

A Sociological Study of the Khasi Religion

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By

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Dedicated to my Father (Late) Ordin Marbaniang
In Memory and Gratitude

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OFFICE OF THE SYIEM OF KHYRIM

SMIT
East Khasi Hills

Dated Smit- 12th August, 2023.

Foreword



It is with great enthusiasm attached with a feeling of pride that I introduce this important work on the Khasi religion, *A Sociological Study Of The Khasi Religion* by Dr. Sharalyne Khyriemmujaat. It is a timely and much-needed contribution to our understanding of its place amidst the world's diverse religious traditions. In this book, the reader will find the multifaceted aspects of the Khasi faith, as it draws its semantics from nature; and how it is preserved in the family (*Ka iing*), the clan (*Ka Kur*) and at the level of the *Hima*.

The book offers a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the Khasi belief system which, for a long time, has been largely overlooked and marginalised especially since the coming of western religions. Readers will find that the advent of the same has created ruptures in the way that the Khasis carry forward their faith to the next generation. Dr. Khyriemmujaat's quick mind and efforts towards uncovering and bringing these significant matters to the forefront has been realised in the publication of this book. Through intensive research, and being that the author has an umbilical connection with the religion she is writing about; being a Khasi and an inhabitant of the region, she has ensured to cover all the grounds necessary in order to bring out this book.

With the current revival of the Seng Khasi Movement, it also becomes imperative for more research and studies pertaining to the same. This is because, with the rise in literacy, education, and research, the demand for more knowledge increases. There is much that students still have to learn about matter outside their own homes and their state. In the same way, readers from outside the state are also yet to learn more about the Khasis, their lives, faiths and practices. I am therefore privileged to witness one of the ways in which the author acknowledges this gap in learning, and seeks to bridge it.


Syiem of Hima Khyrim,
Smit.

PREFACE

The present work is a descriptive study of a religion known as *Ka Niam Khasi* followed traditionally by the Khasi tribe of India in the state of Meghalaya. In popular parlance, this religion is known as the “indigenous” religion of the Khasis or the Khasi religion. This work is a product of my PhD research under the guidance of Prof. Nikllesh Kumar, Former Head, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University. Our concern was to understand *Ka Niam Khasi* in terms of its belief systems and rites. In the case of rites, attention was focused not only on the various rites concerning the individual (performed at the levels of the domestic group and the lineage) but the community as a whole (performed at the levels of the clan, the village, and the *Hima*). In the Khasi matrilineal community, the role of the mother’s brother in the performance of rites at both levels is very crucial. With an increase in the number of cases of conversion to Christianity, there was an increase in the number of cases where the mother’s brother became ineligible to perform the rites due to their conversion. It becomes important, then, to find out who replaces him in the performance of these rites. In this context, we wanted to understand the role of the *Ka Seng Khasi* in preserving and perpetuating the Khasi beliefs and rites.

Whatever is described in the following chapters is based on data collected from the field. Data was collected from the followers of *Ka Niam Khasi* residing in Smit, Laitkyrhong, and Nongkrem villages. These villages come under *Hima* Khyrim in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. These villages were chosen for the study because the majority of the populations of these villages follow *Ka Niam Khasi*. What is interesting to note is the fact that there was unanimity in their views on various aspects of the Khasi belief systems and rites. They had learnt these from their elders and they passed on this knowledge to their younger generation.

The data collection during this specific study was time consuming since rites were carried out in different seasons and at different times of the year. Therefore, it required a lot of patience to gather the required information.

The researcher also faced problems while observing some of the rites since the villagers felt that their practices were personal; therefore, outsiders were not allowed to observe. But, after much persuasion and assurance, permission was granted on the grounds that the data collected was meant for academic purposes only and that their names would not be reflected in the work.

Words cannot express my heartfelt gratitude and sincerest thanks to my teacher, Prof. Nikhlesh Kumar, Former Head, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University. This work would have not seen the light of the day had it not been for his intellectual support.

I place here, on record, my indebtedness to him for his unstinted support, creative counsel and intellectual inputs at every step of my work. More than that, I will always value him as a person who taught me the meaning of life and the value of knowledge.

I extend a special acknowledgement to (Late) Dr A. K. Nongkynrih, faculty, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University for sharing his ideas and responding patiently to all my queries.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Paiem Balajied Syiem, Syiem, *Hima* Khyrim. Despite his busy schedule, he willingly gave time to contribute to the preface of this book, which has been of much significance and has had great impact. Thank you to Mei Iem Batriti Syiem, Syiemsad, *Hima* Khyrim, Kong Sweety Rynjah, Bah Sumar Sing Sawian, Late Bah Phrikson Lyngdoh Pyngrope, Late Bah M. F. Blah, Bah A. Tariang and other resource people for sparing their time and sharing their valuable knowledge about *Ka Niam Khasi* in the midst of their other demanding engagements.

I would be failing in my duty if I did not offer my thanks to all of the staff of the different libraries, particularly the Anthropological Survey of India, Mawblei, Shillong; the Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata; the Jawaharlal Nehru Library, New Delhi; and the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong College Library, for allowing me to use them for consultation purposes during my PhD research.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to Dr E. Kharkongor, Principal, Shillong College, for her constant motivation and moral support. Thanks to my fellow colleagues for their encouragement and support. A special thanks goes to Ms. A. Basaiawmoit and Mr. G. Rumnong of the Department of English, Shillong College, for covering all the necessary translations in the most comprehensive manner.

I also express my deep sense of gratitude to Shri. Kolan Jones Diengdoh, Assistant Professor, Department of Khasi, Shillong College; Dr Batskhem Myrboh, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Synod College; Dr Dhira Bhowmick, Associate Professor, Department of English; and Ms. Evangelene Nongkhaw, Assistant Professor, Shillong College for their comments and reviews at important stages of my work.

I also thank Shri. N. D. J. Thabah and Shri B. Rymbai who did the final layout and gave this work a complete look. My gratitude to the publisher for their help in publishing my work.

I fondly remember (Late) Shri. Ordin Marbaniang, my father, my best inspiration, whose dream I fulfil in publishing this book. I dedicate this book to him.

My mother; sisters and brothers; my husband, Skhemlang; and my children, Shuwamaphi, Hamenangsan and Sanshaphrang were my inspiration and the backbone on whom I could lean during the entire research work. To them all, my love and gratitude.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank all who, in their small but meaningful ways, contributed directly or indirectly to the success of this research.

Sharalyne Khyriemmujaat

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Religion has been an important area of enquiry in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology since the late nineteenth century. An overview of earlier writings shows that the major concerns in the study of religion had been with the understanding of rites and belief systems, besides attempting to define the term religion as distinct from magic. The following survey would show that there is no single, uniform theory of religion in the disciplines mentioned above.

Evolutionists such as Tylor defined religion as “the belief in spiritual beings” (quoted in Swatos 1998, 528). Tylor thought that all the religions were based on the idea of animism. For Tylor, “... [the] development of belief in souls was a natural result of attempts to explain such phenomena as dreams, trances, apparitions, visions, shadows, reflections, loss of consciousness, and death... belief in spirits and deities was an outgrowth of belief in souls” (*ibid.*). Tylor explained the development of concepts of Gods, demons, spirits, devils, ghosts, fairies, gnomes, elves, and angels as a result of such belief in souls.

Tylor’s students did not accept his ideas as they thought that they were “too intellectual and too moral” (D’Souza 2005, 68). However, Frazer put more stress on the cult. Frazer argued that “primitive” religion had many more beliefs and animism cannot be described as a dominating belief in “primitive” culture. When human beings began to realise that they were not quite so powerful, it occurred to them that there must be higher powers such as demons, ancestors or gods. Religion was born when humans appealed to these higher beings with offerings and sacrifices. Religion is “a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them” (*ibid.*, 81).

Malinowski viewed religion as complementary to magic and he considered both as the forms of transcendental belief. He argued that the magic act was not only utilitarian but instrumental also: "... magic is distinguished from religion in that the latter creates values and attains ends directly, whereas magic consists of acts which have a practical utilitarian value and are effective only as a means to an end" (Malinowski 1972, 65). According to him, religious rites establish or demonstrate lasting attitudes, stable relationships and the awareness of rights and obligations. They establish a piece of social order. He argued that there must be suitable occasions when the effects of religion could be brought into play, e.g., the periodical ceremonials, feasts, and religious gatherings. But it can be stated that the rite and its purpose were one and the end was realised in the very consummation of the act. More important than these are the crises of human life, which are most readily elaborated on by religion.

"Religion," according to Durkheim, "is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups" (Durkheim 1965, 22). He explained further that '... religious conceptions have as their object, before everything else, to express and explain, not that which is exceptional and abnormal in things, but, on the contrary, that which is constant and regular ... In fact ... even with the most simple religions their essential task is to maintain, in a positive manner, the normal course of life" (*ibid.*, 43).

Durkheim divided the religious phenomena into two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. Beliefs, according to him, "... are states of opinion, and consist in representations; the second are determined modes of action ... The rites can be defined and distinguished from other human practices, moral practices, for example, only by the special nature of their object. So, it is the object of the rites which must be characterised, if we are to characterise the rite itself. Now it is in the belief that a special nature of this object is expressed. It is possible to define the rite only after we have defined the belief" (*ibid.*, 51). Durkheim classified religious beliefs into two classes or opposed groups: sacred and profane. "The beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or system of representation which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and

with profane things” (*ibid.*, 52). According to Durkheim, rites, as rules of conduct, prescribed how one should behave in the presence of these sacred things. Thus, the totality of these beliefs and their corresponding rites, in the view of Durkheim, constituted a religion.

Durkheim thought that rites could be explained only after we have explained the belief. Radcliffe-Brown’s view differed; he suggested that “... in attempting to understand a religion it is on the rites rather than on the beliefs that we should first concentrate our attention” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 155). He considered the rites in all religions to be the most stable and lasting elements, and he thought that they play an important function. “Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends” (*ibid.*, 157). This, however, does not mean that Radcliffe-Brown ignored the study of the belief system altogether.

Nadel, in his study of the Nupe religion, defined religion “... as all beliefs and practices implying communications with and control of the supernatural” (Nadel 1954, 262). His work becomes interesting because he found that the Nupe religious beliefs and practices varied from one region of the country to the other region, on the basis of local cults.

Evans-Pritchard differed from both Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. He argued that Nuer clearly distinguished between the natural and supernatural. Evans-Pritchard (Mair 1972, 232) made a distinction between two types of rituals: confirmatory rituals and piacular rituals. The former type of rituals signified the passage from one stage to the other in the life cycle of the individual and also the rituals performed annually by the community. In the latter type, he placed the rituals performed in situations of danger, often thought of as being brought about by some fault. They are concerned with the moral and physical welfare of the individual.

Arnold Van Gennep emphasised the significance to the individual of the rites performed at the transition from one stage of life to another in the life of the individual, e.g., birth, sexual maturity (adolescence/puberty),

marriage (reproduction) and death, and categorised these rituals as the “rites of passage.” The passage from one stage to another not only posed a crisis in the life of the individual but also generated concern for the group or the community. Elaborating the ideas of Van Gennep, Norbeck explained, “Crisis rites are markers of special events in the life of the individual and thus differ from recurrent ritual events such as planting and harvesting, ceremonies which have essentially equal meaning for many people” (Norbeck 1961, 140).

Srinivas, in his study of the Coorgs, stated that “every society has a body of ritual, and certain ritual acts forming part of the body of ritual repeat themselves constantly. Not only ritual acts but also ritual complexes, which are wholes made up of several individual ritual acts, frequently repeat themselves. Several such ritual complexes and some individual ritual acts might be together knit into a still wider ritual whole which repeats itself occasionally” (Srinivas 2003, 69).

Beteille, while writing on the scope of the sociological study of religion, argued that such a study does not seek the truth of religious belief or the efficacy of religious practice. Such studies are “... about the actual operation of religious beliefs and practices in particular places and particular times. What counts therefore is the empirical detail in which belief and practice are examined and related to each other and to their social context.” (Beteille 2006, 208).

With the above discussion in mind, the present work discusses the religion traditionally followed by the Khasi tribe of India in the state of Meghalaya. Traditionally, the Khasi were a mono-religious society practicing a religion known as *Ka Niam Khasi*. But, after the arrival of the British some two hundred years ago, Christianity arrived as an alternative religion. Whereas Christianity is a scripture-based religion, *Ka Niam Khasi* does not have any scriptures. The latter is also not a church-based religion. Further, there is no priesthood in the Khasi society. The rites are to be performed by the mother’s brother at the level of the domestic group or the lineage, and the knowledge of these rites is passed down from the senior generations to the junior generations. But, then, there are rites that are performed at the level of the community for the welfare of its members. Given such a scenario, our concern in this work is to understand *Ka Niam Khasi* in terms of its belief system and rites.

The Khasi are a matrilineal society. The society consists of a number of exogamous clans (*kur*) spread all across the Khasi Hills. The concept clan (*Ka Kur*) is central to the organisation of the Khasi society. It gives identity to a Khasi person and plays a pivotal role in the institutions of Khasi kinship and marriage as well as the Khasi religion (*Ka Niam*). The members of *Ka Kur* are believed to have descended from a common ancestress (*Iawbei Tynrai*) though their descent from her hasn't actually been traced. *Ka Kur* is composed of all the descendants (both male and female) from the same *Iawbei Tynrai* who consider themselves related to one another as kin, having the same blood, though this relationship is putative. *Ka Kur* acts as a corporate group and its solidarity is expressed in social, economic, religious, and political spheres. Every *Kur* has a distinct name put after the personal name of the person, which may appear as a "surname."

Solidarity is evident even after death. The bones of every member of *Ka Kur* are placed in the same place called *Mawshyieng*. (It is a place where the bones of all the dead from a particular clan are preserved. Each clan had its own place for this purpose.) This idea of kin-solidarity is reflected in another belief that, after death, the spirits of the dead go to "live" with the spirits of the ancestors in the house of God (*Dwar U Blei*).

Each clan is divided into a number of matrilineal lineages called *kpoh* (womb). Each *kpoh* is further sub-divided into a number of domestic groups called *iing* (in another context, this word also means a house or a dwelling); the number of *iing* depends upon the number of daughters in the *kpoh* who move out after marriage and set up independent *iing*. It is customary in the Khasi society that the elder daughters, sometime after their marriage, are encouraged to move out of the *iing* of their mothers and setup a new *iing* for themselves, though with the support of their mothers and brothers. But, for all other purposes, they always remain attached to their matrilineage (*kpoh*). Their brothers keep in close contact with them and take care of their, and their children's, welfare. In an hour of crisis, these daughters always fall back on their mother's *iing* for support and resources.

Both the *kpoh* and the *iing* function as corporate groups. According to Radcliffe-Brown, "A group may be spoken of as 'corporate' when it possesses any one of a certain number of characters: if its members, or its

adult male members, or a considerable proportion of them, come together occasionally to carry out some collective action—for example, the performance of rites ...” (Radcliffe-Brown 1964, 41).

Rites were performed at the levels of the *iing* and *kpoh* by the eldest male member of the matrilineage. The eldest male member of the lineage has several roles to play as a brother to his sisters and maternal uncle to his sister’s children. In the sphere of kinship, he is the caretaker of the members of the matrilineage; in the sphere of the marriage of the children of his sisters, he is the main negotiator; in the sphere of economy, he is the manager of the lineage property, which is held in the name of his sisters; in the political sphere, he is the main spokesman in the meetings of the village assembly; and, in the sphere of religion, it is his task to perform the various rites. Our concern in this work is with the various rites and his role in the performance of these rites. This role of the mother’s brother assumes significance given the fact that there is no occupational category of priest in their society. Moreover, this religion is not scripture-based either.

In addition to the aforesaid, rites are also performed in the politico-jural domain, e.g., the rites performed to pay obeisance to guardian deities of the village are the rites that fall into this domain. Such rites cut across the domestic domains. A Khasi village consists of a number of households and its population consists of members belonging to the various clans. Every Khasi village community occupies a common territory with defined boundaries. Social order is maintained in the Khasi villages, by and large, through a collective political body known as the *dorbar*, which is a general assembly of all the male adults in the village. The affairs of the village *dorbar* are carried out on a day-to-day basis by an executive body. The head of the executive body is designated as the *Rangbah Shnong* (village elder / village headman), who also presides over the meetings of the general assembly. The *dorbar* executive, on its own, does not have the power of coercion or to punish any offender; that power rests with the general assembly.

A number of contiguous villages (*shnong*) may come together to federate loosely as a *Raid*, which does not have any role in or control over the internal affairs of the member-villages. The entire male adult population from each member-village comes together as a “corporate group” (in the

politico-jural domain) to resolve inter-village disputes or whenever there is a conflict between people belonging to different villages.

Hima is the third and the largest category, besides the village and the *Raid*, and is also a federation of several villages and *Raids*. The general assembly of the *Hima* consists of all the adult male population drawn from each federating village. Matters that could not be settled at the level of the *Raid* or the village are referred to the general assembly of the *Hima*. There are twenty-five such *Hima* in the Khasi Hills, which gained recognition through the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. Out of the twenty-five *Hima*, Khyrim is one of the *Hima* that performs rites as per the Khasi religion and these rites could be seen as belonging to the politico-jural domain. Thus, the *Hima* Khyrim acts as a “corporate group” in the political and religious spheres.

To provide a historical context to the understanding of the practice of the Khasi religion in the present time, we have to make reference to the impact of the British on society after they arrived here in 1826. Sometime after the arrival of the British, there were some isolated attempts at conversion to Christianity in the Khasi Hills, in 1813 and 1831, which did not have much impact. It was with the efforts of the Welsh Mission, in 1841, that one could see Christianity making firm inroads in the Khasi Hills. The conversions were made at the level of the individuals and not at the level of the lineage or the clan.

Over a long period of time, the number of individual converts increased many fold and a situation arose where, in the same domestic group or lineage group, one could find members following different religious faiths. Obviously, those who became Christians had to give up the practices of *Ka Niam Khasi* under the pressure of their Church leaders. If a woman changed her religion to Christianity, then she did not have to follow the rites of the Khasi religion for her domestic group or the lineage group. Her children would, obviously, be born Christians. But, if only males adopted Christianity, then it was a problem for the lineage of their sisters as the rites had to be performed by their brothers, which they could no longer do now.

In the absence of scriptures and the priesthood in the Khasi society, the knowledge of the rites was based on the memory of the elders. By priesthood, we mean a category of person whose main occupation is to conduct rites for the people in the society. Rites were performed in the domestic domain by the eldest male members of the lineage as has been mentioned earlier. But rites were also performed in the politico-jural domain, for the welfare of the community, by the elder members from various clans that constituted the political bodies: the *Raid* or the *Hima*.

These people were referred to as *U Nongknia* and designated as the *Lyngdoh*. Now, it so happened that the lineages of each clan from which these *Lyngdoh* were drawn adopted *Lyngdoh* as a prefix to their clan's name and, thus, created a distinct identity for their clan. This seems to have been the most senior lineage, of which the eldest male member acted as the *Lyngdoh*. Thus, in many clans, we find a particular lineage using *Lyngdoh* as a prefix with their clan's name, e.g., amongst the Nongbri clan we may find *Lyngdoh Nongbri* as one of the lineages, which is commonly referred to as *Kur Lyngdoh Nongbri*. Though the word *Kur* refers to the clan in the common parlance, to our mind it should actually refer to a lineage. However, it may be mentioned very clearly that that practice did not create a stratum in the clan structure of the society.

As more and more people started embracing Christianity, it became difficult for such lineage groups to find members (mothers' brothers) who could conduct the religious rites properly and completely, as per *Ka Niam Khasi*. The Church had put severe restrictions on the converted males to render this service to their matrilineage. Consequently, the number of knowledgeable people started to dwindle. The choice for the members of such lineage groups was to either get males from outside to play the religious role of the brothers or convert to Christianity, as the life-cycle rites had to be performed. This started a vicious circle and many people started deserting their religious practices in favour of other religions that were scripture-based and had a tradition of priesthood. In view of such a situation, an association under the name of *Ka Seng Khasi* was formed to produce literature containing the belief system of the Khasi according to *Ka Niam Khasi* and to provide knowledgeable people to conduct the various rites for those who did not have anyone to do so.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE KHASI BELIEF SYSTEM

The Khasi religion, at both the levels of belief and action (rites and rituals), was neither codified, nor elaborated, uniformly across the Khasi Hills, i.e., it was not a scripture-based religion. Attempts at putting the belief system and ritual practices into writing started in the twentieth century after the Khasi language acquired a written form and after the emergence of a section of educated people in the Khasi society. The understanding of these people (who themselves were Khasi but hailed from different parts of the Khasi Hills) was based upon their knowledge of this religion as per their own experiences and on information collected from different parts of the Khasi Hills. As a result of these attempts, writings on the Khasi religion started appearing regularly. Though there were variations in these writings, there does seem to be a unanimity on the basic conceptions regarding God and other aspects of the religion. In what follows, now, we have tried to construct the various attributes of God from the writings of different scholars.

Khasi Conception of God

These scholars were unanimous in their understanding that God was (i) the creator of the Universe; (ii) omnipresent; (iii) omnipotent; and (iv) omniscient. Further, God (*U Blei*) could manifest himself in any form and through any sign or symbol.

According to Dr Homiwell Lyngdoh (1970, 5), *U Blei*, as the creator of this universe, is the ruler of the universe. As the ruler, God administers the affairs in this world. He is present everywhere and is the provider of wealth in this world. He keeps an eye on each *kur* or *jait* (either of these expressions refer to clan) as well as on the relationship between clans. One of the ways in which different clans establish relationships among them is through matrimony. What it means for a believer of the Khasi faith is that

God oversees (perhaps, guards) the sanctity of the relationship between the consanguines and the affines of the believer. In other words, it could be said that God preserves the systems of kinship and marriage in society, both of which are essential for the survival or continuity of the society.

Sib Charan Roy Jaitdkhar (2007, 2–3) ascribed some more attributes to God, in addition to those described in the preceding paragraph. According to him, God bestows personality and longevity on the mortal beings in this world. Another attribute was added by David Roy (1984:75) when he wrote that God, as being all-pervading, was in the know about all the acts of the mortal beings on Earth. H. O. Mawrie (1981), and Rev. Fr. G. Costa, as quoted by Rymbai (1982, 89), also wrote about the attributes of God in similar ways.

God has been mentioned above as the ruler but, interestingly, Mawrie goes a step further by saying that God administered the affairs of the villages and the various *Hima*. According to Homiwell Lyngdoh (1970, 5), Sib Charan Roy (2007, 2), and David Roy (1984, 75), God not only created the universe but instilled life on the Earth as well. As an instiller of life, God also regulated life on Earth.

In addition to such a conception of God, the Khasi have developed conceptions of

(a) The Universe (*Ka Pyrthei Shityllup*): The Khasi believe that God created the Universe. The Universe consists of the Earth (*Ka Mei Ramew*); the Sky (*Ka Bneng*); and the Netherworld (*Khyndai Pateng Niamra*). The Earth, considered as mother, is conceptualised, along with the various forms of living organisms (animals, human beings, birds, insects, plants, etc.) and non-living things (the rivers, the streams, the ponds, the waterfalls, the rocks, the hills, the forests, the wind, and fire). The Sky contains the Sun, the Moon, and the house of God, inhabited by the spirits of the ancestors and other consanguines and the affines who have died. The Netherworld, located very deep under the earth, is believed to be as deep as nine floors. This very dark place is inhabited by the spirits of those dead people who did not lead a life of righteousness, or who had broken a taboo, or who had met a violent death, and for whom no rites were performed after their death to seek forgiveness from God by their kin.

Such spirits, depending upon the nature and the degree of severity of their wrong actions, resided on different stories of the Netherworld.

(b) The relationship between God and Nature: Since God created the Universe, the Khasi believe that God manifests himself through Nature, i.e., through the hills, the streams, the forests, all the vegetation and the creatures, and whatever else we find in the nature. Such a belief adds an aura of sacredness to all these things in the Khasi belief system. Further, they believe that since all these are manifestations of God, it is He who takes upon himself the responsibility of taking care of these in the face of any calamity or crisis.

(c) The relationship between God and the human beings (in the spheres of kinship, economy, and politics): The Khasi believe that while God created the human beings, He also commanded them to follow a path of righteousness in this world. Righteousness was to be visible in their conduct towards God and towards other human beings without any discrimination, as well as towards all other things in nature, which were created by God and through which God manifests himself. God also commanded that the conduct of a human being, as mortal being, in this world would determine where her/his soul would rest after death. In other words, it means that God prescribed human beings a set of observances (through rites), norms of behaviour, rights, duties, and codes of morality to follow in this world. All these, together, constitute the Khasi religion (*Ka Niam Khasi*).

The relationship between God and the human beings is depicted through folklores. We shall describe, below, three folklores, showing slight variations from one another in terms of their content:

The myth of *Lum Sohpet Bneng*: The Khasi believe that, once upon a time, their ancestors lived up in the skies, with God, the Creator. Living in sixteen huts (*Khathynriew Trep*), they followed the righteous ways as shown by God. Every morning, they would descend to Earth down a golden ladder in the form of the trunk of a tree (*Ka Diengiei*) for cultivation and return by the same route to their huts in the evening before nightfall (i.e., darkness). Once, it so happened that the inhabitants of seven of the huts (*Hynniew Trep*) failed to return in time and the ladder was removed before the onset of darkness. Now, the inhabitants of only nine

huts (*Khyndai Trep*) remaining with God. There was no way for those on Earth to return to their huts up in the skies.

They pleaded hard with God to let them return to their huts to live with Him but to no avail. Ultimately, they entered into a covenant (*Jutang*) with God on the following terms:

(a) They could not enter the house of God (*Dwar U Blei*) during their lifetime;

(b) They could do so only after their death on Earth, provided they had conducted themselves in the righteous way (*ka hok*) in their life-time, i.e., they had spent their entire life as righteous people (*riewhok*) on Earth. The other essential condition was that, after their death, all the rites should have been performed for them by their relatives properly and completely;

(c) If they had failed to live as righteous people (*riewhok*), their souls would roam around in the universe as evil spirits if, at the time of their cremation, their kin did not seek forgiveness from God on their behalf. The evil spirits would then have to find their abodes at different places as the door of the house of God would be closed to them. Some of them might even go to live under the ground at a place known as *Khyndai Pateng Niamra*, *Nurok Ka Ksew*, or *Myngkoi U Jom*; translated by some Khasi scholars as “Hell.” However, it was still possible for such spirits to find their way to the house of God, if the death rites were performed again in the proper manner and forgiveness, from God, for the misdeeds of the person whose spirit had turned evil was prayed for;

(d) The link with God was severed only physically but would continue to remain spiritually. God would always be the protector and, when approached through prayers and acts of divination, would make His presence felt through various signs, which the knowledgeable could decipher.

Another version of this folklore explains that the inhabitants of the seven huts were sent to stay on Earth by God with a purpose. Therefore, it was necessary for their descendants to find out the purpose or the reason (*Ngi wan sha kane ka pyrthei da ka Daw*) for which they were made to live on Earth.

According to yet another version of the folklore, as narrated by Homiwell Lyngdoh, the people living on Earth, after the disappearance of the golden ladder between the Earth and the house of God under the influence of an evil spirit known as *ka tyrut*, forgot the righteous path. When they strayed from the path of righteousness, the entire world was enveloped in darkness. Getting worried with the continued darkness, they decided to convene a meeting of all God's creatures on Earth to find a way out. In the meeting, they explained that since it was because of their acts of deviation from the righteous path (i.e., their violations of the terms of the covenant with God), it was better if some other creature, who was not a descendant of those who had come to settle on the Earth from the house of God, agreed to go to the house of God to seek forgiveness on behalf of everyone. Since the human beings had broken the agreement, their communication with God was severed. Hearing this, a cock came forward to volunteer himself for this task.

On reaching the house of God, the cock pleaded fervently for the pardoning of the human beings and asked God to show the ways and means by which the human beings could reestablish communication with God. Pleased with the prayers and the pleadings of the cock, God said that since the cock did not fall prey to the designs of *ka tyrut* and did not leave the righteous path, it could act as a mediator between the human beings and God. Further, God said that whenever human beings wished to communicate with Him, they could do so by examining the various organs of the cock and the eggs laid by the hens as God would manifest himself through signs on any of these parts. The cock agreed to be the sacrificial bird for the human beings whenever they wished to communicate with God. God provided a coat of colourful feathers to cover the naked body of the cock.

From the three versions described above, it is possible to identify the three fundamental beliefs of the Khasi religion, which lay the foundations of the various rites: (i) belief in the covenant between God and human beings (*ka jutang*); (ii) belief that there is always a reason behind every act of God (*ka daw*); and (iii) belief that man could communicate with God at times of need or crisis through a cock (i.e., by sacrificing a cock).

The Khasi believe that God never tolerates any act of deviation from the righteous path (i.e., breach of the covenant), and brings suffering and

misfortune to the deviant. If any person ever deviated from the path of righteousness, the person would incur the wrath of God in the form of misfortune or suffering in one form or another. Now, the onus would be on the person to find out the reason (*ka daw*) for the misfortune or suffering and make amends. After finding out the reason, the suffering person could seek the forgiveness of God.

The reason could be found out by performing the rite of *Ka Khein Ka Bishar*, which involves either the sacrifice of a cock (considered as the mediator) or the breaking of an egg of a hen. However, it was not possible for everyone to perform this rite to find out the reason for the misfortune. Consequently, help was sought from knowledgeable people, who may or may not be members of the matrilineage of the person.

The aforesaid could also be put as follows: the Khasi believe that all events taking place in the world reflect the will of God and every will of God had a purpose behind it. People, as the mortal beings, can only try to understand the cause (*ka daw*) of any event by performing the rite of *Ka Khein Ka Bishar*. It was only after deciphering the cause that someone could approach God for forgiveness, as it is believed that no one should invoke God or other deities without having a good cause or reason. The Khasi also believe that the rites should be performed properly and completely, otherwise they would not be able to communicate with God and there would be an adverse effect on them or their kin. It is for this reason that help was sought from those people who had the knowledge of these rites.

It is an important fact that there is no separate specialised priestly occupation in the Khasi society as it was for the eldest adult male in the matrilineage to perform the rites suited to any occasion. He was, therefore, supposed to have the knowledge of all the rites and religious practices. This knowledge was transmitted across generations, from mother's brother to sister's son in the lineage.

We have pointed out, above, that the Khasi perform rites at the level of the domestic group. These could be the rites performed at the different stages of the life of individual. Rites were also performed, as was pointed out earlier, at the level of the matrilineage group. The rites performed at the level of the matrilineage group were reflected as the rites performed at the