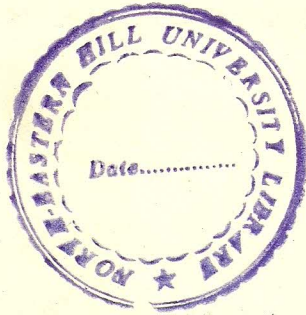


**The Festivals in the
History and Culture of the Khasi**

**MARY
PRISTILLA
RINA
LYNGDOH**

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Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh



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Foreword

The festivals are inalienable components of folk/tribal cultures, originating in specific stages of social development as the creative response of the masses to their problems, needs and aspirations. Be it for rich harvest, good health or general prosperity and welfare, to fight the vagaries of nature, the ravages of wild animals, disease and pestilence, or to immortalise personalities, deeds and events, these festivals have survived the test of time as the occasions of joy and entertainment, held the community together and strengthened its identity. (The elements of change and continuity in the life of the society are dormant in the dance and song forms, the costumes and the rituals associated with the festivals) The way these are spread throughout the year synchronizing the change of seasons and activities of the masses, and the indigenous calendars revolve round them, it symbolizes how men organised themselves to negotiate with the nature in specific conditions. The festivals are indeed the living archives of folk traditions.³⁵

(A model of scientific social enquiry, the festival study can be a key to understanding the social milieu, social differentiation and power structure, history of the masses, their creative genius in the fields of music and literature, art and crafts, the occupation and the market linkage conditioned by the level of technology and the resource-base. The desperate need is of an appropriate comprehensive methodology to tap the hidden data for a multi-disciplinary research.)

Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh's *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi* is a compendium of the fascinating festivals of the Khasis of Meghalaya in historical perspective. A combination of descriptive profile of the festivals and analytical enquiries into their historical origins, forms and contents, and the on-going revivalist and modernist trends, this pioneering work is indeed a serious attempt at understanding the material and spiritual heritage of the matrilineal Khasis. She has ably brought out how important is festival in tribal life, how its contents can guide the sensitive observers to

the situation that a festival originated or absorbed changes and reinforcements, and how the evolution of a society can be traced in a time frame through the changing forms and contents of festivals involving the masses. It is my pleasure to recommend the book to the widest solarium of our readership.

NEHU

J.B. BHATTACHARJEE

Preface

The festivals are very important in the life of the Khasi. Besides providing entertainments and social festivities to them, they also act as an integrating force for the community as a whole. The festivals which are observed in different parts of the year coincide with the activities of the people throughout the year. Most of the festivals are connected with agriculture and cultivation rites of the people. It is during the observation of the festivals, that the people propitiate God their Creator for His blessings and kindness throughout the year, so that they will have a prosperous harvest, good health, general prosperity, and that they could live happily throughout the year being free from diseases and evil spirits.

The study of the festivals in historical perspective has been selected as an attempt to study the festivals in the history and culture of the Khasi, and to focus on the social relevance and the historical contents of the festivals which had been lying dormant for so long, and at the same time to bring to light what is left by our ancestors, and to try and dig out their past history. The study is not only a matter of interest for research, but it is considered essential as a connecting link between the past and the present. We have tried to study the significance of the festivals in relation to the socio-economic and political organisations of the Khasi.

The study of the festivals has been made by some scholars and books and articles both in English and Khasi have been written. A survey of these literatures shows that no one has attempted to make a comprehensive study of the festivals, their origin, contents and social relevance. This study will serve as a beginning for further research in the field.

In this book, eight important festivals of the Khasi have been selected. It opens with a profile of the Khasi, dealing with their origin and migration, religious and social system, and the physical environment of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The second chapter discusses the life of the Khasi throughout the year, how the villages, political and social institutions come into existence. The chapter also shows how the people made adjustments with their own environment for the sake of existence, and how this organisation of life throughout the year when refined over the ages led to the evolution

of the Khasi system of reckoning time or calender. The third chapter attempts a general survey of the festivals, the objectives of each festival, the areas where they are held, and the months in which each festival is being observed. The fourth chapter shows their historical origin, evolution and how each festival is being preserved till date. Chapter five attempts to examine the form and contents of the festivals, the different functions, which include the rituals, dresses, ceremonies, musical instruments and so on. Chapter six examines the importance of the festivals in tribal life. (An attempt is made at a comparative study of the festivals of the Khasi with some of the festivals of the other tribals of the North East.) Chapter seven brings into focus the contemporary trends, particularly the modernizing and revivalist dichotomy. The Chapter shall examine whether the people are moving away from tradition or want to revive the same. Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of the book, which reviews the earlier chapters and highlights the main findings.

The study has been based mainly on data collected during the field work, through interviews with selected knowledgeable persons, and those who participate in the festivals. besides these, we have consulted whatever books, magazines, journals, which are available of the subject both in English and Khasi.

The book has emerged out of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University in 1989. I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to my Supervisor, Professor J.B. Bhattacharjee, Dean, School of Social Sciences, NEHU, for his inspiring and sympathetic guidance, valuable and untiring advice and for sparing for me his most valuable time. I am also grateful to him for having kindly written a Foreword to this book.

I am deeply obliged to the Librarian and Staff, NEHU Library, Shillong, Gauhati University Library, Guwahati, and the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, State Central Library, Shillong, Anthropological Survey of India Library, Shillong for their kind help and cooperation.

I am indebted to Shri D.T. Laloo, Shri L.G. Shullai, and all those knowledgeable people who have given me their valuable information during my field work in the different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. My sincere thanks and gratitude to all of them for having spared their most valuable time and giving me precious information. I am thankful to Shri B.P. Domes, Shri W. Sohliya, Shri S.S. Sawian and Shri K. Kharumnuid who have helped me in my photographic illustrations.

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To all the teachers and staff, Department of History, NEHU, and to Prof. N.K. Sarkar and all my friends and well wishers who have helped me in their different ways, I would like to say a very big *Khublei*.

I am most grateful to my dear mother and my husband and other members of my family, who have been sources of inspiration to me.

My thanks would be incomplete if mention is not made of Mr Joseph F. Khongbuh and Mrs. S. Mawthoh who have helped me in my typing works.

Shillong

Dr (Mrs) M. PRISTILLA RINA LYNGDOH

Some Folktales

1. The Creation of the World

God the creator in the beginning created *Ka Ramew* or mother earth and her husband *U Basa*. *Ka Ramew* gave birth to five children, namely, *Ka Sngi*, *U Bnai*, *Ka Um*, *Ka Lyer*, and *Ka Ding* corresponding to the Sun, Moon, Water, Wind and Fire. All were females except the Moon, the only son of mother earth. On the prayer and request of this mother earth, God sent the seven huts to this world, who lived happily, learnt cultivation and who increased and multiplied. They led a happy life and they could come and go to heaven as they pleased, through the ladder till the Seven Huts decided to stay here on earth and the ladder was severed. The five children of Mother earth lived happily till one day the Moon became wicked and fell in love with his eldest sister. The Sun became very angry. She took ashes in her hands, rebuking him angrily for his daring and bad intention towards her, who was like a mother and who had taken care of him threw the ashes on his face. The Moon felt very much ashamed of himself, he left the house and walked only at night, not during the day time.

2. The Hynniew Trep the Hynniew Skum

God the creator in the beginning created sixteen families. They were allowed to move freely between heaven and earth by means of a golden ladder which touched the top of a mountain peak named *Sohpetbneng*, literally meaning, the navel of heaven. This was the golden age, when the people lived happily. Later, nine out of the sixteen families chose to live in heaven and they were known as the *Khyndai hajrong* or the nine above. The seven families known as the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* decided to live here on earth and the ladder was severed. Thus the Khasi trace their origin to these seven families and are known as the *Hynniew Trep* or the Seven Huts. This legendary origin is accepted by all the Khasi.

3. The Diengiei Tree (a Gigantic Tree)

After the *Hynniew Trep* had decided to stay on earth, the golden bridge was severed. Then, a very big tree known as *Ka Diengiei* grew, which

became so gigantic, that its leaves and branches overshadowed the earth and became very dark. The people decided to cut and destroy this tree. They started cutting the tree in the morning and went back to their homes in the evening as they could not finish the job in one day. When they came the next morning they found that the tree grew again and the cutting marks disappeared. The people were surprised because every time they cut it, the next day the cutting marks could not be seen. Then, *Ka Phreid*, a very small bird told the secret to the people, that it was the tiger who came every night and licked the part of the tree which had been cut, and the cutting marks disappeared, and the tree grew again. Having come to know the secret, the men did not take the axes and knives home, but kept them upwards on the part of the tree which had been cut. The tiger came as usual and licked the tree, but the sharp edges of the axes and knives cut his tongue. So, the tiger did not dare to go and lick the tree any more, and the mission of men succeeded. The *Diengiei* tree fell and light appeared once more to the world.

4. U Lakriah the Reformer

When the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum* came to stay on earth, they were led by their leader or chief known as *U Lakriah*. When they reached the earth, the seven families soon found that the world was full of stones there was no land for cultivation and other works. So, *U Lakriah* went back to heaven to ask God for the earth or soil. God directed the supreme goddess to give three basketful of earth from heaven and threw the earth all over the stones.

U Lakriah came to his people with the message of God. God conveyed. His wishes and advice through *u Syiem Lakriah*, the most important were to earn righteousness, to respect their parents and to know man and to know God, and God could be reached through prayers and sacrifices.

5. The Story of *ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang* - (A Cave) - and the Origin of dances

Once upon a time, a day was fixed for the dance festival, and all the living creatures turned up in their grand costumes. They danced throughout the day, until they were tired and towards evening, when they were about to depart, there arrived the Sun and the Moon who were a sister and a brother, and they also started dancing. Everyone in the dancing arena said that it was unethical that a brother and a sister should dance together. In anger, the Sun went to hide herself in a cave known as *Ka Krem Lamet Ka Krem Latang*, and the world was enveloped into total darkness. Many animals and birds went to persuade the Sun to come out of the cave, but failed. Lastly, the cock went out to search for the Sun. The Sun narrated to him, how she was

laughed at, sneered and abused. The cock promised to the Sun that thenceforth, no creature would abuse her in anyway. Then the Sun agreed to reappear only, when the cock would signal her by crowing thrice. Since then, the cock hold a sacred place in the life of the Khasi.

Another story tells us that in the olden days, all the living creatures lived happily here on earth and could communicate with one another. One day, some animals and a bird went out for a walk. They saw a dancing arena where men and women danced together with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes and flutes. The animals were so much impressed by the dances performed by the human being, that they decided then and there, that they too should perform a dance. A day was fixed and all the animals reached the dancing field in their best dresses. Then the music started with the beating of the drums and playing of the pipes. They were amidst the joyous mood, when at that time appeared the lynx with a big silvery sword. He danced beautifully with his sword, that all admired him. The lynx became very proud. After sometime, U Pyrthat or Thunder came, he borrowed the sword from the lynx. The Thunder performed the sword dance, after which he went up to the sky taking the sword along with him. The lynx was very sad that he had lost the sword, and everytime, he tried to go to the sky, to get back the sword from Thunder but could not. From that time onward started the enmity between the different animals.

6. How do Eclipses occur? and Why There are Spots on the Moon?

Eclipse is known as *Ka bam Hynroh* meaning eaten by the toad. The story goes that once upon a time, there lived a beautiful and innocent girl named *Ka Nam*. She ran away from home as she was afraid of the tiger and took shelter in the house of the Sun. To hide her beauty, she covered her face with a toad's skin. Later, the Moon who was the Sun's brother, fell in love with the girl. He asked his sister to arrange his marriage with *Ka Nam*. The Sun did not agree as the girl was ugly. The Moon came to know of *Ka Nam*'s beauty. So one day, he hid himself near the river and when he saw that the girl has taken her bath, he took away the toad's skin, and threw it, so that she would not cover her face any more. After she had finished her bath, she looked for the toad's skin and at that time, the Moon caught her hand. The girl shouted and all came running to help her. A Durbar was summoned to try this case. The Sun became angry and scolded him. She brought some ashes, spat on his forehead and threw the ashes on his face. From that time, onward, whenever the Moon passed by that river where he had thrown the toad's skin, the toad would catch and eat him, hence occurred the eclipse of the Moon.

Another story tells us that the Moon became very wicked, and fell in love with his eldest sister the Sun. Knowing his bad intention, the Sun

became very angry, she took ashes in her hands, rebuking him angrily, threw the ashes on his face. The Moon who felt much ashamed of himself, left the house and walked only at night and not during daytime. When we look at the Moon, we can see sometime like clouds, these the Khasi believe to be ashes thrown by the Sun.

The eclipse of the Sun has another story. The Moon was very angry with the Sun, as she had disgraced him in public. So he went to Thunder and borrowed a sword from him. Early in the morning, the Moon went to the Sun's house, and hid himself near the window. The Sun did not know the bad intention of the Moon, she came out and the Moon gave a blow with the sword and ran away. The sun was wounded, she fell down sprinkled with blood all over. From that time onward, the eclipse of the Sun took place, whenever she felt the pains from those wounds, and could not come out and remain hidden as she has to rest and sleep.

7. Origin of Ka Phur or Ceremonies Connected with the Dead

Longtime ago, in one small village lived a widow and her son named U Synring. The poor mother had to work very hard to earn her living and take care of her son. Both lived happily. Then one day the mother became very sick and died. Her son cremated her and took the bones of his mother and kept properly in the *Mawshyieng* or stone cist. After many days, he started to do his works as usual. One day, he saw a sow coming to the field. He shot an arrow and the sow ran away with the arrow. U Synring wanted to get back the arrow, so he followed her and reached a different world altogether. There, he met his mother who told him that it was she who had come to help him in the field. U Synring was very disappointed that he had shot his mother, so he took care of her. Then, his mother told him that the time had not come for him to live in that new world, until his death so, she told him to go back to the world. She gave him some drums and flutes and told him to beat the drums and play the flutes and collect her bones to be placed in the *Mawbah* or clan ossuary, along with the dead members of the clan. She further asked him to hold a feast and ceremonial dance known as *Ka Phur Ka Siang*. Henceforth, began this ceremony connected with the dead.

8. The Virginity Dance

In any Khasi dance, the female dancers must be unmarried and virgins. The origin of the virginity dance is obscured. One interpretation of its origin is that *Ka Pah Syntiew*, the legendary female ancestress of the Hima Shillong was a virgin, when a man belonging to the Myllemngap clan caught her. *Ka Pah Syntiew* loved dances and songs she used to teach the small children how to sing and dance. The boys who tended the cows used

to see her dancing on the rocks. So, the female dance of only virgins among the Khasi, must have originated from the dance of Ka Pah Syntiew.

According to another tradition, once a dance festival took place, and many dancers both male and female came out to dance. The fairest of all the dancers was the wife of U Myndi. The king was impressed by her beauty and dancing performance. So, he planned to kill her husband. U Myndi who was killed came back to life by some hidden powers. A Durbar was summoned and the king's misdeed was exposed and he was dethroned and u Myndi's wife invited to take the throne. Since then no married woman could dance.

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The purpose of this pioneering work is to study the Khasi festivals in historical perspective and to focus on the social relevance and historical contents of the festivals which had been lying dormant for so long. The festivals which are observed, coincide with the activities of the people throughout the year. It is during the observation of the festivals that the people propitiate God their creator for His blessings and kindness throughout the year, so that they will have a prosperous harvest, good health, general prosperity and that they could live happily throughout the year. The festivals play a very important part in the life of the Khasi, as each festival has certain meaning to them. Besides providing entertainments and social festivities, the festivals act as an integrating force, hold the community together and strengthen their identity. The festivals have also preserved the distinctive traits of the culture and traditions of the people.)

The book is a descriptive profile of the selected festivals of the matrilineal Khasi, and an analytical enquiry into their historical origins, forms and contents and the influence that they have on the life of the people. The study of the festivals is not only a matter of interest for research, but it is considered as a connecting link between the past and the present and highlights the significance of the festivals in relation to the socio-economic and political organisations of the Khasi. The author has made a serious attempt to bring to light how important are the festivals in tribal life and to understand the rich cultural heritage of the people. A comprehensive and comparative study of the various fascinating festivals of the tribals of the North East is very essential, and this book will serve as a beginning for further research in the field.

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Dr (Mrs) M. PRISTILLA RINA LYNGDOH received her M.Phil and Ph.D. from the North Eastern Hill University and at present teaches History in Shillong College, Shillong and has served as Head of the Department since 1982. A Khasi herself and a trained scholar in the Khasi studies, she has published a number of learned articles in English and Khasi. She is a member of Literary and social organisations.