



THE KHASI MILIEU

H. O. Mazwrie

Also
An Introduction to the
Study of Tribal Religions

by
Sujata Miri



This is the first translation into English of H. Onderson Mawrie's *Ka Pyrkhat U Khasi*. Although the translation cannot hope to capture the vitality of the original, it will serve at least its immediate purpose, if it is able to generate a fresh approach to the study of *Khasi* religion, in particular, and tribal religions, in general. Mr. Mawrie's account is free from any sentimentality or romanticism and he is never bitter in his criticism of the distorters of his tradition. It is about time that this book should be made available to a wider spectrum of readers.

H. Onderson Mawrie is a major writer in Khasi. He is deeply committed to a serious articulation of the traditional Khasi world-view and religion and to freeing them from many errors of misinterpretation that they have suffered for long. His works in Khasi include *Ka Pyrkhat U Khasi and U Khasi Bad la ka Niam*.

Sujata Miri is currently Head of the Department of Philosophy at North-Eastern Hill University. She has been engaged, for several years now, in the study of tribal religion and culture. She is the editor of the book entitled *Religion and Society of North Eastern India* (Vikas, New Delhi). She is also the author of the book entitled : *Suffering*.

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Introduction

THE EMERGENCE of history as the sovereign science of man exercised a tremendous influence on the anthropological study of religion. With it came an emphasis on the nature of primitive reasoning and the stages of its "evolution into civilized thought". While the intellectual tradition of the cultural evolutionists has been rejected in the west (specially with the advent of Freud and Durkheim), it is surprising to note that in much of Indian anthropology today there still persists the domination of the historicist's modes of thought in the understanding of culture and religion. This accounts for an unashamed, continuous description of tribal religions (including the Khasi religion) as spiritism or animism.

With the advent of science, educated Europeans began to account for their own religion as arising out of misunderstanding from false analogical reasoning and ignorance of natural causes. Accordingly, the religion of the uneducated and unscientific peoples appeared still more compounded of error and misunderstanding. The simplest form of religion, "animism", as Tylor had called it, arose so he thought, when primitive peoples had reflected upon their experience of immaterial forms in dreams or considered the difference between a living man and his corpse. Accordingly for him primitive religion was a means towards a knowledge and control of human circumstance and particularly of the physical world, which in his day men of science had really begun to achieve by rational methods.

Influenced by such an approach the early enquiries, mostly foreign, into Khasi religion oversimplified the problems of translation and interpretation of Khasi ideas and custom. Original writings culled from Khasi informants were very few. The scholars who claimed the Khasi mentality as a primitive mentality knew nothing of their language nor were they intimate with

their social and cultural conditions. Consequently, Gourdon's interpretation, for instance, of Khasi religion remains the result of simple introspection. He is prepared (as other Victorian anthropologists) to compare as well as contrast 'savages' with him. For him the primitive gods of the Khasis were the product of more or less uninstructed human reason and imagination.

To Tylor the minimal definition of religion was "a belief in spiritual beings". Thus the understanding of religion came down to an understanding of the basis upon which such a belief arose at its most primitive level. Strangely enough, belief in spirits began as an uncritical effort to explain such puzzling phenomena as death, dreams and possession. Tylor believed that the idea of a soul was used to explain more and more remote and hitherto inexplicable natural occurrences until virtually every "tree and rock was haunted by some sort of gossamer presence". The "higher", more "developed" forms of "belief in spiritual beings", first polytheism, ultimately monotheism, were founded upon this animistic basis.

In official anthropology today, however, the term "animism" is firmly rejected, and this rejection is reflected even in elementary text-books on cultural anthropology. Thus, Melville J. Herskovits in his *Cultural Anthropology* p. 229, says :

The term 'animism' cannot be applied to the total system of beliefs of any people. To characterise a religion in such terms is so broad as to be meaningless. Christianity is animistic in that the belief in the human soul is an integral part of it, but Christians do not officially believe that automobiles have spirits. On the other hand, a belief that a waterfall or a rock or a bear or mouse has a spirit does not necessarily exclude belief in pantheons of gods who direct the larger concerns of the universe, or in quite impersonal supernatural forces. Both these, in turn, can and in most instances do coexist, as part of the same system with ghosts and other manifestations of the spirits of the dead, perhaps formalized as an ancestral cult.

Wherever students have investigated the interrelations of their co-existing beliefs, they have found all such forms to be integrated into a unified world-view. This world-view, moreover, is not to be taken as evidence of a deficient or

even a particular kind of mentality; it is the expression of a system of logic that moves with sureness from accepted premises concerning the nature of the world and man.

It is amazing, therefore, that writers on Khasi religion cannot till this day, shake off their fascination with the idea of "animism". The "experts" on Khasi religion claim the following :

The religion of the Khasis may be described as animism or spirit worship, or rather, the propitiation of spirits both good and evil on certain occasions, principally in times of trouble. (Gourdon, *The Khasis*, 1907, p. 105)

The religion of the Khasis is a rude animism or demon worship (*Census of India*, 1961, p. 86).

A rather vague cult of the spirits supposed to live in trees, mountains, peaks etc. (Meerworth, *The Andamanese, Nicobarese and Hill Tribes of Assam*, 1919, Guide Book 2, p. 14).

Khasi religion is demon worship or a jumble of enchantments muttered by priests who are sorcerers. (N. Natarajan, *The Missionary among the Khasis*, 1977, p. 43).

Khasi religion is both theistic and animistic. . .

History and Culture of the Khasi People, 1967, p. 355 (H. Bareh).

The original religion of the tribal people is what used to be called Animism . . . the contribution of a soul to natural phenomena.

(*Hill India*, 1972, Vol. I, p. 326).

The Khasi religion is both theistic and animistic though in the beginning it was apparently monotheistic.

(K.L. Bhowmik, *Tribal India*, p. 126, 1971).

Belief in the existence of spirits or deities which goes by the name of "animism" is not peculiar to the Khasis, nor does it make their religion particularly primitive.

(J.N. Choudhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 1978, p. 190-91).

The main reason for this, what I call 'animistic fixation', is undoubtedly the fact that writers on Khasi religion continue to be influenced by anthropologists like Lowie and Marshall and through them by Tylor. Tylor's influence is unmistakably

present in Harry I. Marshall's study of the Karen people of Burma conducted in 1922 where he makes the following observations: "The second religious conception attained by the Karen was animistic. They entered upon this stage of religious belief when they began to assign personal attributes to the various powers about them, conceiving of every unknown force as a more or less distinct personality". Unfortunately, Marshall does not himself see the importance of his own observation about the Karen. "Every tree, river, lake and indeed, almost every natural object is supposed by the Karen to be inhabited by divinity". It is astounding how after making the above observation, the author reached the conclusion about the Karen by stating that the life of the Karen is therefore dominated by "superstitious beliefs in unseen and malicious powers".

Also, one might think in this connection of Lowie's study of Ekoi of Kamerun in Southern Nigeria. "A considerable portion of the Ekoi religion centres in the conception of ghosts and the ritual practice to avert or nullify their anger". At another place the same author observes "special locations are haunted by ghosts, among them two lakes shunned by the natives, who would not even track game in the vicinity for fear of arousing the vengeance of the snakes and crocodiles credited with the guardianship of these sacred waters. Ghosts are by no means all bad. The dominant note in the native attitude towards these spirits is fear. The Ekoi are afraid of the dark because they do not wish to encounter ghosts. Ghosts sometimes eat human beings. People take pains to exclude ghosts by wearing amulets or keeping lamps lit or by burning species; and they go to great trouble to conciliate them".

The same author talked about the Polynesian religion characterised as spiritism. On the one hand he declares "the entire fabric of the universe is constantly sustained by this 'Nangia' primary being". And this he cannot reconcile with the Polynesian conception of "the primeval gods numbering about 300". Among writers on tribal religions in India, Verrier Elwin is still among the most widely read. And the influence of Marshall and Lowie on his earlier writing is undeniable. Take, for instance, Elwin's study of the Soaras tribe of Orissa. His conclusion here is interestingly the same as that of Lowie's about Polynesian religion. On the one hand there is recognised

the Creator of this earth namely Kittung, on the other, there is co-existent a belief in many gods leading the author to a similar conclusion characterising these Soaras as having a religion of spiritism. Actually the pantheon of the Soaras is only a clever way of talk, so Elwin believes, because in practice these gods have a status of devils or supernatural forces only! To him, (Elwin) most of these deities are 'drinkers of blood'! As it is the case in the other study, I think the inability to understand the tribal religions here also is because of the author's bias in favour of one or another so-called 'organised' religion. Note the following observation about the Soaras.

"There is no idea of a supreme and beneficent Creator of all things. Where the Soaras have been free from Hindu influence, nothing is known of a beneficent deity". Then again, "only few of the gods receive anything like regular worship. Fewer have shrines created in their honour. Some are not worshipped at all. Many of them are remembered only at times of crises". Verrier Elwin sees Kittung, the Creator of the Universe, according to the Soaras, as "lacking in many of the attributes which the more highly developed religions have given to the Supreme Being. He is not omnipotent, omniscient or omnipresent". Therefore the author concludes, "the Soaras cannot create a perfect God". Accordingly, "Soara religion is rather weak."

Roy Burman's account of the religion of the Koragas of Karnataka is mainly an account of the ghosts, devils and 'bhutas'. Although he concedes, they report themselves as Hindus, (Census, 1961), "but the brand of Hindu religion followed by them at present has certain overtones of religious practices which have been termed as 'devil worship'". Note the following :

"The 'bhuta' or spirit can be divided into two categories. (1) The 'bhutas' common for the community as a whole, (2) spirits of the dead ancestors who are supposed to exercise great influence on the well-being of the members. The principle 'bhuta' is 'Kuladeva' or 'patron-deity'. They are worshipped in time of birth, marriages etc. There are other 'bhutas' which are represented by images of stone symbolising different animals. There are also female 'bhutas'. The family 'bhutas' are kept inside the house over a wooden bracket known as

'bhutasthan'. The important 'bhutas' in the community are collectively worshipped at least once a year. The worship is performed at a consecrated spot under a tree. They place before the image of the bhuta, cooked rice mixed with turmeric powder, five betel leaves and liquor. They burn incense and sacrifice fowls and pigs. They perform dances and some divination".

The persistence of the animistic framework for the study of tribal religions in our country is not really surprising. It is part of the general phenomenon of the persistent domination of imperialist modes of thinking in most other spheres.

As in other parts of India the launching of anthropological studies in the context of north-east India was the product of British expansion over India during the 19th century. The need to govern the tribes of various races and vastly different cultures created in the rulers the need to study the life and culture of the ruled. "As European knowledge of the non-European world increased and as societies were formed to promote such knowledge, the idea emerged, under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution and the Victorian idea of progress that the institutions of the non-European represented stages through which the European had passed long ago. This notion also gave a fillip to European Christian evangelism".¹

Evolution was the idea that put into a coherent framework, the fast accumulating knowledge about the culture of the so-called primitives in various parts of the world.

Evolutionism, like it or not, seeks to explain the existence of the diversity of cultures, both in the past and in different places, by subsuming them under different phases in a single path of development; "it is really an attempt to wipe out the diversity of cultures while pretending to accord it full recognition. If the various conditions in which societies are found, both in the past and in the far distant lands, are treated as phases in stages in a single line of development, starting from the same point and leading to the same end, it seems clear that the diversity is merely apparent. Humanity is claimed to be one and the same everywhere but this unity and identity can be achieved only gradually: the variety of cultures we find in the world illustrates the several stages in a process which conceals the

ultimate reality and delays our recognition of it".² Evolution is thus the refusal to accept the fact that the form and development of human life is not everywhere the same. But rather takes the form in an extraordinary diverse realm. Thus everything that does not conform to the evolutionist's system of criteria is either denied the name of culture where standards of values are involved, or are considered vague or unintelligible where it involves meaning and concepts. Such, perhaps, unintentional discrimination is to be found in P.R.T. Gourdon's *Reconstruction of Khasi Religion*, for example in his claim that "the Khasis have a vague belief in God". Discussing Khasi religion in Section 4 of his book, Gourdon makes the following two claims :

1. "The Khasis have a *vague belief* in God, the Creator".
2. "The Khasis cannot, however, be said to worship the Supreme God although it is true that they sometimes invoke Him when sacrificing and in times of trouble".

Let us examine the first of these claims. It may be that by the term "vague belief", Gourdon is describing his own state of unclarity about *U Blei*. While this is perfectly understandable, this is, of course not what he really means. The "vagueness" that he talks about is supposed to be part of the Khasi's idea of his God. But I think this is both misleading and potentially dangerous.

Without entering into the philosophical debate about vagueness of concepts I would like to make the following points about his notion :

- (1) An idea might be vague *for* someone without being vague in itself. An idea may be vague for me in that I cannot spell out the conditions of its applications; but it need not follow from this that these cannot be spelt out at all. My idea of electron may be vague in this sense.
- (2) On the other hand, there are concepts such that, from the nature of the case, the conditions of their application cannot be exhaustively spelt out. These are the

concepts to which Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance has an application. Wittgenstein's multiple use of the concept of game as an illustration here is instructive. However, it does not at all follow from the family-resemblance idea that the concepts to which it applies are vague. There is no vagueness about the concept of game. It is clear as it can possibly be.

- (3) A concept may be vague in itself in that any attempt to spell out the conditions of its application in detail inevitably leads to confusion or incoherence of one sort or another.

It may be thought that the notion of *U Blei* is vague in the sense of (3) above, indeed much philosophical criticism of religious ideas whether of Christianity, Buddhism or any other major religion of the world rests on the belief that they involve logical confusion of one sort or another. But such criticism is often inspired by a fairly arbitrary and mistaken assumption about the ultimate determinants of meaning. The philosophical debate concerning this also I shall pass by. I wish merely to make the remark that the clarity of a concept is sometimes a matter of its place in the total conceptual framework of a culture. When a concept plays a central role in the life of a culture, becoming clear about it coincides with the progressive exploration of this role.³

Such a central role is played by the concept of *U Blei* in Khasi religion. A reference to U Sib Charan Roy Jait Dkhar here would explain the concept of *U Blei*.^{*} Our forefathers attributed and explained that God is :

“God from above from below (Omnipresent) God, the Lord and Master, God, the Creator; and God, the Determiner of our life, the Dispenser; Oh God the Supreme power.

“This God is the only one God and there is no other God besides Him. He is Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent. He is the Lord of lords.

“As the Creator, He controls over man and all creatures. He gives a spirit to all living creatures. He works eternally.

* Ka Niam Ki Khasi, Ka Niam Tip-Blei Tip-Briew, Ka 'Tien Hok' Tien Blei Don-Sot Dou-Kular.

“As God is omnipresent, He is inside and outside of one’s hearts. The Khasis offer a prayer to God because they know that God is with them and they are dependent on Him. The forefathers realised that God has given a spirit to all living creatures and has taught us that even the animals also have some spirit; since both man and animal have the same spirit, only talents and skills differ.”

H. Onderson Mawrie in his article “God and Man” (published in the *Khasi Heritage*) writes the following : “God is the Creator of Man. We came into this world through that cause, out of that cause and by that cause. Man comes out of the righteousness of God and therefore he must act righteously, live righteously and earn that righteousness”.

Gourdon’s claim reflects the tendency of the evolutionists to take the part for the whole and the failure in his case to account for the place and role of *U Blei* which holds together in multifarious subtle ways, the entire network of meanings which constitute Khasi culture. It is of no wonder, therefore, that Gourdon found it vague for he considered it in isolation and so considered it is bound to appear truncated and strange. Moreover, the claim that since there are similarities between cultures there *must* be similarities in all respects between them is logically quite indefensible. It is also not surprising, therefore that Gourdon fails to establish the similarity in all respects between the Khasi *U Blei* and the Supreme God of his own culture and thereby concludes that the Khasi concept of *U Blei* is incoherent and vague. It is *prima facie* a denial of differences which he can no longer account for intellectually. But most importantly Gourdon’s claim is also *dangerous* because it arises from the ego-centric view point of an alien imperial culture. This is a danger which anthropologists in spite of a great deal of talk about it have not really overcome as yet.

I have discussed Gourdon at some length, because his assumptions and framework continue to slip into studies of Khasi religion and culture, helped of course by the tacit acceptance by the latter of the muddled “anthropology of animism”. In north-east India, this fact acquires special importance because there are powerful agencies whose very survival here

depends primarily on the survival of evolutionary anthropology and the frame of mind which goes with it.

The name given to their religion by the Khasis is *Ka Niam Tip Briew Tip Blei*—the religion of knowing man, knowing God. There is no special means of knowing *U Blei*, knowledge of man and of God always go together.* Accordingly, what is important for a religious Khasi is not a commitment to a doctrine or dogma but his behaviour as man and how he conducts himself in his relation with other fellow human beings and to nature. His religion is therefore also characterised as *Ka Niam Ka Rukom* the religion of the correct observance of norms.

Knowledge of man consists fundamentally in the insight into the truth that, man must lead his life within a framework of rules and duties. It is important, in this connection, to note that the Khasi word for religion is derived from *Nia* which means reason. Religious knowledge is thus also the knowledge that man's life has a rational foundation which derives ultimately from *U Blei*.

Man is a creature of God. There is a covenant between God and man from the beginning of time. The Khasis begin their invocation with these words :

God the Lord and Master, the one who assigns, the giver of Divine faith to us the Khasis, lo, I uphold the covenant between us from the beginning of creation. I am not like other races who seek you through written books or by bowing before idols and images.⁵

There are many parables about the creation of the universe and the relation between man and God.⁶ Being all in all God is above gender, *U Blei*. In prayer they simply say *A Blei* or *Ka Blei* without using the masculine prefix *U* or the feminine prefix *Ka*.

The following are some of the things said about *U Blei* :

“U Blei is the name given to God. He is the Creator, Sustainer, all powerful, Omniscient and Omnipresent. Being all in all He is above gender and therefore the Khasi

calls Him *U Blei*. God is the Creator of everything that has been, that is, and that will be.

“The Khasis believe that there is only one God who is the greatest Almighty. God is the Schemer and Creator (*U Nongbuh U Nong thaw*). He created the heaven and the earth and all things that are in heaven above and earth below. The Khasi regards God as Giver and Dispenser of life. God is the Supreme Being, all powerful and perfect”. (H.O. Mawrie : *Ka Pyrkhat U Khasi*).

“The Khasis believe that God is Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient. Accordingly they hold it a sacrilege to symbolise God or to picture Him in any shape or form.” (R.T. Rymbai : ‘Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi Pnars’ in *Khasi Heritage*.)

Since God is regarded as formless it is impossible adequately to symbolise Him by means of any spatio-temporal object; also it is improper to try to do so. Consonant with this idea, Khasis do not have temples, nor is there any iconographic tradition among them. *U Blei* is the unrepresentable source of everything but everything in the world bears the mark of His greatness. God the Creator of all fills the heaven and earth. God can be invoked anywhere and everywhere and with any names according to the need of the moment. There is no fixed day of congregational worship; “man must work to live and honest work is worship”. He must be truthful in his thoughts and words and just in all his actions. The basic concept of Khasi religion is *Kamai Ka Hok* it means to “earn righteousness”. Moreover, if a person lives a truthful and righteous life, after death his soul goes back to God and lives thenceforth in His presence. Hence, the Khasis call their dead *Bam Kwai h aing U Blei*—he who is eating betel nut in God’s house. *U Blei* does not punish after death (there is no idea of hell) although the souls of those who have broken a taboo (*sang*) roam about the earth in various forms.⁷

As nothing material can be carried to the House of God, the emphasis is on earning righteousness, which is the only thing that can be associated with one forever. Hence living long in this world is a blessing as it offers a greater opportunity to earn righteousness.⁸ Moreover, it is the individual alone who is

responsible for his self-realisation, no other can achieve for him an entry into the House of God, accordingly there is no room for priesthood or sainthood.⁹ However if misfortunes occur there are ways of finding out their causes. Nothing happens in the world without some cause and if a family or clan suffers from misfortunes of any kind, there are appropriate divinations aimed at finding out their cause. "The Khasi religion is usually known as 'religion of divinations', or that 'which involves primarily calculation and judgment', because in it consists man's urge to achieve what is good and righteous through the means of correct calculation and judgment, a calculation which cannot be wrong."¹⁰ To account for any mishap the family resorts to divine consultation, they ask for the signs from grains of rice, *cowries* or other materials and should those not yield any result they use the egg-breaking or "cock-sacrificing" ritual. When they have discovered the cause, they perform sacrifices in atonement for their shortcomings in order that they may be freed from their afflictions etc., promising also to offer thanksgiving to God. In case they fail to discover the cause in spite of all their efforts the family takes the last resort of surrendering completely to God.

The worship of different deities like *U'lei Muluk*—the God of the State, *U' lei Shillong*—the God of Shillong peak, *U'lei Umtong*—the God of water, *U'Lei longspah*—the God of wealth, has been referred to as the polytheistic tendency of Khasi religion even by Khasi scholars like H. Bareh.¹¹ Here, I am afraid, I sense some error in interpretation.

In spite of propitiations to different deities (at various festivals) the theism is actually never abandoned. In Bareh's own words: "... the Supreme Being retains a predominant place in all cases of sacrifices. He or the supreme Goddess is first to be *invoked* and addressed before other spirits are to be appeased. His permission is first to be obtained by means of divination or otherwise". Again he admits "the Supreme Being is not altogether removed although the system becomes complicated and vague" (Shades of Gourdon?). Even Gourdon who describes the Khasi worship of gods and goddesses accepts a similar position. Note "They (i.e. the gods and goddesses) are even supposed to possess the power of life and death over man

and woman, subject to the control of *U'Blei Nongthaw*, God the Creator.¹²

Granting the worship of sacred forests, rivers etc. the question is what is the relation between these "lesser or local gods" and *U'Blei*? The answer is easily found. They (i.e. the deities) of course "cannot be considered to be equivalent to the one God, the Creator, *U'Blei Uba ha jrong ha tbian* the God who is above and here below, is the God who is everywhere."¹³ He is one although he can manifest Himself in different guises. Being omnipresent He gets temporarily identified with particular agencies. U Rabon Singh explains the above in the following manner "God manifests Himself in different places in a number of groves, forests, hillocks, peaks and rivers. For this reason, these places became places of worship".¹⁴

For Hamlet Barih this becomes, in his words, "polluting animistic beliefs". According to Barih the Khasi "animistic" rites consist mainly in the cult of fertility, worship of mountains and river spirits, divination, glorification of ancestress and other allied elements. The rites associated with cultivation in Jaintia and North Khasi Hills seem strange to the author, just as the recognition of forest groves and rivers as sacred, are proof of their primitiveness. So also offerings to the deceased ancestors whose assistance would aid the descendants to grow, thrive and prosper is enough reason for the critic to brand them as primitive because of their failure to differentiate the secular (dead bodies) from the sacred (the super-natural) Barih's approach is consistent with the earlier approaches. One identifying feature of Khasi spiritism for the commentators is ancestor worship.

Here are six assertions from different authors:

- (1) "The Khasis not only revere the memories of deceased ancestors but they adore them by means of offerings. These offerings take the shape of food . . . To honour a dead ancestor is the duty of every Khasi". (Gourdon)
- (2) Gourdon also quotes U Hormu Rai Diengdoh "The real religious demand amongst the Khasis is the *ai bam* or giving food to the spirits of deceased ancestors . . ." (p. 110).
- (3) "Every house has its little domestic shrine. The shrine

- is one in which the ancestors are worshipped". (N.E. Bose, *Some Indian Tribes*, chap. "The Khasis" p. 156 published in 1972).
- (4) "Ancestor worship is an important feature of the Khasi religion" (N. Natarajan: *The Missionary among the Khasis* p. 53, 1977).
 - (5) K. Chattopadhyay in *The Missionary among the Khasis* says, "Ancestor worship by offering food to the dead is an important ceremony . . ." (Published in 1978).
 - (6) "Ancestor worship plays an important part in Khasi religion". (P.R.G. Mathur, *Khasis of Meghalaya*, p. 62 Published in 1979).

What is of significance here is the fact that the offering of food to the dead ancestor, a rite commented upon by Hastings (in the *Encyclopaedia of Ethics and Religion*, Vol. I, p. 450), as "a rite common among all savages and semi-savage races", is recognised as yet another failure of the Khasis to recognise the sacred-secular dichotomy. The ancestors belong, let us say, to the secular world and only the supernatural or the other world or God is sacred. The critics fail to see that offerings are literally "not offerings to the ancestor but simply tokens of remembrance".¹⁵ They (the offerings) are taken from the functional organs of the body to symbolise the continuity of life hereafter. There, unfortunately, also seems to be a determined effort not to heed the repeated denial by actual followers of the Khasi religion of the charge that "ancestor worship" in the form suggested by the critics is a feature of the Khasi religion (R.T. Rymbai and others).

The point I wish to emphasise in this connection is that within a religious world view any one aspect of creation may be chosen for special religious attention; nor does this rule out the possibility of there existing more than one symbol of divinity.

There are places within the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which are accorded special religious significance. They have—in relation to other places—acquired greater symbolic power, and this power is partly embodied in "legends" associated with them. Take the legend associated with the city of Shillong. In the ancient days both the Khasis and the Syntengs claimed that the Shillong God belonged to them. To settle this dispute it was

decided to inquire from *U'lei Shillong* Himself whose God, whether of the Khasis' or the Jaintias', He was. On a fixed day both the parties appeared at a particular spot and the Khasis requested one member of the Synteng to speak to God first. *Me te U Blei jong i me?* (Art thou our God?), said the Synteng. No answer came in reply. However, when a Khasi asked the same question of God, the answer came "Yes" three times. From that day onwards the Syntengs ceased to claim the city of Shillong.¹⁶ Also there is a myth about how the Shillong God saved the Khasis from the Japanese aeroplanes by causing a horrible and tremendous storm to blow over the hills.

The Khasi religion is quite explicit in its assertion that there can be no sphere of human life on which religion does not have a crucial bearing.

God has brought every man into existence with reason and design and He expects man to uphold his reason (*Ka Rngiew*) at all times. He has also placed him in a family as well as a clan. Hence, He lives in the world not alone but with the God of the clan (*Ka Blei*), the Ancestress (*Ka Inwbei*), the Ancestor (*U Thawlang*) and the Uncle (*U Suidnia*), who all compose the *dawing*. It is impossible to isolate a man's responsibility to himself from a man's responsibility to his family and clan. Whatever man does he is aware that by his doings (good or bad) he commits not only himself but also his family and clan to the consequences of his actions.

A look at the traditional Khasi idea of the "true" significance of marriage will make this clear. Marriage is something more than a union of two individuals or even their immediate families. It involves a relationship between whole groups of people; the proposal for marriage comes from the groom's side through his mother or aunt, with the approval of his maternal uncle, after it has been established that there is no kinship between the couple or the families forbidden by custom and religion. The couple is joined in wedlock by a ceremony performed in the girl's house after dusk. After sunset the girl's maternal uncle and other friends and relatives go to the boy's house to fetch him. The boy is accompanied by his maternal uncle along with friends and relatives.¹⁷ The marriage ceremony is conducted by the two maternal uncles. At the time of the marriage the priest abjures *U'Blei* in the following manner:

Hei oh God from above: oh God from below;
 Oh *Lei Synshar*.
 Oh God who has created man:
 As Thou hast ordained this marriage
 Thou wilt bless them;
 Thou will grant them prosperity;
 Thou wilt show them the way;¹⁸

The violation of an established rule of conduct is considered *Ka Sang ka pap*. The following are a few of the taboos and the consequences resulting from their violation:

<i>Ka Sang</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
1. Marriage within the same clan	{ Excommunication from the entire society and prohibition from parti- cipation in ritual perfor- mance.
2. Marriage with the father's brother.	
3. Marriage with the sister's cousin or aunt of the father	
4. Witchcraft	{ Exile from the village. Birth of deformed or otherwise abnormal children.
5. Adultery	
6. Suicide	{ Prohibition from parti- cipation in ritual and deprivation of inheri- tance.
7. A Khatduh who gets converted to Christianity	
8. To murder a fellow human being ¹⁹	Excommunication from the clan.

The commission of *Ka sang* 1, 2 and 3 is considered unpardonable, debarring offenders from all rights and privileges vouchsafed by custom. So also the violation of 5, 6 and 8 necessarily entails banishment and complete rejection of the culprit as a respectable member of the community. In case of *Ka Sang* 7 in recent times a concession is made in the sense

that if a *Khatduh* renounces Christianity she will be accepted back in the clan and can claim all her rights. What I wish to stress here is that undoubtedly *Ka Sang* promotes the maintenance of social and natural order *but* it does not do so in abstraction from the religious order. This social order is neither separated nor separable from the religious order. Actually we can, in a certain sense, go so far as to claim that the two are one and the same. If an offender threatens the stability of the society even God cannot protect him (*Ka Sang* 1, 2 and 3). Religious rituals are interwoven with social norms and the greatest punishment is excommunication from the clan and not merely burning in hell in a life hereafter.

Two notions which may be said to be basic in the Khasi conception of his society are those of *Kur* and *Kha*. All those who have descended from the same ancestral mother belong to the same *Kur*.^{*} Members of other *Kurs* are *Kha*. As the Khasis are descendants of the ancestress goddess an important status is assigned to women by the Khasis. Accordingly it is the *Khatduh* (Youngest daughter) who inherits the lion's share of the mother's property. But demands on her are enormous in keeping with religion. She is literally the keeper of *Niam* (religion) and her house is called *Ka iingseng*. Here all the family assemble to witness her perform all rites and rituals. She cremates her mother, puts the bones of all the members of the family in their final resting place (*Maw Bah* or clan cairn) and if any member of the family is unable to support himself or herself he or she has the right to being fed at the *iing Khatduh*.

* Certain evolutionist ideas about matriliney—now widely rejected in professional circles—seem, perhaps not surprisingly, still to vitiate ordinary thinking about Khasi society. These are ideas such as the following :

(a) matrilineal peoples are primitive "promiscuous hordes" and therefore (b) their children would necessarily be brought up by only their mothers, the particular father being unknown to them. "There is no historical evidence for this argument, and it will certainly not hold if the supposedly more 'primitive' matrilineal descent is assumed to be associated with a general cultural poverty and simplicity. The matrilineal Nayar, or matrilineal peoples like the Akan of China, Minan or Kaban of Sumatra and even the plains Indians of North-America are by any standards as highly organised socially as many patrilineal peoples and culturally far richer than some". (Godfrey Lionhardt, *Social Anthropology*, p. 119m).

The members of the same Kur no matter how far removed cannot inter-marry. Marriage is strictly outside the Kurs. There cannot be a greater sin (*Ka sang*) than a union between members of the same clan. The society places the demands of kinship as above the rule of the state and as at par with religious precepts. In traditional Khasi society there are other similar rules of conduct the violation of which is threatened with social boycott or banishment or deprivation of some kind *outside the domain of law*. However, in most of contemporary Khasi society this is not quite the case. There is a change in that, for reasons into which I do not wish to enter here, there has come about a rift between the social and the religious. My point can be illustrated with reference to *Ka sang*. Earlier the youngest daughter, if converted to Christianity, was deprived of her inheritance rights along with prohibition from participation in religious functions. However, today, the *Ka sang* connected with this is overlooked for social and legal purposes, although the performance by her, of the traditional religious rites and practices is still prohibited. In other words, today her social and political status is divorced from and is independent of her religious identity.

Unlike the societies which have come under the sway of historical religions, in traditional Khasi society there is a single religio-political hierarchy. The "secular" and religious leadership are combined in one person, i.e. the Syiem. But the important point to note is that though there is leadership in the traditional society yet the pattern of election is democratic. The Syiem who is the chief or head of the village is elected by the people. To check the misuse of power by him and to also help him in matters of administration there are myntries, basans lyngshkor etc., who in their turn are also elected from different clans.

The democratic way of life of the Khasis is well depicted in the Nongkrem Dance, the annual religious ceremony of the Khyrim Syiemship. The state of which the Syiem is the head is composed of Raids or different groups of villages. These Raids in token of friendship and loyalty bring sacrificial goats to the Syiem during the festival without any special distinction at all. All pray together to God to give them strength and wisdom and to promote happy understanding between the ruler and the ruled.

The different clans have their own elected headman (who is elected from amongst the males of the clan). Each family within the clan manages its own internal affairs under the supervision of its elders. However, the final say lies in the jurisdiction of their headman who not only settles legal disputes but also conducts rituals and ceremonies on behalf of the clan assisted by his maternal relatives and clan elders.

To settle disputes involving criminal offences the Durbar is proclaimed by the Syiem who acts as the judge. Both sides have their own pleaders and the hearing commences only after due prayers to the goddess of the state or *Ka 'lei Synshar*. Over the Syiem and his Durbar of myntries, lyngskhors, basans and lyngdohs there is a higher authority which is supreme called *Durbar Bima* (State Assembly). It is also called *Ka Durbar Blei* (the Assembly of God). Hence its authority is final and its sanctity divine. It alone can decide important issues like dethroning of a Syiem or selecting of a new ruler. To ensure maturity in thought and debate, the representatives who are to attend the Durbar are all above 50 years of age.

The British Government effected drastic changes in the powers and functions of the Syiem.²⁰ After subjugation by the British they lost their age-old freedom of dispensation of justice among their people. For instance the Syiem and his officers in the twenty five states in the Khasi Hills were allowed the exercise of their traditional power to try only mild civil and criminal cases. But serious crimes like murder, homicide and accidental death were all referred to the Deputy Commissioner for his verdict.

Immediately after independence the Khasi Syiems revived the Khasi State Federation (which had been originally formed in 1934) for the administration and dispensation of justice. But after the formation of the District Council (in 1952) once again some of the powers enjoyed by the Federation were curtailed, and eventually it led to the emergence of a new pattern of leadership among the Khasis. Thus the Syiem who was the guardian of Khasi law and of moral authority, the protector of his people during times of war and peace is today reduced to being merely a Syiem in name, that also for presiding over certain religious ceremonies. Today the Khasis are ruled by the Meghalaya State officials and District Councils.

The main occupation of the people was cultivation, agricultural products being mainly paddy, rice, potato, betel nut and betel leaf. This again was regarded as something God-given, God in his mercy gave the inhabitants of the Seven Huts the gift to till the land and to produce food. Hence it is not becoming to disturb or obstruct anyone at work. "Should one need another's tools or implements in one's work one should ask for permission before using the tools and take special care of them while in use and return the same in a courteous way".²¹

Moreover in case there is a widow or a self-supporting female member in a village it is the duty of the entire village particularly of the youth to help her. At least one adult member from each household is required to jointly bear her burden in the cultivation of her fields. In case she is reduced to starvation and begging it will be a matter of shame for her entire village community.

On the arrival of the sowing and harvesting seasons all strong adults do community service. They form voluntary groups and help one by one each family of the neighbourhood by working in their fields till dusk. The household in turn provides free morning and evening meals for them.

So also the male youth offer to care for and nurse the sick at night. In case of death it becomes the duty of the entire village to help in the disposal of the dead body with due ceremony and observance of ritual.

Like in most modern societies, the sacred/secular dichotomy has also invaded Khasi-Jaintia society. Take the role of the Seng Khasi organisation. The aim of this organisation was set forth as that of safeguarding the truths of Khasi doctrines of religion and custom from the onslaught of alien influences.

The organisation adopted the following four principles with a view to implementing its objectives :

- (1) Adherence to the tenets of kinship as specified by the ancestors.
- (2) Righteousness through service, love and truth and a desire to improve both mind and body.
- (3) Respect for one's own fellowmen and cultivation of humility.
- (4) To work for one's country with faith in God.

Leading intellectuals of this organisation, like Maham Singh, A.S. Khongphai, Hipshon Roy, Kynpham Singh and R.T. Rymbai, are all involved in bringing out publications and organising discussions highlighting the importance of preserving the Khasi heritage. However, the larger part of the activities of the organisation is restricted to the organisation of symbolic traditional dances like *Shad Suk Mynsiem* (Thanksgiving Dance) or the Nongkrem Dance, activities which may be considered to be non-controversial, not demanding a total commitment of thought, deed and action involving political economical and social goals. This demonstrates the erosion of the truly tribal (religious) character of our tribal societies.

In Khasi culture there are enough examples to show how divine sanctions are sought to enforce their social and political order. A functionalist would find fairly convincing explanation for the divinisation of social labours. Let me illustrate this with an example. The Khasi had sacred groves of forests at the outskirts of almost every village. It was considered *sang* or taboo to cut live wood from those forests for it was held that God would wring the neck of any offender. However, there was no harm if any villager removed dead wood for domestic use. There could hardly be a better policy for the preservation of forests in any tradition. However, I am far from suggesting that one can give an exhaustive account of Khasi or any religion in functionalist terms alone. I have already argued to some extent against that earlier. Functionalism amounts to reductionism. While religious activities undeniably have a functional role—whether social, psychological or political—their meaning transcends the boundary of any such role. And it is characteristic of religious meaning that it necessarily binds together in one whole, of course in an inevitably oblique and complex manner, man, nature and the transcendent world. My plea is that instead of looking at Khasi religion (or any tribal religion) as a collection of more or less disconnected activities with more or less disparate areas of human life, we should consider it as a system of meanings with its centre in the concept of *U Blei*. This concept as it were, breathes life into the entire range of activities. I would here agree with Ninian Smart when he says “one requires in one’s phenomenology an interactionism in which the gods themselves are members of the wider society under

consideration".²² I wish only to add that it is the pervasive membership of *U Blei* in this society that makes the most crucial difference in their phenomenology.

REFERENCES

1. P. 180, *Sociological Bulletin*, Volume 22, No. 2, September 1973, article—"The development of sociology and social anthropology in India" by M.N. Srinivas and M.N. Panini. According to Srinivas and Panini, "the All India Census first undertaken in 1871 by the British also became an instrument of the official policy. Sir Herbert Risley, Commissioner of the 1901 Census for instance noted as well as deplored the tendency of the tribes to become Jatis which meant their absorption into Hinduism. In observations such as this can be seen the germs of the policy of erecting barriers between Hindus and the other groups and sections".
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss "Race and History", Published in the book *Race, Science and Society*, ed. by Leo Kuper, p. 102, first published in 1973.
3. Also compare N. Smart : "the full existence claim is unnecessary to the depiction of their powerful reality to the participants". (p. 73. *The Science of Religion and The Sociology of Religion*).
4. "Man-knowing and God-knowing go hand in hand. To know oneself is to know God because the self is the reflecting mirror of God. Again God is within all human beings, when we love human beings, we love God." (H.O. Mawrie : *U Khasi bad Ka Niam*).
5. *Religion and Society of North-East India*, p. 45.
6. H.O. Mawrie : *Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi*, Chap. 3, *U Khasi Bad Ka Niam*.
7. There is a popular belief that those who have not lived righteously will go to *Khyndai Pateng Niamra—Nurok Ka Ksew*, the ninth chamber under the surface of the earth, where only dogs will walk. Lyngdoh refers to it as the kingdom of *U Jom* (courtesy Kelian Synrem).
8. For moral commandments see : *Ka Niam Ki Khasi* by U Sib Charan Roy Jait Dkhar.
9. In recent discussions with informers one did hear of exceptional cases of individuals claiming 'possession by God' in almost epileptic type of fits. But such instances are rare and do not get the attention or admiration of clan members.
10. U Rabon Singh, *Ka Kitab Niam—Khein Ki Khasi*.
11. See *Meghalaya Religious Belief and Ritual*.
12. P.R.T. Gourdon, *The Khasis*, p. 116.
13. (Courtesy Sitimon Sawian and Brandon M. Pugh).
14. *Ka Kitab Niam Khein Ki Khasi*, p. 11.
15. Kynpham Singh, *Khasi Heritage*, p. 100, published in 1979
16. There is a feeling that the Khasis had cheated the Jaintia by keeping a man hidden in a trench who spoke instead of God (courtesy Motiferr Rani)

17. R.T. Rymbai, *Khasi Heritage*, p. 77-78.
18. Refer U Jeebon Roy's notes on Khasi Religion. Also quoted in Gourdon's *The Khasis* and Lyngdoh's book.
19. Even the killing generally justified during war time is to be remedied with ritual observances.
20. Syiemship was accepted by the Khasis to be an institution of divine origin and was accordingly styled as *Ki Syiem U Blei*.
21. H.O. Mawrie, Chapter 11, "A Khasi bad Ka Akor" in *Ka Pyrkaat U Khasi*.
22. See *The Science of Religion* and *The Sociology of Religion* by Ninian Smart.