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Transcribing Orality

A Study of Ki Jingsneng Tymmen

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At their creative best, *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* (The teachings of elders) are a body of aphorisms that have been orally transmitted through the ages. They mark an important territory in Khasi thought for they capture the ambience of a culture with roots embedded deep in the oral practices of their ancestors, where the social and the metaphysical interpenetrate each other. The noted Khasi writer, Radhon Singh Berry, put them down in written form in a two-volume work first published in 1902, which will be continually referred to in this chapter. Although they are more than a century old, the two volumes—unedited—are still used as a literary text in schools and colleges for imparting Khasi culture to the present generation. Though repetitive to the modern reader, the very essence of the oral lies in just this. The paradox of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* lies in the fact that their interface with society is at the level of the oral. But for obvious reasons the discussion centres around the written version.

For purposes of the present study, this written rendition will be used as the primary, although not the exclusive, source. Within the scope of the discussion, the two volumes have been used as a means towards the larger end of understanding the structure of the Khasi belief and value system. One would, however, have to go beyond them and draw from the oral sources that have fed the very foundations of Khasi society.

One would look at *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* as a vital extension of the social, an outgrowth of the oral that has defined the Khasi way of life. It serves as a coalescence of Khasi thought. Many of the dos and don'ts

found in *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* are still functional in modern everyday life, the anchor that, ironically, seems to assuage but not alleviate much of the confusion in an increasingly complex society.

Ki Jingsneng Tymmen reflect the vital chords of a society that has always believed in the existence of one supreme deity, *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*, God the Creator and God the Maker, and the life concurrent with such a belief; that the Khasi has come to this world only to *kamai ïa ka hok* or to work for righteousness. The formulation of this body of sayings or proverbs and chants has been carefully shaped by a culture that has always preferred to explain its existence in mythic rather than in historical terms.[1] This is intimately connected with the elevation and installation of the oral to a position of centrality that was consequent upon the mythical loss of the written script.[2] The oral or the spoken word, *ka ktien*, rationalizes the ultimate meaning of existence in a way that is geared towards the preservation of a mystical sense of life where the *rngiew* or the aura that radiates from an individual and even the entire community must be kept alive (Giri 1998). The individual or community may be measured in terms of the *rngiew* that gives it distinctiveness.

The *rngiew* is a numinous extension of personality, a lighted area that is said to visibly encircle an individual, spelling out personality in several complex layers. Nourished by an inherent genius, which may be defined as racial wisdom, it is an unselfconscious recognition of one's multiple strengths. This in itself produces positive waves that communicate themselves to others in multifarious and intangible ways. The *rngiew* speaks of an inner force that is difficult to conceal. In maturity it is almost tangible and is a natural protection against all negative influences. Even a child may possess a strong *rngiew* or be *eh rngiew* and, therefore, be able to withstand the suppressive forces that may threaten it. Giving a child a name is the first step towards empowering its *rngiew*.

To be *jem rngiew* is to be opposite of *eh rngiew*; that is, to be abjectly prone to suppression or to be unable to contend with conflicting pressures of many kinds. In life one must make a conscious effort towards the development of a strong *rngiew*. The *rngiew* is an integral part of personality in a way that is difficult to peel off. It is an organic accumulation of the experiences that determine the inner core and outer layer that constitutes personality. Figuratively speaking, the person whose flag flies high at all times is the person whose *rngiew* remains uncontested, keeping marauders at bay.

At this point, an explicatory note is necessary to explain *Ka Niam Kur* or the clan religion originally practised by the Khasis. Dondor Giri

Nongkhlaw, a well-known geographer, has explained its origin and evolution in his article, "That Elusive Niam Kur (Clan Religion) of the Hynñiewtrep Geographical Landscape" (2007). Although it would not be possible to discuss this at length, the one indisputable fact that emerges is the respect that the maternal uncle in the Khasi matrilineal society evokes. Today, even in Christian families, he maintains an importance that is impossible to sideline. The appellation "orphan" for example cannot be indiscriminately used, if the clan uncle and grandparents are still alive. This effectively points to the indispensable role that the clan uncle has to fulfil in respect of his clan. All belief remaining the same in the various clans or *kur*, prayers, rituals and sacrifices were usually performed by the eldest maternal uncle of the clan. His esteem within the clan, and consequently within society, lies in his ability to negotiate the social and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical. He spells out the rationale for life by codifying existence for the clan and society at large.

As clan elder, Radhon Singh Berry perceives the value of the words that he transcribes, consciously aware that they will help in the maturing process of each individual *rngiew*. He must, therefore, take his role seriously in order to ultimately fortify the *rngiew* of the entire Khasi community. The motivating power of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* lies in the elder's consistent efforts to keep the symbolic Khasi flag flying high at all times, for the *rngiew* to be nourished and to grow.

Unlike the vast body of oral resources in African American literature that evolved as subterfuges to the white master, *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* are straightforward, pithy reserves of philosophy and poetry, culture and literature. They come from a society that enjoyed the freedom of introspective and, especially, retrospective thought; the ancestors were unquestioned as the ideal repositories of wisdom and knowledge. They speak of the inevitable outgrowth of a society that has always placed great importance upon the spoken word, as it must continually harvest its own store of accumulated wisdom. This is both challenge and promise, for the spoken word has been perceived as a tool of immense potential, its full power understood only in maturity, hence it cannot be trifled with. Section 21 of Part 1 warns against the dangers of negating the word.

The antecedents of the written version of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* date back to a period when the evangelization of the Khasi and Jaintia hills by Welsh missionaries had gained momentum. As was inevitable in such cases, a number of Khasi intellectuals, having benefited from a Western and in some cases a Bengali education, fought hard to preserve

the unwritten in the written form. One significant result of the preservation of Khasi literature and culture was the compilation of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*.

I have dwelt at length on the 'Invocation' as this forms a significant prelude towards the understanding of the Khasi belief and value system. The rest of the *jingsneng* grow from the argument that must be placed before 'God and man'. These *jingsneng* harvest the racial wisdom of the Khasis, which is communicated through chants or *ki phawar*, an inbuilt means of public communication. As a genre they form a vast store of undocumented knowledge. To some they come as naturally as speech itself. They use subterfuges such as humour and exaggeration to express themselves (War 1994). In *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen, ki phawar* are an inevitable outgrowth of a natural skill with words, wielded for the benefit of their audience. They display a sense of poetic propriety in their ability to combine the oral techniques of poetry with moral injunction.

The 'Invocation' is a request for empowerment from God. Three epithets have been used to describe Him: "*U Blei U Trai U Kynrad U Bastad*," (Berry 1959: 1) or 'God the Maker, the Master, the All-Knowing One.' Although this is a formulaic beginning for all occasions, it is always at the altar of *U Blei* that the elder, the priest or the shaman invokes empowerment for the performance of his role. The four lines of the 'Invocation' sum up the Khasi world view, God above and supplicating humankind below. By virtue of his maturity, his position of responsibility and his contribution to society, the elder takes on the mantle of a higher responsibility to impart to a younger generation the values that must be nurtured for safeguarding a God-centred life.

When *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* were first published, it may be inferred that Radhon Singh Berry was the ideal image of the Khasi elder, representative of a particular breed of Khasi men who have a manifest responsibility towards God and the younger generation. One must also see him within the perspective of the written version, as the poetic persona responsible for the projection of culture and religion. Upon him too, rests the ability to wield the spoken word with sharpness and insight. He is retracing a path that has been traversed several times over in the past by similar men of responsibility. The one significant difference lies in the fact that the path is now a 'written one'.

The verses resonate with accumulated voices from the past, repeating the essence of *Ka Akor Khasi* or the Khasi code of ethics. He emulates the spoken word through an oratorical display of language and maintains the formality reserved for occasions such as these, when the entire *kur* or clan

gathers around the elder to be taught in its ways. Consequently, one must understand that the identity of the elder, of Radhon Singh Berry per se, is not as important as the ritual moulding of Khasi identity through the spoken word. This has been the compulsion of a society that perceives continuity primarily in its ability to impart, instil and teach its younger ones, in and through, the spoken word.

Hence the emphasis upon truth, *ka hok*, in the second line of the 'Invocation' as a way of life ordained by God, is also a metaphoric self-anointment by truth that elevates the elder to the position of seer. The second line envisions a generation that is made perfectible by its inner sighting of truth, equipping itself to lead the younger lot. The third line roots the race upon an important dimension, the clan, paternal relatives and the family: *kur*, *kha* and *ïing*. These have been crystallized and are reflected in everyday conversation in terms of *kamai ïa ka hok*, to earn (work for) righteousness, *tipbriew-tipblei*, to know man and to know God, and *tip-kur tip-kha*, to know one's maternal and paternal relations (Rymbai 1979).

In much the same way as caste is an all-pervasive entity in Hindu society (Kakar and Kakar 2008: 138), clan is in the Khasi way of life. These three cornerstones of existence for the Khasi find analogy in the three hearthstones that make up the Khasi hearth—*ki mawbyrsiew*. These special stones that ring the fire represent the strength and unity of a family and hence, of society. The glowing fire in the kitchen has been a cultural symbol of abundance and continuity, especially when a household can still boast of the presence of a member or members of the older generation who, in the literal sense, keep its embers alive by warming themselves around it. Ideally it is around the hearth, not in the shade of a tree, that character is formed and values forged, where the spoken word reigns supreme and wisdom is conferred to the eldest. Thus *sawdong ka lyngwiar dpei*, around the hearth, is an actual configuration of the oral-based foundations of the Khasi way of life.

The last line of the 'Invocation' completes the circle of life. While the third line is suffused with considerations of the present, family and society, the next line makes a vertical move back to God. Having fulfilled one's duty to family and society, one anticipates further guidance from above so that the respect of 'hearth and home', 'clan and society' may be kept intact. The elder also pleads before God not to bring humiliation upon the race. The 'Invocation' is a sensitive indicator of the priorities of a community, made clear in the written version of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, through its elder, who is both the medium through which values are being processed and constantly refined and the prime actor in this public arena.

It must be emphasized that in Khasi society, gender roles are never ambiguous. The spokesperson for the clan and society, in most instances, can never be a woman. In Khasi matrilineal society at present, much debate has been generated over the equality of the sexes. Gender inequality is evident in all spheres, where many men and women, knowing that they have to move beyond their designated roles, are yet unable to disentangle themselves from the time warp that they are trapped in. However, Khasi society, in its ideal state as it flourished in a fairly insular set-up and as reflected in *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, is the subject of this discussion.

Thus the elder is usually the eldest clan uncle. He is the moral watchdog of the clan and of society. Among Khasis, male prestige has always been synonymous with the man's decision-making abilities, his capacity to shape and change society. A man who is *ksan rympei rem dorbar* becomes the object of ridicule. The phrase refers to a man who argues and debates only within the realm of the domestic, literally in front of the hearth, normally associated with women and children. At public meetings or durbars, however, in front of equals, he is incapable of expressing himself. As a consequence, his *rngiew* as a *rangbah* or a man is seriously challenged. Men have been identified with the public realm of policymaking whilst women have been identified with the private realm of the domestic, looked upon as custodians of society. According to oral sources, one of the reasons why men surrendered lineage to women was for safeguarding the clan name in that age when men constantly went to war. Hence it was for pragmatic rather than essential reasons that women were given custody of the clan name (Laloo 1970).

Ki Jingsneng Tymmen are steeped in the lore of a matrilineal society that gained strength from its oral deliberations. The word *sneng* in the third line of the 'Invocation' focuses upon the oral ability or the actual reaching out through the spoken word to one's relations, to advise, warn, teach, bring to consciousness; a responsibility that did not sit easy on the shoulders of many men. The compulsion to *sneng*, therefore, became the prerogative of a few who had the aptitude for keeping the channels of communication open, first with God and then with his fellow human beings. The emphasis even in the written version lies in this ability to shape character and reality using the spoken word.

The spoken word becomes a tool of great power and cannot in any way be trivialized. As inextricable as *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* are from the oral, they are doubly dependent upon the oral discourse that must shape society in its continual evolution. There has, however, been a noticeable break in this discourse. In the wake of British colonization and the development

of the Khasi alphabet by Welsh missionaries the compulsion to forge newer horizons of thought and fine-tune character has never regained its original impetus. In her book, *The Khasis under British Rule* (1998), the historian Helen Giri has discussed this impeded evolution at great length. Though not a conclusive factor, the very fact that *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* have never been updated or revised says everything about the erosion of the oral and the failure of the written to replace it at this level of Khasi thought.

In his own way, however, Radhon Singh Berry has tried to stay the loss by crossing over to the written, thereby preserving whatever oral wisdom was accessible to him at that critical moment in Khasi thought. He is strongly grounded in the lore of Khasi life because he, like all his predecessors, experiences closeness to God and to people. This is a qualifying virtue that empowers him as it has others before him, with a strong sense of mission, to establish the two-way communication, both vertical and horizontal, that will enable him to interpret and clarify values for society in general. He closes the 'Invocation' by reminding everyone that once he takes on the mantle of elder in order to *sneng* others, God will henceforward preserve society from itself and keep disgrace away—an apt preamble to a discourse that has always been God-centred. One must keep in mind that the elder is not addressing himself to the reader but to a listening audience in which Radhon Singh Berry the author subsumes personal identity for a public and mythic role.

The opening line of the first verse calls up all the nieces and nephews, the clan at large, children and grandchildren, "*ko pyrsa ko ïing bad ko khun ko ksiew*" (Berry 1959: 1), to pay heed to the words of advice to come. This roll call follows a precise order in a society that is *kur-* or clan-oriented. A sure sense of tradition is then evoked in the words that lead up to the next line where both boys and girls, "*shynrang, kynthei, ngan sneng eh rngiew*" (Berry 1959: 1) are expected to pay close attention to what is being imparted. In trying to understand *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, one must pause awhile to take in the ambience of a social situation in which nieces and nephews have taken predominance over one's own children (Chattopadhyay 1985).

The twin roles of the man, as clan uncle and as father to his children, follow this particular order. He fulfils his twin roles judiciously but sometimes with significantly more emphasis upon the former. There is a recognizable sense of continuity when plenty of nieces and nephews, children and grandchildren gather around the clan elder to listen to his words, ensuring by their youthful presence the growth of the clan as a

whole. A balance is created whereby every clan uncle fulfils his duty to the clan, whilst the man as father has a supportive role to play in the clan of his wife and children (Chattopadhyay 1985).

The elder begins by cautioning the young against the ills of bad manners and a lazy lifestyle. Reprehensible habits are explicitly denounced, examples of which form the bulk of many verses. The poetry arises out of illustrations that reconstruct life in a chanting usage of idioms, *ktien kynnoh*,[3] that spill over into language thick with hyperbole, imagery and metaphor. The first book is lined with analogies taken from nature, illustrating the fallout of bad habits and an indolent mindset. Thus children are warned never to snatch things away "like a monkey," (Berry 1959) never to give or take anything "facing back" (Berry 1959) to someone, a taboo, much like the antics of a fleshless phantom from the underworld whose intentions are ambiguous. One is cautioned against recklessness towards nature and the elements, "*ka ding ka um, ka dieng ka maw*," (Berry 1959) for this would definitely bring about accidents and ugly injuries of all kinds.

The path to be taken must be the middle one of moderation. In section 7 of Book 1, a litany of rhyming couplets explains the route to be taken in one's daily life. The justification for such a life lies in the elder's insistence that everything roots back to God Himself. The last couplet hones the litany back to a lifestyle that is based upon calculation and deliberation, "*da mut da khan, wat sarong, wat kyreit*," (1959) free of arrogance, for this mars clarity of thought. These are fundamental to an existence that is oral-based.

A visible legacy of these moral precepts may be seen in the way guests are treated even today. *Kwai, tympew* or betel nut and leaf, must be offered after sometime; picking up a broom to sweep the room while they are still present is an insult, explicit in its message. And if one were to pass in front of them in order to leave the room or walk through to another room, one would have to walk bent from the waist down as a mark of respect and apology for entering upon the other's private space. Rules for hospitality are laid down in section 12 of Book 1 where specific instructions, for example, are given about the ways of serving extra lime when giving betel nut to others—not on the tip of a knife for this would seem like a ritual performed for the sacrifice of animals, an insult to others—on a betel leaf, the right way up.

Sections 29 and 30 of Part 1 and section 22 of Part 2 deal with marriage, an important milestone that must never be crossed impetuously. Family background and equality of social status are significant criteria as

are the importance of informing both father and uncle. Nothing specific is said about marriages having to be arranged by them.[4] As love marriages have been the rule rather than the exception in Khasi society, utmost caution has to be exercised in any friendship between the sexes, so that should the friendship lead to marriage, it should not be a tabooed one, that is, exogamous.

Section 30 lays down six important guidelines for a responsible life, some of which are: never to enter into relationship that is taboo, never to lie as this will shorten one's life, the repercussions of embezzling money, the offensiveness of adultery, which may even lead to death. The list continues in other sections too, but the bottom line is that these excesses are taboo not only on earth, but also in the eyes of God: "*Baroh hynriew kim dei tang ha pyrthei/Sang bad pap ki long haduh khmat U Blei*" (Berry 1959: 19).

The *jingsneng* of the clan uncle are uncompromising and explicit. But before any further discussion and for the purpose of clarification, the difference between two concepts, that of *ka pop*[5] which is synonymous with *ka lait ka let* and *ka ryngkang ka palat* (mistakes of omission and commission) and *ka pap ka sang* (incest and taboo) must be explained.[6] As stated earlier, the clan is a pervasive entity that determines even the severity of sin. *Ka pop* is not as heinous as *ka pap ka sang*. *Ka pop* or *ka lait ka let* and *ka ryngkang ka palat* are human mistakes that are pardonable since they do not challenge the authority of the clan. Even if they do, they do not necessarily undermine it.

These may be petty instances of crime and in extreme cases, even murder,[7] but as long as motives are sufficiently understood as not impinging on the 'sanctity' of the clan, they can always be justified "in the eyes of man and in the eyes of God." The oral aspect has an irreplaceable role to play in all occasions. Cleansing rituals and supplications may be appropriately offered at such times and the reasons for such occurrences deliberated upon and closely weighed and examined in order to purge the cycle of any curse that may follow.

In *ka pap ka sang*, however, when the authority and sanctity of the clan is acutely jeopardized, the culprit or culprits must meet with dire consequences. Preservation of the clan in its sanctity has been the abiding concern of Khasi society. The individual has identity and significance only in respect to her position in the clan. Therefore a person's actions, good or bad, will always impact the family and the (maternal) clan to which the family belongs. Thus when a taboo is committed, the entire clan meets to deliberate upon it. Taboos such as the murder of an uncle by a nephew

or vice versa, intra-clan marriage and incest demand immediate redressal because these violate the sanctity of the clan.

Actions such as these usually result in derecognition and expulsion from the clan. Meanwhile the information must be made public. The culprits have to set up a different life elsewhere, but their past will dog them as inevitable questions about their clans will always come up in their adopted place of domicile. In rare cases, the death sentence is pronounced and the entire clan engages in the communal killing. The act of killing is looked upon as a necessary evil in the interests of clan sanctity. The ritual process of purification requires intense effort and great oral skills on the part of the clan elders in order for the clan to be cleansed of the stigma of the taboo and of any boomerang effects thereof.

There are nuances buried in *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* that may be understood only by a Khasi. In the course of my discussion I have attempted to bring them out bit by bit, but the *jingsneng* are layered with meanings that speak of a lifestyle with a thriving oral culture that has sustained itself for hundreds of years. Part 2 begins by explicating upon a social hierarchy based upon seniority. It exhorts all youngsters to take heed of the wisdom and instruction imparted by their elders. The clan elder is once again reinstated in his proper place for the discourse to continue. Verses leading up to section 7 weigh the priceless value of the spoken word: "*ap dngong ïa ka ktien ba kren ki rangbah*," (Berry 1959, Part II: 1) literally, to wait patiently for the word to sound from the elder.

This leads to a discussion on the verbalization of words: never to trivialize words by using them aimlessly, by name-calling, or when addressing others, to always use their full names in order not to mar their *rngiew*. Should one's name be heard in the distance, one must always wait for a second and a third call, for in the first instance, it might only be the beguiling call of a ghoulish spirit. Odd numbers spell trouble and people going about must walk in even-numbered pairs[8] to deter bad luck and harm. Section 10 spells out the ways in which people are to be greeted and *kwai*, *tympew* to be shared in a spirit of friendship. Section 11 elevates the priest and medicine man to a position of respect not to be taken over by anyone else, least of all one's parents. He is described as the arch debater, the necessary link to God who will speak on behalf of all humankind.

In Part 2, the elder continues his discourse, discussing serious issues related to life and death, sickness and sorrow, and the responsibilities, amongst others, that are related to marriage, clan and God. In sections 41–44 women are cautioned against excesses of behaviour, they are

portrayed to be the intellectual inferiors of men and, all the similes used to illustrate them, describe them as 'custodians', '*ka lukhimai*',[9] or "*Ka nongri ïing, nonglum khih lum kamai*" (Berry 1959). In following a path replete with dangers of all kinds, there is a warning against allowing a woman to lead the way. In leading the way himself, the man symbolically obstructs danger and the enemy is deterred from attacking, knowing that the woman will "cry aloud for help", "*Man ka kam u shynrang uba haphrang, Man ka kam ka kynthei kaba ïap ang*" (Berry 1959). Men have always been perceived to be protectors and guardians. Men are also warned against a life of irresponsibility for it brings its own nemesis, examples of which abound in plenty.

A sense of retributive justice is inbuilt in Khasi thought. This is reflected in its mistrust of people with deformities (section 9 of Part 2), for the belief is that these are retributions for indiscretions of word or action. Consequently too, the razor-edged path that the elder has to traverse lies in choosing the right words and setting up the appropriate arguments "before man and God" so that they do not backfire or prove to be ineffectual.[10] The combinations and permutations that the argument takes has the ability to convict, condemn, cleanse or purge. The Khasi believes that it is humankind's (*u khun bynriew*) prerogative, at the altar of God, to 'argue and define,' 'disclaim and reclaim,' to 'erect' words of supplication or defence. The phrase *ïeng rangbah u briew, Ap jutang U Blei* depicts the archetype of the clan elder who literally 'stands before God as man' (as opposed to a child), knowing that God waits for him 'to speak so that the word be fulfilled.' The clan elder combines the dual role of priest and prophet, *u kñi uba sait uba pynkhuid* and *u kñi uba sneng uba kraw*. In his capacity as priest he 'expatiates and cleanses,' 'purges and propitiates'; and as prophet, he 'warns and denounces' and is the 'mouthpiece of God'.

Hence, the oratory that forms the backbone of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* stems from an intrinsic ability to communicate through the chants or *ki phawar* in a public setting. One must remember that only a few have the inbuilt ability to wield them. These are, therefore, special in terms of the 'chain of authority by which [they] are remembered.'[11] After the introductory dedication, where links are established and the pattern set, they navigate a metrical rhythm that occupies, especially in an earlier oral set-up, a mental space replete with the aesthetics of the moral and repeatedly expressed for a specific ethical purpose. They draw their inspiration from nature itself as they unravel the path to be trodden. These *phawar* negotiate time and space, faith and values and

are entrenched within the racial psyche, from which they have always been culled out by the dedicated few. The written version of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* documents this constant process of redefining and reprocessing thought at a particular stage in the development of life in the Khasi and Jaintia hills.

Almost as a premonition of changes to come, the 'Epilogue' to Part 1 questions the fate of the Khasi code of ethics. And the question that arises as a consequence of reading these *phawar* is, since there has been no updating of these *jingsneng* have oral deliberations become defunct in a society that is pushing forward to meet the challenges of the day? How does one reclaim one's oral roots? Would it be in terms of the past or in the digitized terms of the global village? Questions relating to the future of Khasi morals are fired off by the elder in the 'Epilogue' to Part 1, but since he continues in the second volume, one deduces that he is forging ahead with the kind of zeal that comes only with the dedication of a bard or a seer who refuses to submit to alternative value systems. The foresight and dedication of the clan elder must always remain unimpeachable.

Notes

1. This refers to the commonly held belief that the Khasis, even today, refer to themselves as a group of the seven families who descended from heaven to settle on earth. The other nine stayed on in heaven.
2. According to oral sources the man chosen to receive the script from God was caught in a flood. Unlike his counterpart from the plains, the *dkhar*, who kept his within the safety of his knotted ponytail, the Khasi put his in his mouth. At the time of crossing the river, he swallowed the script, thus depriving his people of a written script.
3. The idiomatic speech of the Khasi.
4. Arranged marriages are rare, but not impossible, in Khasi society.
5. The word *pop* is a loanword and probably came into usage at a later time.
6. The clan still rules supreme in many families and the probability of killing by the clan, though rare nowadays, still exists.
7. This is the *tyrut* or the curse, which continues to have a superstitious hold on society.
8. This, according to oral sources, was what happened to inhabitants who were eaten up by the *thlen* or the serpent when they went marketing together in odd numbers.
9. *Lukhimai* is the spirit associated with wealth. Women are supposed to be of single strength whereas a man's strength consists of twelve layers. Another oral saying warns against such time when women would begin to 'crow like a cock', for it spells subversion of all kinds.
10. Diviners and priests have to be cautious in the way that they put up their arguments so that nothing backfires and no consequent destruction wrought.

11. Hugh Miles (2005) speaks about how the spoken word holds sway over the written and the importance attached to it in the Arab world. This is no different from many communities in the East. Amongst the Khasis, wedding invitation cards have no real creditability. It is the personal call at home that solicits a response from invitees. It is a commonly known fact that men were the original keepers of the clan name. See also Laloo (1970).

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