



The
Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative

Esther Syiem

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Fax : +91 361 2519231

Email : info@easternbookhouse.in/easternbookhouse@gmail.com.

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Dedication To

*My Mother Bliantimai Syiem and My Father
Hollington Diengdoh who have passed on
They taught me the art of reading voices*

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Ki Jingsneng Tymmen and the Clan Elder was presented at a seminar in Kolkata organized by the Dept. of Comparative Literature Jadavpur University, Kolkata, on *Literatures and Oratures as Knowledge Systems: Texts from the North-East* held on 14th-16th January 2009. It was also presented as *Scripting the Oral: Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* at a national seminar in Shillong on *Society and Literature: Interdisciplinary Transactions* on 16th, 17th & 18th March 2010 organised by the Dept. of English, NEHU in collaboration with ICSSR-NERC.

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Esther Syiem

Introduction

The essays reflect, firstly, the author's attempt to understand the oral premise upon which Khasi society was built and secondly, to try to assess it through the narratives that form part of the discourse that is central to Khasi thought. This provides an illuminating insight into one of the oral communities of North East India, in its transition from the oral to the written, from antiquity to modernity. It forms part of the ongoing attempt of these communities to situate their age old concerns and values in this contemporary, literary world.

Even as the author places Khasi philosophy within the ambit of the oral in the first three essays, an attempt has been made to bring out some of the social practices that mark out Khasi society as being distinctively oral. The origin myth places the onus on the Khasi individual and subsequently on society itself to justify existence on earth. Figures such as the messenger who lost the script and who play a self-reflexive role in Khasi culture have been critiqued in terms of the influence that they have had on cultural thought even today.

Chapter Four discusses the historic role that the maternal uncle plays in a society that has perforce maintained its matrilineal character despite the many onslaughts against it. *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* as compiled by Radhon Sing Berry is the written body of work that the chapter attempts to read and understand.

The remaining chapters deal with the iconic figures of Khasi society; to analyse what they have always stood for and to situate and critically assess their place in the contemporary world.

With the growing interest in folk studies in North East India this book will be an invaluable resource to researchers across many universities.

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The book takes up some of the oral narratives that have informed Khasi society and attempts to locate the discourse that they have generated over the years. Whilst familiarising the reader with unfamiliar themes and concepts, the author has also succeeded in drawing the reader within the ambit of the matrilineal to enlighten one's perception of Khasi society and its cultural mores. The essays provide relevant and incisive insights into a society that is still struggling to maintain the balance between the intrusions of the written: the modern and contemporary; and the challenges of the spoken: the pre-modern and pre-colonial.



Esther Syiem teaches English Literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She has been involved in the study of Khasi folk literature for more than a decade now. Some of her contributions form part of this book. Esther Syiem is a bilingual writer and an established poet. Her publications include two volumes of poetry, *Oral Scriptings* and *Follies and Frailties of Wit and Wisdom*; a play in Khasi entitled *Ka Nam* studied as a text in the Khasi Department, NEHU, Shillong. She also has a volume of critical work and has co-edited anthologies for the Under-Graduate Courses under NEHU. Esther Syiem comes from a traditional Khasi family rooted in Khasi oral culture. She traces her ancestry back to the cradle of Khasi folklore at Sohra and to the Myllichem valley. She is settled in Shillong with her husband and three children.

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