Orality Alive: Recapturing the Tale

Esther Syiem

In an essay, in a recently published book, *Between Ethnography and Fiction,* the anthropologist Jan Brouwer makes an interesting comment on the knowledge system of the Khasis. According to him this system has prevented them from easy conversion into the Christian religion which indicates the existence of an already evolved philosophy of life that was proof against the evangelising fervour of the Christian missionaries. The significance of such a system is the oral preservation of itself, within the private unit of the individual and the public domain of the clan or the community. He cites the example of the Khasi habit of chewing *kwai* 'which may be called an institution that was stubbornly defended against missionary objection.' It 'appears to be an innocent activity, but Khasi oral tradition has a story, known to one and all, that justifies the custom.' (ed: T. B. Subba & Sujit Som 2005:139 &140). This story, (Indian Literature2001: pp142-146), he goes on to say, shows the importance that Khasi society places upon the autonomous individual whilst at the same time, declaring to all and sundry, society's views on mortality. The story has also privatised death. *Kwai* eating has been so ritualised, even today, that it has at all costs, been preserved as an identifying norm. In this manner, the social dimensions of *kwai* eating amongst the Khasis, has filtered itself to a generation, who have become urbanised to a large degree, who are losing touch with their oral foundations, but who are still receptive to a knowledge system that still comes down to them by word of mouth.

The medium of the spoken word has its roots deep in the folk intelligence that has always guided Khasi society. A noted historian made this claim about the historical sense of the Khasis :

'whatever the social scientists may say about the origin of the Khasis, whatever theories they might have advanced –, the fact

remains that the Khasis have their own theory about their origin – according to oral accounts handed down from generation to generation, it appears that the original home of the Khasis was somewhere else.' (R. S. Lyngdoh 1996:118)

'which places the oral mode well within the centre of life in Khasi society, true today as it was in the past, characteristically opening up a discourse with the current practitioners of the written word. As in all developing cultures vacillating between the oral medium and the written form, attempting to incorporate the oral in the written, the folk is a conscious presence that permeates all spheres of life. It can neither be dismissed nor can it be simplistically elevated to its former position in what was once a homogeneous society. Assessing the worth of its existence in Khasi society is an exercise that requires the kind of sensitivity displayed by Bevan L. Swer. He clearly sees its imprint within the constructs of the Khasi imagination and hopes for it to be revitalised again and again, even as it revitalises a society that is much in need of renewing contacts with its deepest self.'

In his book 'Ka Mationg ki Khanatang' (Bevan L. Swer 1995: 2) Swer, imbues the folk with a distinctively audible presence. He compares it to the thumping of the ethnic heartbeat and uses the stronger term *kyndeh* instead of the commonly used *tied* to describe its pulsations. This conjures up images of strenuous action that bespeaks of a heightened sensitivity embedded deep within the community's psyche. It is an inheritance that all have come to, that makes a justifiable claim for the immeasurable richness of all folk traditions. He continues with his own definition and analysis of myths, legends and folktales and initiates a discussion on the immense vitality to be found therein. In parenthesis he is actually demonstrating, by using well known and not so well known examples of folk discourses, the complexly layered grounding of the folk within the social set up of a community.

As corroborative examples from the world of literature, one may turn to the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe or to the Indian writer R. K. Narayan who use the folk to delve into the diversity of their existing cultures. In their novels the folk is a metaphoric presence

of order and signification that enables them to move into regions unacknowledged before. It is a literary device; it enhances their vision of life and aerates the channels of communication hitherto neglected because ignored. It also gives them a sense of their own rootedness. In Khasi society the folk, whilst belonging to the private individual and to the community at large, has adapted itself to the changing sensibilities of people who once perpetrated it with sanctimonious effort. As it has moved into significant spaces of human life, it has undergone the permutations consequent upon a living organism. Its influence sometimes weak, sometimes strong shapes one's responses to the world at large. The ' "past-ness" of the present makes up the very sap' [1]of Khasi society. The tale of the Khasi script that was lost, for example, has been re-told with ardent fervour as if to bring out the ambivalence of a story that continues to hold sway over the minds of people who are still within the powerful ambit of the spoken word:

There was a time when God called together the people of the world in order to give them a written script of their own. Having received it each went their own way back to earth. The *dkhar* or the plainsman, kept his within the safety of his knotted ponytail whilst the Khasi put his into his mouth. On the way back they had to cross a river that was swollen with rain. The *dkhar* swam safely across, his script safe with him but the Khasi, in battling against treacherous currents, suddenly swallowed his. This is why the Khasi has never had a written script and has had to rely upon the spoken word.

The tale places a great onus upon all thinking members of society. It challenges them to the telling and gives them an oracular sense of themselves. It says much of the double-edged attitude of the Khasi towards himself. It directs the hearer's vision to the struggling recipient who is presumptuous enough to put the script into his mouth. At his wits end, he does what seems to be the only way out for him. Responses to the tale have been accompanied with light-hearted banter concerning the obtuseness of the Khasi recipient. According to many, the tale demonstrates the powerlessness of the Khasi in dealing with a situation that requires a quick wit. Comparisons are inevitably drawn

up with the shrewd plainsman who had already anticipated the impending disaster looming in the horizon.

But in an age that insists upon edging out obsolete priorities, there is this tendency to re-qualify and re-orient itself towards hitherto undefined goals. Hence the tale of the lost script must be understood within the logistics of a society that is keen to review itself in the light of similar changes taking place elsewhere in the world. Bevan L. Swer observes that the tale of the lost script is an empowering one. He makes an articulate stand for the tale's psychological and imaginative inroads into the sensibilities of the contemporary Khasi. This throws a valuable light upon a tale made infamous by a persona who has been much maligned and taken to be an example of the Khasi's illaudable character. In the same way is another tale about *Manik Raitong*, the legendary forefather of Khasi music, whose act of adultery seems to have elicited more sensationalistic response than his esoteric role as the artist *per se*, misunderstood.

Bevan L. Swer's qualified acceptance of the tale of the lost script brings it to the forefront of the Khasi oral tradition. He succeeds in changing the shape of Khasi thought by rescuing the misbegotten recipient of the lost script from ignominy and making an entire generation look upon him as the sole anchor of a tradition that gave a boost to the Khasi's distinctive sense of self. However, the self-reflexiveness of the tale, which plays upon one's responses to the presumptuous Khasi recipient, shows a mock-seriousness in the attitude displayed towards the Khasi buffoon. He is the vociferous but unmatched 'historical aside', always making an unwarranted appearance in the writing of the linear history of the Khasi. He has always maintained a paradoxical profile in one's understanding of Khasi letters and his contribution to it has been sustained by the countless abettors in his crime: perpetrators of the oral tradition, multi-voiced and multi-toned, equally bent upon perpetrating a parallel discourse to the written one.

Through the decades, orality has manifestly achieved a status of power within Khasi society. It looks to a future that can attain

authenticity only through absolute acceptance of its sway over the private and the public. The folk as being inextricable from the oral, and as it enhances the Khasi's knowledge of his past is a primary dimension of the larger domain of Khasi life. It cannot be trimmed off from the main body of Khasi thought.

The orality that defines Khasi culture may also be understood to be an open-ended one for it raises queries that are placed in the path of later generations honing in for a deeper insight. Each variant of a tale runs parallel to one another. One is never made to forget the multiplicity of voices that garnish the tradition. Unless one is able to accept this, one misses out on the dynamics of the telling, the listening and the further telling, which revises and deletes, improvises and embellishes as it is passed on from group to group. Thus, stories keep renewing themselves in a society that is slow to surrender the art of story telling to the printed medium. Although in a technological age, the medium of communicating the folk has undergone a significant metamorphosis, (ed. Handoo, Kvideland 1999:5) the goals have always remained the same. In the context of the Khasi, the stature of the folk has remained undiminished since it still has a prominent place in a society that continues to maintain links with its oral past through village elders and clan uncles.

An example that one can draw from is the tale of *Noh Ka Likai*. It tells of a woman who commits suicide when she discovers that her husband (her child's stepfather) has fed her the flesh of her own daughter. In the tale, fear and jealousy are the foremost emotions that threaten to ruin the marriage. Suspicion is compounded with mistrust. The child who should be the centre of the parent's world has been rejected by a stepfather who is also a possessive husband. *Likai's* loyalties are severely tested. She, it would seem is the one who goes out to work and it is during one of these days when she comes back after a day's hard labour that she finds that, uncharacteristically, her husband has something cooking in the pot for her. After the meal she searches her betel nut basket to have some *kwai* but discovers the remnants of her child's fingers strewn all over the basket. She rushes out in a state of shock only to throw herself from the waterfall

that has since been named after her.

Likai is a type of the Khasi woman, common enough nowadays, eager to make a new life for herself. Her fault lies in rushing into a relationship without perhaps consulting her clan members or, being over sensitive to her child's need for a father and mistaking him to be a good father-substitute, or even having fallen in love with him, she chooses him to share his life with her child and herself. Anyone would agree that she has mistakenly harboured the wrong man. She bespeaks of the travails of the Khasi woman, who sometimes has too much to carry on her shoulders. The tale resonates with the tragedy of a woman having to struggle alone. It carries over unresolved, into the present generation many of the problems that have confronted women, then and now. The note of interrogation at the core of the story lies in the fact that this tale comes from a matrilineal society where 'women are supposed to be more equal than men'. Yet the predator at large is the identity-less -because faceless and nameless, two disqualifications that discredit him as a good man -husband who escapes unscathed. It articulates an endemic problem concerning the rights of women in a society that is supposed to give a better deal to them. In a child-centered society such as the Khasi society, the violence directed against the hapless child boomerangs onto the mother and, its welfare is left to the imagination of those listening to the story. Its open-endedness pushes the story forward into the orbit of other listeners in the future. This initiates a process of re-examination of a system that has many paradoxes inbuilt into it. The fear is not only that there are still such men at large in society but also that there are many women who willingly allow themselves to be so victimised. Death in such a case does not clinch matters. One is reminded that there are several *'Likais* since, unretrieved from their personal sufferings.'[2] The tale goes beyond the purview of the social to touch upon matters that strike at the very heart of society. It throws up issues that need to be countered, disproved, understood, assimilated or thrashed out according to the perceptions of successive generations. In the light of present concerns, the tale has arrived at a moment in

linear history, when gender issues are causing debates the world over and, the death of *Likai* is an eye-opening factor concerning the powerlessness of this society against malefactors such as *Likai's* husband. The tale warns even as it dramatises *Likai's* inept strategy for survival.

The folk defies the circumscriptions of theory. Its lifeline is its apparent artlessness. Its influence may be measured by the power that it still yields through its diverse manifestations in song or dance, in pottery or weaving, in proverbs or aphorisms, in tales or in folk theatre. In his essay, *Some Aspects of Khasi Folk Drama* Bevan L.Swer demonstrates the kind of play-acting that forms the verve of Khasi life. The enactment of rituals according to him is common in the social and religious make-up of the Khasi (Handoo, Kharmawphlang, Som 2003: 111). It manifests itself on social occasions such as funerals, weddings and ceremonies of other kinds. It is a vast reflection of the oral composite of life in Khasi society. The immense body of the folk exists close to the surface, punctuating it with its characterising insight. It is forward looking in its adaptability to change and, in Khasi society it has gone a long way in exercising order and control over many aspects of the lived life; it is never uncommon to seek guidance from a village or a clan elder who is steeped in folk knowledge. It breathes life, poetry and philosophy. Its aesthetics is based upon a simple enunciation of its principles, wherein the physical and the extra physical are equally legitimised. Hence, one would continue to view the folk, as a vast resource of knowledge patterns, which wields control far beyond itself.

A seminal influence over Khasi thought has been the tale concerning the origin of *U Hynniew Trep*[3] or the Khasi race. It has inserted itself within many written discourses of the Khasi, providing him with a more complete sense of an identity than the one that history has bestowed upon him. The tale allegorises the coming of the Khasis to the hills. There were actually sixteen families in all, nine choosing to stay on in heaven and seven coming down to the earth. The primary relationship of the seven families with God, with nature and with the other nine families, was tragically severed, when they

willfully cut themselves off from their Maker.

After the severance from God and from Nature the Khasi literally became an exile in this world (ed. Handoo, Kharmawphlang, Som 2003: 19). Before his separation from God, the entire creation was involved in facilitating life for the Khasi who existed in an undivided universe of freedom and productivity. Originally, there was a divine sense of order in the rapport that the Khasi shared with his Creator, where access to Heaven was easy. The *(ei* tree that grew unhampered on *U Lum Diengïei* or the *Diengïei* Peak, was the symbol of God's munificence[4]. But when this was felled, God withdrew Himself from the created universe and the Khasi found himself adrift in a metaphysical darkness. The felled tree is an image of the fragmented universe. After the incident, oral sources speak about the mounting efforts of the Khasi to repair his relationship with God. The oral discourse that takes place after this mythical period is the soul searching one of physical and spiritual relocation. The construction of a new terrestrial order that the Khasi was now embarked upon may be understood to be part of an existential reaction to the chaos surrounding him: hence the supremacy of the spoken word.

It has been wielded to exercise order within the individual and without, in the external world. As an exile in a world of his own making the Khasi now has a divided relationship with himself. And, if one were to analyse the interweaving thread of philosophical sayings and aphorisms that run through Khasi society one would detect in them a concerted effort to re-lay the foundations of a society that had once overreached itself, to re-establish, if only in part, the world order that had existed before the break in the relationship with God. The thought patterns that now distinguish such a society reveals a desire to pre-empt the kind of destructiveness that had reached uncontrolled heights and brought damage to society at an earlier epoch in the mythical history of the Khasi. The folk has surely entrenched itself within the psyche of a community that bears a sense of the shared inheritance that has marked them out from all others. This has been reflected in the works of such well-known Khasi writers as Soso Tham and Victor Bareh. They write with a profound sense

of the loss of an ideal order, which throws the present world order into sharp contrast to it. There is an anguished lyricism in them, the keynote in Khasi writing that goes back to a mythic past that, one finds, can never really be exercised from the domain of a collective memory. It has been the cause of many debates and innumerable strategies to bridge the gap with the Maker, to make society aware of its failings. Salman Rushdie's definition of the 'imaginary homelands' (Salman Rushdie1981:10), could well be compared to the Khasi's own mythic world existing in another realm. He too has made singular attempts to repossess a world that he knows he can never actually reclaim.

The Khasi exile is left with nothing less than the ability to vocalise a loss that translates itself into a dialogue with the antagonists of his destiny. The exilement becomes manifest in an orality that expresses itself through the allegorical tropes of symbol and metaphor. Hence *U Lum Sohpet Bneng, Ka Diengïei,* and *Ka Jingkieng Ksiar,* are multi-voiced and inter-connecting symbols of a lost era. They are central to a narrative that tells of the cataclysmic loss that the Khasi has suffered. They had once established a rationale of the Khasi world-view, that was destroyed by humankind. Ironically, however, in destroying them and in thus trying to establish a fresh relationship with God, a new connectivity is established with the environment, re-mapping the Khasi's position in a universe that spells out a new sense of responsibility for him. Their destruction stands testimony to the self-annihilating instinct of the Khasi. At the same time, they also function as symbolically tragic reminders of a gigantic loss that evokes a sense of pathos and vulnerability. They form the philosophical and socio-cultural base upon which an entire civilisation has re-built itself since that mythical time. They wield their power through *Ka Ktien* (the Word), a double-edged weapon for survival in a society that knows of no other self-empowering strategy than the skill that comes from diligently exercising one's orality. As a matter of interest, totally unrelated to what has been stated before, but emphasizing the power of the spoken word, wars in the heartland of the Khasi began with ka *thma ka ktien,* the war of words (Lest We Forget 1994: 18) first

and, if this proved unsuccessful in preventing an actual war, then the Khasi resorted to his bow and arrow.

When nature is destroyed in the actual felling of the *ïei* tree the Khasi commits a sacrilege far beyond his limited purview. Firstly, he challenges the authority of the Maker; and mars his relationship with Him by allowing his reasoning to be clouded over by the misjudgments of other creatures who are said to be bent upon spoiling his relationship with the Creator[5]. Secondly, the intellectual challenge that he throws out to the Omniscient One, takes on a physical form, that of wanton brutality. When he finds that the *ïei* tree cannot be felled and discovers the reason for its nightly recovery, the Khasi places several axes with their blades pointing outwards, to destroy the tiger that was responsible for licking the tree back to health again. With the slicing off of the tiger's tongue, the Khasi incriminates himself in a multi-layered crime that completely undoes his relationship with creation. Hence he is condemned to an earthly life of hard toil. He has to regroup his identity around an exilic sense of deprivation that makes him more prone to a foiled sense of humanity.

The symbolic silencing of nature in the slicing off of the tiger's tongue has deep repercussions in the world of the Khasi. He loses an ally who has always been sympathetic to his needs, a presence attuned to him at all times. He must at all costs woo nature back to himself. He must, as other tales like the one about *Ka Krern Larnet Latang*[6] imply, re-initiate a fresh relationship with nature giving it a central position in his life. It is within these parameters of Khasi thought that nature has a definitive role to play in the life of the Khasi. Every creature and every life form is given a fresh significance. This will bring order back to a world that has gone astray with mischief of his making. The Khasi exile does not, however, accept banishment passively. He sends out feelers to the Creator and initiates a fresh start in a world that he knows is cut off from heavenly resources. Thus, one notices the social emphasis that is placed upon manners and morals. These are important requisites in the life of every Khasi, unceasingly reminding him of his duty towards man and society and, towards God.

The tale of the destruction is fraught with self-betrayal and cataclysmic pain. Nature collapses in shock at the hands of the Khasi. It ends on a feeling of overwhelming loss. The code to this dramatically moving tale is played on a note of tragic recognition. Catharsis is possible only if the Khasi seeks to restore the sacredness of the spoken word, which was traumatised when he did not keep his with the Creator. It is in this respect that the orality of Khasi culture has always been viewed as being both an asset and liability.

Since the drama about the expulsion of the Khasi from the presence of God, is said to have taken place in the *Bhoi* region where *U Lum Sohpet Bneng* (The Peak of Heaven's Navel) still stands, the tale gives it a rootedness that adds to the sense of the real. It comes as no surprise that annual pilgrimages are now being made to the summit of *U Lum Sohpet Bneng* to retrace origins, to re-establish connection with God or even to re-ritualise a belief system. It has drawn a large number of pilgrims, tourists, interested people and uncommitted stragglers to witness these revivalist gatherings that indicate the tremendous control that the oral tradition exercises even today. Despite historically proven theories about the origin of the Khasi, this tale cannot be so easily relinquished as it has welded itself to the Khasi religion. The pilgrimage, imbued with various religious significances, may also be understood to be a modern extension of a-historic search for the lost route that must, however, be understood at the level of the allegorical and the metaphorical. On an extra-religious level, this intensifies the proposition inferred from oral sources, that the Khasi is an exile, in a world that seems to be thwarting all endeavours to reclaim that lost status.

The tale has a specific place in Khasi religion, literature and culture, and in the socio-economic layout of Khasi society. The Divine Decree (ed. Hipshon Roy 1979:85) often recalled by the intellectual and by the common man alike, was said to have been imparted by God to the seven families who made the earth their home. It was this decree that helped them carry on with the task of rebuilding their lives. These were, *kamai ia ka hok, tipbriew-tipblei* and *tip-kur tip-kha*. The first commandment directs the Khasi to earn righteousness in this

world, the second, to know man and to know God, and the third, to know one's matrilineal *(kur)* and non-matrilineal relatives *(kha)*. In brief, these are social and extra-social directives that have been garnered from an erstwhile era that once reflected the perfect relationship that had existed between man and God. They provided a moral ambience for the tribe of the seven families who use them as props towards the re-construction of social and religious patterns for themselves. It is not uncommon to hear from a Khasi mouth, these injunctions to himself or to his family and friends. They have retained their moral vigour and they continue to work upon a generation that is caught on the conflicting changes of its own making. If one were to view the quality of statesmanship in the region, however, one would see the kind of lip service that is being paid to these supposedly divine rules of conduct. The comparison arises because they still form a part of the essential configuration of, the Khasi world-view. It has neither become dysfunctional nor has it lost its potency, as it continues to be written in human hearts and not on parchment paper.

Endnotes :

1. Ref: Unpublished paper by Esther Syiem entitled *Folk Networking The U Hynñiew Trep Way.*

2. Ref: Unpublished paper by Esther Syiem entitled *Khasi Matrilineal Society: The Paradox Within.*

3. This tale may be obtained from *Folklore in the Changing Times* Ed. by Handoo, Kharmawphlang and Som in an essay entitled *U Hynniew Trep* Ka *Diengiei* and *U Lum Sohpetbneng*: Folk Imprinting p.166.

4. There are many oral versions of the tale. Some do not refer to the Diengïei as a symbolic manifestation of God's faith in man. References are made to the tree growing out of all proportions as a reflection of the greed that has distorted humankind's vision.

5. A list of the attributes of God may be looked at in *Khasi Heritage* 1979:96. Hence, there are several epithets used for Him.

6. This was the cave where the sun was supposed to have hidden herself from humankind. The cock was finally sent to bring her back. He was the one most humble and therefore, fitted to the task.

References :

Khasi National Celebration Committee. 1994 *Lest* We *Forget,* Shillong: Seven Huts Enterprise.

Ed. Handoo, *Folklore in The Changing Times*

Kharmawphlang, Som. 2003 Bhopal: IGRMS.

Roy, Hipshon. 1979 Khasi Heritage Shillong: Ri Khasi Press.

Swer, Bevan L.1995 *Ka Matïong Ki Khanatang* Shillong: Ri Lum Offset Press.

Ed. Handoo, Kvideland.1999 *Folklore in the Changing World.* Mysore: Zooni Publications.

Rushdie, Salman. 1981 *Imaginary Homelands.* London: Granta Books.

Nongkynrih, Kynpham. 2001 *Death in a Hut The Story of Betel Nut Betel Leaf Lime and Tobacco.* Indian Literature Delhi: Sahitya Akademi No.201. VoIX LV No.1.

Lyngdoh, R. S.1966 *Government and Politics in Meghalaya.* New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House.

Ed. Subba,T. B. & Som, Sujit.2005 *Between Ethnography and Fiction Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in India.* Delhi: Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd.

Syiem, Esther. 2005 *Folk Networking The U Hvnñiew Trep Way Laiphew Na Ar Jingmut* Contempoorary Khasi Author's Association, Shillong.

— 2004 (unpublished) *Khasi Matrilineal Society The Paradox Within.*