang" means "sacred". Hence, **Krem Lamet Latang** literally means **Lamet Latang** cave. This cave is believed to be the place where the sun flees during the dance festival of the various creatures after being ridiculed for dancing with her brother, the moon.

The age of **ka Krem Lamet Latang** is usually described as the "Age of Gloom" because darkness has crept in due to the fact that man has fallen into 'Ka **siar ka laitkylla**' meaning, 'treachery and violation of sacrificial custom'. This results a torn life, society and home. How much so shall it effect mankind when man himself put forward his 'ka **siar**' against his Maker. Furthermore, 'ka **siar**' leads to 'ka **Laitkylla**', which the Khasis say that ill intention towards others may in turn rebound to the transgressor himself. What is seen in this myth is that man has by passed God and so disaster rebounds upon man because God too turns away from him, which later brings about 'ka **phai lyndet u Blei**' which literally means that 'God has turned His back on man'. Therefore, the darkness which occurs in this age is not because the sun has fled away but because **ka pap** has entered humanity and so darkness reigns over light.

The myth of **ka Krem Lamet Latang** not only depicts darkness and **ka pap** which leaves man in a confused state of mind, but it also explains that the chasm has widened even further. Man finds himself in a dilemma as to what is right and wrong. This has left him in dread because evil has totally controlled him. Later man realises that it is his own responsibility again to bring back the sun from the symbolic cave and he needs no intercessor or debator or any kind of mediator. It is here, that Mawrie (1981) says that the doctrine of atonement comes in where there has to be a compensation for a previous error. Man has to stand in a manly manner and on his own volition he has to go to his Maker. The compensation of **ka pap** is summed up in the phrase, "**Ka ieng rangbah u briew bad ka ap jutang u Blei**", which literally means. "Man to stand as a 'man' and God waits upon whether man abides with the covenant or not". Therefore, atonement is possible only when man knows how to reconcile with God. The myth of **ka Krem Lamet Latang** thus envisages the conception that when man comprehends to uphold the principle of "**Ka ieng rangbah**", God too will not turn away from him and so, "**ka phai lyndet u Blei**", will never occur.

God's love is once again reflected in the myth of **ka Krem Lamet Latang** for he showed man the cock as the most suitable representative to intercede with God. The appearance of the cock as mediator has enabled man to know and understand God's will. Through divine consultation of the egg and through the signs of the cock's entrails, man is able to understand and receive the commands of God. It should be understood therefore, that the cock is simply a mediator who helps restore the relationship between God and man. Since man is unable to encounter his Creator physically, as in the days of **u Sohpetbneng**, the cock becomes an instrument through which man can speak to God through the various signs that are reflected in the divination. In conclusion therefore, the cock is a humble creature and a messenger of God which helps man in his quest for truth also a medium to discover the wishes of God which so far has been accepted by the Khasis in general and upheld zealously by convicted Khasi non-converts in particular.

### **Section – III: Daiñthlen And Khasi Thought**

This section deals with the Khasi concept of **u thlen**. Although it is difficult to explain the physical features of **u thlen**, yet the Khasis believe that it exists as an

evil spirit which has engulfed the life and existence of **u Hynñiewtrep Hynñiewskum**. Despite the fact that it is regarded as a fierce and greedy spirit, yet it still forms part of the Khasi folk belief till the present day.

From the various interpretations it is observed that **u thlen** is an evil spirit which is reared by some clans in the Khasi Hills. Traditionally, it is believed that this evil spirit attaches itself to property and wealth. The worship of such spirits slowly dwindled the belief and faith in God. The effect caused by **u thlen** is tremendous because it also involves the killing of another fellow human being. At the same time, Swer (1995) says **u thlen** symbolises evil thoughts that ruled the hearts of man. It exists even today in the form of greed, heartlessness and material gains. This results therefore, in the decline of human values and brings about a society which is fast degrading and not keeping with the basic Khasi tenet of **tip-briew tip-blei**.

So, besides the traditional belief, **u thlen** also symbolises evil in the form of personal gain and meddle over wealth in addition to destroying his fellow human being. The desire of wealth gives birth to evil like theft, treachery and taking away precious lives. This means that a person who is greedy of wealth is no less compared to **u thlen**.

## CHAPTER – V: CONCLUSION

Like any other traditions in the world, the Khasis too have their own creation myths which relate how the world began and how **U Hynñiewtrep Hynñiewskum** came to settle on earth. To the Khasis God is the Supreme Planner and Creator and in reality, the Khasi religion is monotheistic.

It is also observed that the myths that have been dealt with, also relate to the close relationship of God and man, the fall of the Golden Age, an age where only peace and harmony exists. It also reflects upon the fall of man and at the same time how he fights to win over evil. This is clearly depicted in the myth of **U Diengiei**. The myth of **Ka Krem Lamet Latang** also reflect upon man as God's creature who takes the initiative to win over evil. This myth also shows how man is able to bridge the gap which existed between God and man after the day of **U Diengiei**. The appearance of the cock becomes an instrument through which man can speak to God through divination.

Khasi myths are also found to be allegorical in nature. for within them is embedded a second thought and meaning. For example, the myth of **Ka Krem Lamet Latang** also reflects the power of humility and humbleness. Besides reflecting the Khasi belief in evil spirits like **u thlen**, it is also found that this creature symbolizes envy, greed and jealousy among mankind which is prevalent till today. This results in the decline of normal values and the basic meaning of **Ka tip-briew, tip-Blei**.

In conclusion, the myths that have been dealt with are mythological stories of the genesis of the Khasis, they reflect the cultural traits and beliefs of the people, besides being allegorical in nature.

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