

The Sacred Groves of Meghalaya

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Many villages in Ri Khasi or Ri Hynñiew Trep, comprising the districts of East and West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaiñtia Hills, are bordered by what is commonly known here as a sacred grove. In many cases, this is a misnomer, since they are actually enormous forests. These forests did not become sacred on their own or because of some supernatural visitation. They were sanctified by men through religious rites and solemn prayers, and much pleading with God, *U Blei*, asking him to bless and consecrate them and charge the guardian spirit of villages and the wilderness, *U Ryngkew U Basa*, with the task of protecting and preserving them.

There might have been a thousand and one reasons why such deliberate sanctification of woodlands was carried out, but I will enumerate only some of the most obvious.

At the root of it all is the Khasi pantheistic philosophy and their belief that God exists in all things, animals and people within the universe. In short, to Khasi, God is the universe and manifests most closely through nature. Therefore, to disregard nature is to disregard God, and to deprive forests of trees is to deny God his favourite haunt on Earth.

Because of this, the old Khasi never indulged in wanton destruction. When they went to the forest to cut wood, for instance, realising that everything must carry God's sanction according to *Ka Hukum Blei*, the Divine Law, they would do the job only after paying obeisance to God through the ceremony of *Ka Nguh ka Dem*, the bow the homage. As part of the ceremony, the woodcutter would have to intone words of supplication before she could even touch a tree:

Look here, that I have come to cut you down is not because I detest you or want to destroy you without cause. I have a great need for you. Through *Ka Hukum*, the Divine Law, God himself has given me his consent that I may cause your fall, so you too may have a role in all my undertakings, so you may live again by becoming a part of my home, a part of my fields and gardens. Therefore, allow

me, obey me, bend to my will, so I may fell you with a machete or an axe, for even though you may fall now, yet your fame shall rise and grow before God.

Before the spirits, it shall rise, before kings and nobles, before priests and elders, before all the people from generation to generation. So that your seeds, your branches, your trunk may proliferate, may spread, may rise, may grow, hey ho, I have given you my blessing, hey ho, God will give you his blessing, and you too, forgive me. I have spoken.

It is owing to this unique green consciousness that the old Khasi used to maintain forests where the felling of trees was either prohibited or regulated. Foremost among them were the *law kyntang*, the sacred groves and forests. In this type of woodland, not only is the cutting of trees forbidden – but nothing can be taken out of it: not a fruit, nor a flower, nor even a single leaf.

The most famous law kyntang in Ri Khasi is the *Law Lyngdoh* sacred grove at Mawphlang, about 24 km southwest of Shillong. The grove is so named because it belongs to the Lyngdoh Mawphlang clan (the priestly as well as the ruling clan of the traditional state of Mawphlang), which had sanctified and dedicated it to God and the guardian spirit, *U Ryngkew U Basa*.

According to legend, the sacred grove had been founded by an enterprising woman named Khmah Nongsai. The legend goes back to the beginning of Mawphlang's history, to how elders of the ĩangblah clan were one day compelled to perform obsecration ceremonies appealing to God for a sign as to their future ruler.



A view of Law Lyngdoh Mawphlang. Photo: Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

The clan had originally migrated from Ri Pnar (Jaiñtia Hills) and was in control of the state, but for some unknown reasons, there seemed to be widespread discontent with it at the time. The augurs and diviners who conducted the egg-breaking rituals and extispicy (the use of animal entrails for divination) declared that a woman named Khmah Nongsai had been revealed to them as the most fitting person to be the ruler of Mawphlang. Nobody knew who she was. Even the diviners had only learnt that she lived in a place called Laitsohma, in the state of Sohra, with her husband Lyhir Sohtun.

Ka Khmah Nongsai and her two uncles, in fact, had been wandering from place to place for reasons not very clear. One story says she was orphaned after an outbreak of cholera and had to leave home with her uncles to search for new places to farm. Another says she and her uncles had to run away because of a conspiracy to wipe out her family since they were considered a threat to the state's ruling clan.

Whatever the reason, Khmah first went towards Ri Bhoi in north Ri Khasi and settled down in a place called Patharkmah. Later, she left for a village called Nongsai, and that may be why she was known as Ka Khmah Nongsai, after Patharkmah and Nongsai. Next, Khmah shifted to the village of

Mawlieh in contemporary East Khasi Hills, where she met her husband. He took her to Myllem in the state of Shyllong. However, owing to differences with a powerful clan, they moved away to settle in Laitsohma.

It was to this place that the ĩangblah elders went to meet Khmah Nongsai and offered her the state of Mawphlang. But she did not appear to be interested. She said she would seek divine guidance by planting *diengsohma* (a kind of rhus tree) and *diengsning* (a species of oak) saplings, one of each, in Laitsohma and Phiphandi in Mawphlang. She promised the ĩangblah elders that she would settle in the place where both the saplings grew well.

When the saplings were inspected a year later, only one was growing in Laitsohma, whereas both were alive and well in Phiphandi. This prompted her to go to Mawphlang to become the first ancestress of Lyngdoh Mawphlang, the priestly ruling clan. Khmah Nongsai also had Phiphandi consecrated as a special place of worship, where the religious ceremonies of the clan could be conducted. As part of the ceremonies, more and more trees were added until the entire area grew to become a large grove that has remained sacred to this day.

This centuries-old woodland is a temperate rainforest with evergreen broadleaved trees. It can be described as a biodiversity wonderland – because of the variety of trees in it but also because of the diverse plants, flowers, insects and birds. Enter the grove, and it is like walking into a vast, dimly lit dome with sunlight barely filtering through the canopy of incredibly old trees, many with a thick covering of green moss and lichen, and others with a decoration of wildflowers and orchids of various species. The floor is covered with a carpet of rotting, rufescent leaves, several inches thick, judging from the way one's feet sink into them. The atmosphere is as peaceful and solemn as a house of worship. One can hear only the calming sounds of the forest. The water from its many springs is heavenly.



Inside the Law Lyngdoh Mawphlang. Photo: Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Leslie Harding Pde, a Khasi writer who has done some research on the sacred grove, tells many stories of how it is protected by the guardian spirit, *Basa*. [He writes](#), for example:

Ever since I was a small boy, I have heard tales of the Basa. It comes, they say, in two forms – snake and tiger. If a person goes into the grove to do anything destructive, such as cutting grass for his pigs, the Basa will appear as a snake and position himself in the sty, so that the pig will not dare to venture inside. When people see such strange happenings, they begin to enquire where the grass came from. Then they say to the snake, 'Go, please. They have done wrong and abused the grove.'

Then, as the people throw the grass back where it was taken from, the snake will disappear.

Elsewhere in the same text, he writes:

The locals also consider the Basa, in the form of a tiger, to be a guardian of innocent people. When suddenly, for some reason, people near the grove find themselves overcome with fear, they may cry out, 'O N̄i, O Kong, O Ryngekew, O Basa, please protect us from danger.' Immediately, it is said, the characteristically guttural sounds of the tiger, 'khor, khor, khor', will be heard at their backs and the tiger's spirit felt on all sides. And when they consider that they are out of danger, they send the Basa away.

The kind of total prohibition on the exploitation of forest resources that Pde speaks of is more or less true of all the sacred forests in Ri Khasi, sometimes also known as *ki law lyngdoh*, where the ruling clans of a state perform their religious rites. There are some, however, like those in the Sohra areas, where the felling of trees for very specific purposes is allowed after the mandatory ritualistic pleading with God. Now, unfortunately, the rituals are not observed except in a few places.

Many have asked me if the Khasi had had entire woodlands consecrated for the love of God. The answer is 'no'.

To imagine that would be to idealise the community beyond belief. Of course, given their natural respect for trees and forests, the Khasi must have found conservation as a policy easier to implement. But definite and pressing needs for such conservation must also have been felt. That is why, apart from the sacred groves and sacred forests, there are also other types of protected woodlands.

Among them are *ki law adong* (prohibited forests) or *law shnong* (village forests), controlled by village authorities; *ki law raij* (community forests), controlled by the state; and *ki law kur* (clan forests), controlled by elders of the clan. These forests are not subject to total prohibition, although their use is carefully regulated by the authorities concerned.

For instance, when a village allows trees to be cut for firewood from a prohibited forest, only a portion of it is declared open for use. If the east wing is opened, the inhabitants are assigned their shares only in that wing after they have paid the fees to the village council. Other parts of the forests are strictly prohibited. Also protected are saplings and young trees that have not reached a certain prescribed girth. This is how other types of forests are regulated too. Even in the so-called *law pyllait* (unprohibited forests, found mostly around Sohra or Cherrapunjee), which can be freely used by citizens for domestic purposes, wanton acts of destruction are not permitted.

There are many complex reasons for the Khasi's veneration of forests. For one, the hills were given to fits of furious rain and wind, which often put houses and the lives of people and domestic animals at risk. The forest surrounding a village formed a natural wind-break that considerably lessened the threat of decimation at the hands of these primal forces.

To the old Khasi, the forest was a temple where priests performed their many elaborate ceremonies connected with faith and culture. It was also an enormous storehouse of everything they needed: water, firewood, building materials, fruits, wild vegetables, herbs, medicinal plants, wild honey, flowers and marketable orchids, animals and birds. All of these form part of the incredible biodiversity of our forests.

As an illustration of how rich and diverse our sacred forests are, take the one at Narpuh in Ri Pnar. According to a study by an environmentalist, quoted by H.H. Mohrmen, a local writer, "More than 400 species of birds, at least 120 species of mammals, which include 37 species of bats, 30 species of carnivores, 7 species of ungulates and 30 species of rodents are endemic to this forest. It is also the source of the three major rivers of Jaiñtia Hills: Ka Kupli, Ka Apha and Ka Lukha." This is more or less true of all the sacred and prohibited forests found in Ri Khasi today.

However, the mode of cultivation in those days (unfortunately, still true today) was not very conducive to the conservation of forest cover. The slash-and-burn method of shifting cultivation, with its large-scale clearing of jungles, had depleted these sheltering woodlands at a frightening pace. In many places, this had been exacerbated by the production of lime and the manufacture of iron, which necessitated the use of wood in furnaces. One dreads to think what havoc their complete disappearance would have wrought in these hills.

Everywhere, dwellings would have been exposed to the ravages of fierce thunderstorms. Erosion on a massive scale would have taken place, and all the covering soil would have been washed away to the plains of East Bengal or Assam. Even more calamitously, springs, creeks and rivers, most of them

originating from deep inside the forests, would have dried up in no time, and there would not have been enough water to drink in the dry, windy months between winter and spring. Moreover, no trees would have meant no firewood, and the poor would have been left without a free supply of timber to build their homes and burn their dead. No trees would have meant no birds or animals, no life of any sort – complete desertification.

These must have been some of the most powerful reasons that prompted the ancient Khasi to conserve at least those woods that lay near their villages. And it certainly speaks volumes of their civic wisdom. But perhaps the most unusual motive for conservation is also the least talked about: the call of nature. Above all else, the forest to a Khasi also meant, and still means in many places, one gigantic loo.

A small clarification here. Sacred forests cannot be desecrated in this manner. When we were children, we used to defecate in the prohibited forests. But many people mistakenly refer to them as sacred groves or sacred forests. You may very well ask, “How come?”



Climbing plants and orchids colonising an ancient tree at the Mawphlang Sacred Grove. Photo: Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Having determined the necessity for conservation as a policy, the ancient Khasi sought effective ways to implement it. They settled on sanctification, called on God and his serving spirit, *U Ryngkew U Basa*, performed rites and pronounced injunctions to prevent anyone from defiling a forest so sanctified. Any surreptitious felling of trees, for example, would invite upon them not only the wrath of the people but also that of God and the preserving spirit. That done, these wise men of the past sat back and dared all possible offenders to call their bluff.

Such sanctification was done not only in the case of sacred forests, the Khasi temples, where any act of desecration is strictly forbidden, but also in all categories of prohibited forests. Hence, the confusion.

If you question the wisdom or effectiveness of sanctification as a strategy, this is what I would ask: is the manner of conservation today more competent? The forest department spends crores every year on the salaries of forest guards alone. Sanctification does not require any guards to protect the trees.

I strongly feel there is an urgent need to revive the tradition of sanctifying forests to meet the challenges of climate change and global warming, and as a countermeasure to the large-scale commercial logging and charcoal burning in our state, which continue unchecked despite the Supreme Court ban.

New forests should be created out of barren hills and unused land. The village forests, controlled by the village authorities, and the community forests, controlled by the traditional state authorities, should all be converted into sacred forests to render them more secure. At the same time, alternative means of livelihood and new modes of cooking and heating homes should be made available.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a poet and novelist. He teaches literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

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