

Cultural History and the Genesis of the Khasi Oral Tradition

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

The Khasis, by which I mean all the seven sub-tribes—Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lynggam, and the now-little-heard-of Diko—of the Khasi tribe,¹ are a great story-telling people. Telling because their alphabet is a fairly recent history, no older than Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary who introduced the Roman script in 1842² to form the essentials of the Khasi written word. But the alphabet is nothing to judge them by. Enlightenment did not come with schools and colleges.³ The Khasis before the white man came were not a band of barbarians roving the hills for heads and scalps. They did not climb trees like monkeys, nor hunted 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, yes, and industry. Theirs was a society of great wisdom and civilised conduct at a time when brute force held sway. True enough they had their fair share of war and bloodshed. But more important, they propagated peace and togetherness with other people, for theirs was a culture that worshipped God through a respect for man and Nature, and indeed all animals and animated things as the equal creations of God. That is why the Khasi stories always begin with '... When man and beasts and stones and trees spoke as one...' This shows the Khasi worldview, the universe as a cosmic whole that receives its animation and force from the one living truth, their God, *U Blei*.

The great story-telling 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,⁴ 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 holy communion with God at the summit of a very tall mountain, after being familiarised with the history of his race and initiated into certain religious rites and moral principles which were to govern the spiritual and moral life, and indeed the daily activities of his community. Together with him was a representative of the people from the plains of Surma. Both were carrying with them their 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 huge river, which was then raging with turbulent floods. The man from Surma, used to swimming in large rivers, attached his document to a turf of hair on his pate and somehow managed to swim safely across.

The Khasi, not wanting to be left behind, took his document between his teeth and against his better judgment, attempted to cross the river. But being a hill man, not accustomed to swimming in surging torrents, he soon found himself floundering in 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. Though after a long struggle, he managed to save himself, he had, however, 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 that 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 and everyone on the teachings of God and his divine laws.

It was from that time that the tradition of story telling among the Khasis was supposed to have started.⁵ The stories began with an exposition as to 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 worldview, 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* (Golden Ladder)⁶ located at *Lum Sohpet Bneng* (Mount of Heaven's Navel) and how they, in a Golden Age of their existence, used to travel between heaven and earth through the Golden Ladder they only mean to impress 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.

For so long I have been talking only about the *khanatang* or sanctified myths and their function. But the intention of the Khasi folk stories cannot be confined to philosophical and religious enlightenment alone. Having realised the tremendous potential of the *khanatang*, the Khasis invented a story for everything. Explaining the inexplicable, comprehending the incomprehensible, they invented a story or a moral lesson and they invented another. And they have a story to tell about everything—the phenomenon of lightning and thunder; the unique characteristics of animals; a gigantic boulder that looks like an overturned conical basket; the name of a waterfall; a hill; a forest; a village... everything. 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.

Serving 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.

But whatever they may be, they always have their roots either in the philosophy and the cultural life of the Khasi people or in their attempt to offer explanations for whatever is mysterious in life according to their concept of God and the universe. The need to teach and propagate cultural history, therefore, is, it may be reiterated, the reason and the inspiration behind the Khasi stories.

Endnotes and References :

1. Oral tradition refers to the ancestors of the Khasis as the *Hynñiew Trep*, or the Seven Huts, the Seven Families, the Seven Clans, who would later become the ancestors of the Seven sub-tribes of the Khasi race, encompassing the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam, and the now little-heard-of Diko. See R. Tokin Rymbai, 'The Evolution of the *Hynñiewtrep* Polity, *Khanasamari—u Khun u Hajar ka Ri Hynñiewtrep*', ed. Sumar Sing Sawian (Shillong: Apphira Publications, 1998) N. pag.

2. See Nigel Jenkins, 'Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis.' *The New Welsh Review* 21 (1993): pp 56-82.

3. On the subject of Khasi enlightenment see R. Tokin Rymbai, 'Evolution of Modern Khasi Society', *Khasi Heritage*. (Shillong: Seng

Khasi, 1979) p56, and Hipshon Roy, 'The Khasis, Where Lies the Soul of Our Race', ed. Hipshon Roy (Shillong: Hipshon Roy, 1982): p 3.

4. See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, 'Khasi Myths and Folktales: The Lost Manuscript', *Indian Literature* 201 (Jan-Feb2001):pp166-8.

5. *ibid.*

6. See Sumar Sing Sawian, *Ki Khun ki Hajar na Jingkieng Ksiar* (Shillong: Future Creations, 2004): p 31.