

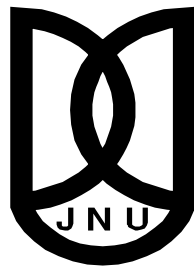
**Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiewtrep:  
A Translation**

Dissertation submitted to  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

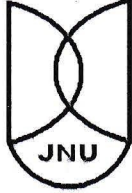
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**2019**



**CENTRE FOR ENGLISH STUDIES**  
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Date: 25 July 2017

**CERTIFICATE**

This dissertation titled “**Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiewtrep: A Translation**” submitted by **Ms. Matti Bakor War**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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**DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE**

This dissertation titled “**Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiewtrep: A Translation**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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## Introduction

### The Green Grass

Quietly among the forest trees,

He grew among the weeds;

A one of a kind, a lone violet, -

*Laiphew-na-ar jingmut*<sup>1</sup>.

Quietly beside cool streams,

Sweet smelling till it dies;

The fern that causes happiness,

Remains green for a long time.

Tell me, night beloved by the gods,

And you, clouds of different hues;

Tell me where he can be found,

The first born star of heaven.

Quietly he lives and quietly he dies,

Upon a wasted land;

---

<sup>1</sup> *Laiphew-na-ar jingmut* is a Khasi idiom to signify a deep thinker.

Quietly let him rest in his eternal bed –

Among the emerald grass.

(Tham, 1979)

The above lines were written by one of the most renowned Khasi poet and they were likely reflective of the poet himself. U Soso Tham was one of the earliest pioneers of Khasi poetry, among poets like John Roberts, Amjad Ali, Radhon Singh Berry and H. Elias. Born to a humble but God-fearing family, he had a difficult childhood and saw many of his aspirations cut short by his unfortunate circumstances. Forced to fend for himself and his family, he became a school teacher as soon as he left school. Many former pupils remember him with fondness and respect; these former pupils included prolific people like S. J. Duncan, R. T. Rymbai and A. S. Khongphai, among many others. From being a humble school teacher, Tham steadily rose up to become one of the most well-known and celebrated poets of Khasi literature. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih went so far as to crown him the “Khasi National Bard” and for good reason too. For rarely has anybody been able to leave behind a distinct and solid legacy as Tham did; as untrained a poet as he confessed himself to be, his poetry still resounds in the Khasi hills till today. With his lyrical verses that celebrate life, love, hope and the human spirit, Tham’s poetic works are a true embodiment of the kind of person that he was and the things he stood for and believed in. From a simple start in a classroom, Tham’s earnest yearning for an understanding of poetry and his consequent discovery of it has led his works to be immortalised.

Tham’s total output of literary contribution is rather small, a total of fifty-three poems which were published in two volumes – *Ka Duitra Ksiar* (The Golden Duitara) and *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep* (The Ancient Days of U Hynñiewtrep). The poems in *Ka*



*Duitra Ksiar* dealt with myriad themes. Many of them were inspired by his personal experiences, as seen in “U Tiew Pathai” (A Fragrant Flower), “U Phlang Jyrngam” (The Green Grass) and “Ki Mawlynnai” (Diamonds). Many of them spoke about the human spirit, like “U Dieng Bilat” (The English Pine), “U Sandy” (Sandy) and “U Sim Ba La Lait” (The Free Bird). Most of them are celebrations of Nature, especially that of the place he was born in; “Ki Kshaid Rymphum” (Cascading Waterfalls), “Kynjai Ha La Ri” (Peacefully In My Motherland) and “Ki Sngi Ba La Leit Noh” (Days Gone By) are a few of them.

However, Tham’s true masterpiece is his second poem collection, titled *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep*. Written in a narrative style, it is a single poem consisting of one hundred and eighty one stanzas, each comprising six lines, and divided into ten chapters. This collection narrates the story of how the Hynñiew Trep came to be, the period of peace and prosperity and the period of darkness that came after, how the suffering of humanity was elevated by a saviour in the form of the rooster and it ends with the poet’s wistful reminiscence of a golden age that has passed by and left behind. This dissertation will attempt an English translation of six selected poems from the poetry collection, after which the process of the translation attempt will be analysed and processed.

## **Review of Literature**

A substantial amount of literature and research has been done on the poetry and works of Soso Tham. There has been many literary contributions of many authors like H. Warjri, H. W. Sten, D. R. L. Nonglait, and H. B. Ngapkynta, among a few, on the author and his literary works. There have also been quite a number of translations on his works as

well; the most well-known translations are those of Oscar M. Wahlang, Shlur Manik Syiem and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih. These sources will be examined for the purpose of this research. Other works that are included are *Ki Duitara Ksiar* and *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiewtrep* by Soso Tham himself, articles by Soumen Sen and Esther Syiem and the Khasi-English dictionaries by Nissor Singh and Iarington Kharkongor for reference.

## **Methodology**

The major research methodology for this dissertation will be the translation of selected poems from Soso Tham's poem collection, "Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep". Apart from that, secondary sources mainly books, articles, journal pieces, essays, magazines, web articles and electronic sources have been referred to for the rest of the research for this dissertation.

## **Chapterisation**

This dissertation is divided into four separate chapters, besides the introduction and conclusion. The introduction presents an overview of the dissertation. It includes a brief abstract of the dissertation, the number of chapters and what each chapter will be dealing with, a literature review,

The first chapter gives an introduction into Khasi literature. After a brief description of the oral tradition present in the Khasi society, it will delve into the history of written Khasi literature starting with the advent of the evangelical missions. This chapter is

necessary to acquaint the reader with the start and growth of written literature in the Khasi hills.

The second chapter deals exclusively with the poet whose work is the main focus of this research, U Soso Tham. Before going into the details of his life, a brief contextual history will be given about the start of Khasi poetry till the works of John Roberts, who happens to be both the poet's former teacher and an influence in his life. The chapter will then go into the details of the poet's life, studying events that lead up to his first foray into writing poetry and his gradual evolution from his humble beginnings till his prominence as a poet in the Khasi literary scene.

The third chapter contains the English translations of the six selected poems. A brief overview of each and every poem is provided, before the translations. The six translated poems are "Grains of Gold" ("Ki Symboh Ksiar"), "The Flower Garden" ("Ka Persyntiew"), "Mother Nature" ("Pyrthei Mariang"), "The Cloud" ("U Lyoh") , "The Rainbow" ("U Simpyllieng") and "A Golden Age" ("Ka Aïom Ksiar").

The fourth chapter will present the analysis of the entire process of translation of the six poems.

The concluding chapter will follow the fourth chapter. Here, a general overview of whatever has been done so far will be made and a brief discussion of the state of Khasi literature in present times will be included.

## Chapter 1

### A Brief History of Khasi Literature

Khasi culture boasts of a rich tradition of folklore which is prevalent until today. It has its roots in oral tradition that has spanned generations of people - the elderly passing on the knowledge system by word-of-mouth to their young listeners who in turn, would pass on these stories and lessons to another generation of young listeners and so on so forth. This ancient knowledge system has survived and is surviving still in the form of folktales, fables, myths and anecdotes, told either through stories or songs. D. R. L. Nonglait states that:

Since the Khasis had no written literature, their origin can only be traced through the oral tradition. In ancient times, when our ancestors returned home from their work in the fields and after they had their evening meal, they would gather their children, nieces or nephews near the hearth and engage in telling stories. (Nonglait, 2005)

The knowledge system of the Khasi people exists in their folktales, legends, myths, fables and parables, proverbs, anecdotes, homilies and discourses. These often take the form of narratives or songs. One of the most prevalent and popular forms of story-telling takes the form of *ka phawar*, which is defined by Soumen Sen as follows:

... an ethno-specific genre... a distinctive form of oral poetry with a musical quality between chant and song. It consists of a rhyming couplet, which may be sung or chanted to pipe, stringed instruments or percussion on occasions ranging from rituals to sports competitions. Different categories of *phawar* reflect these different performance situations; at socio-religious occasions such as births, marriages, and funerals; at celebrations of military victories or of successful hunts; during archery competitions... at the erection of megaliths to commemorate the ancestors; and during festivals. Whatever the occasion, the *phawar* carries a socially relevant moral passage. (Sen, 2011)

Other forms of narratives which exist are in the form of *ki puriskam* or fables which are short in length or *ki parom*, which may be as short as a few hours' sitting or may take days to complete. All of these stories are pregnant with meaning and may contain elements of humour, tragedy, dramatic and even historical elements. In this case, it falls upon the onus of the story teller to engage his/her audience and to skilfully and subtly weave the intended message into the listeners' imagination so that it becomes ingrained into their understanding and it becomes part of them and their way of life and their beliefs. Proverbial sayings also abound in plenty in Khasi oral tradition especially like those seen in the two volumes of *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen* by Radhon Singh Berry, which dictates a certain set of values and ethics through the many do's and don'ts and thus, contribute to the shaping of the Khasi society and the people till today. Prior to Radhon Singh Berry putting them down in written form, these maxims were often repeated time and again by elders to advise and guide the younger people in order to ingrain in them three vital tenets of Khasi society: *ban tip briew tip Blei* (to know man and to know God), *ban tip kur tip kha* (to know one's maternal and paternal relations) and *ban kamai la ka hok* (to earn one's own righteousness through hard work and honest means). On the importance of these sayings, Syiem, in one of her essays, states that:

The formulation of this body of sayings or proverbs and chants has been carefully shaped by a culture that has always preferred to explain its existence in mythic rather than in historic terms... The oral or the spoken word, *ka ktien*, rationalises the ultimate meaning of existence in a way that is geared towards the preservation of a mystical sense of life where the *rngiew* or the aura that radiates from an individual and even the entire community must be kept alive. (Syiem, 2011)

Syiem further stresses upon the importance of the three vital tenets of Khasi society, describing them as the "three corner-stones of existence for the Khasi" (Syiem, 2011) and

likening them to the three stones that make up a hearth in a Khasi household. In popular Khasi terminology, the expression ‘*sawdong ka lyngwiar dpei*’ (around the hearth) encapsulates the daily cultural practice that the Khasi people, especially in the rural areas, would practice often after a long day of work in the fields. After their evening meal, the family or a group of people would assemble around the fireplace or the hearth and would listen to the story teller narrate a tale after which they would then depart with new lessons learned and wisdom gained. Fire itself is an important symbol in Khasi culture and it was always a good sign if a household could host elders who would narrate stories and anecdotes while warming themselves around it. Thus, the fireplace still holds special significance for the Khasi people and Nonglait quotes author E. W. Dkhar who put it eloquently below:

“... the fireside, therefore, was an educational furnace of the Khasis... oral in character.”  
(Nonglait, 2005).

Syiem quotes noted anthropologist Jan Brouwer who made the observation that the knowledge system of the Khasi people is “an already evolved philosophy of life” that did not make the evangelists’ task of converting the natives to Christianity an easy one. She further goes on to quote Brouwer that “The significance of such a system is the oral preservation of itself within the private unit of the individual and the public domain of the clan or the community” (Syiem, 2011).

Thus, it is through the spoken word that the elders would teach and ingrain into the minds of their young audience their traditions, their ways of life and culture, their religious beliefs, their social and moral obligations, to put it in short, the essence of their sense of

identity and belonging. And it is an effective medium till today, as evidenced by Esther Syiem when she states:

The phenomenon of the written that gave Khasi society its alphabet over a hundred and fifty-nine years back, has still to contend with the pervading presence of the oral as being a far more efficient tool and a better repository of all learning and knowledge, and societal wisdom... the Khasi still prefers to hold on to the immense possibilities of the oral that resonates as strongly as ever through its undocumented past. (Syiem, 2011)

### **Evangelical Missions and written Khasi Literature**

It would be fallacy to think that the arrival of the Christian missionaries and an education system marked the beginning of Khasi literature but it would be just as erroneous to discount the fact that the arrival of an education system and a script helped facilitate the start of written Khasi literature. However, the beginning of literary activity in the Khasi hills was not smooth and there were several hiccups initially. It can be said that these interruptions, however, were not without their use as they helped pave the way for Khasi literature to the status that it has reached today. Before the arrival of the Christian faith, the first attempt to introduce the natives to a religion other than their own was made in the seventeenth century by a ruler of the then Jaintiapur kingdom who had converted to Hinduism. Later in the early nineteenth century, Brahmins from Dacca reintroduced it to the people of Shala (now Shella) in their efforts to spread Hinduism. Though their efforts did not bear much fruit for the religion did not spread beyond Shella, it did help usher in the first evangelical activities by providing a medium for the early missionaries to converse with the natives and to stir into life early literary activities in the Khasi hills.

The first recorded attempt at initiating literary activity in the Khasi hills was that of Krishna Chandra Pal, one of the first Christian converts of William Carey of the Serampore Mission. He arrived at Pandua (now in Bangladesh) from Kolkata in the year 1813 and began to spread the Gospel to the people. In the same year, he successfully baptised two locals, U Duwan and U Anna. Pal also started to translate the New Testament into Khasi through the Bengali script with the help of a Khasi translator. By that time, the people of Shella and other neighbouring areas were already familiar with the Bengali script, as there were schools that had been established by the Brahmins of Bengal in their effort to spread Hinduism in the Khasi Hills since the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, it was not an easy task to do so as the Bengali script could not accommodate certain sounds of the Khasi language. Still, their efforts bore fruit and in the year 1817, copies of the Gospel of St. Matthew were printed in Khasi and made available to the Khasi people who could read the Bengali script. By 1824, the Serampore Mission had published five hundred copies of the translated version of the New Testament, written in the Bengali script. Afterwards, another version of this translated New Testament known as the *Khashee New Testament*, containing an additional eight hundred and ninety eight pages, was produced in 1831 and this version would later be used by another Baptist missionary from the Serampore mission, Alexander Burgh Lish.

Alexander Burgh Lish can be credited as the person who opened the first regular schools at Mawsmal, Mawmluh and Sohra. He arrived in the Khasi Hills in the year 1832 and with the help of U Duwan, one of Krishna Pal's first Christian converts, he sought to educate the native people. Though he had initially employed the English language while teaching his students, he soon reverted to the Bengali script as he thought it would be a



better medium of instruction seeing as to how the people were acquainted with it. However, Lish soon realised the inadequacy of the Bengali script for the purpose of writing down the Khasi language and the lukewarm response from the natives regarding the usage of the script. This was also evident from the fact that though the people seemed to be quite enthusiastic about attending school at first, their numbers slowly dwindled and little progress was made with using the Bengali script as the medium of instruction. As K. Mark Swer aptly puts it, "... its use of the Shella dialect and the lack of acceptance for Bengali beyond the southern slopes of the hills meant that the 'First Khasi Bible' remained a mere novelty – something talked about but not read" (Swer, 2016). The natives were also not so easily swayed into leaving behind their old beliefs and this presented a tough scenario for the missionary to work with.

Still, Lish carried on with his endeavour and had started working on developing a Roman script for the Khasi language when it was unfortunately cut short by the amalgamation of the Serampore Mission with the American Baptist Mission in the year 1838. The new mission was not interested in continuing with the missionary endeavour in the Khasi hills and so, the schools were shut down and Lish's new endeavour left incomplete. There are not many records of Lish's works and contribution in the Khasi hills but it cannot be denied that his efforts went a long way in paving the way for a Welsh missionary who capitalised on what had been left incomplete and whose contributions made it possible for the birth of the Khasi alphabet and consequently, the beginning of written Khasi literature.

Thomas Jones and his wife, both missionaries belonging to the Welsh Calvinistic Missionary Methodist Society arrived in the Khasi Hills on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1841 and were

graciously hosted by Captain Thomas Herbert Lewin, head of the East India Company military camp at Saitsohpen. Like the previous missionaries before him, Thomas Jones arrived with evangelical zeal but he soon saw that it would all be in vain unless the people could read the text and understand it themselves. Thus, he began to educate the people and where Alexander B. Lish failed, Jones succeeded.

To start with, Thomas Jones tried to acquaint himself with the Sohra dialect as opposed to the Shella dialect and within a few months, he had managed to familiarise himself with it with the help of three literate Khasi natives who were former pupils of Alexander Lish – U Duwan Rai, U Jungkha and U Laitthat. Once he had gained a working knowledge of the language, he began working on a script that would make it easier for him to educate the natives. What also worked in Jones' favour was the fact that he did not do what his predecessor did and chose to work with the Roman script instead of the Bengali script and the result of this experimental endeavour was the first ever Khasi primer titled *Ca Citab ban Hicai Ca Citien Cassia* (The Book To Teach The Khasi Language), which helped both missionary and native gain an understanding of the new script. The publication of this booklet kick started the beginning of Khasi literature in the written form and cemented Jones' prominence as the one who gave the Khasi people their own alphabet. Having formed a script which both he and the natives could work with, Jones then resumed with his mission work and organised classes at the military camp. In 1842, he reopened the schools that Lish had established and posted three of his competent students there as teachers - U Larshai, U Nissor and U Jom.

Jones worked alone for almost seven months before he was joined by other Welsh missionaries, Rev. William Lewis and his wife and Dr. Owen Richards. They arrived in

Sohra on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1843. Upon their arrival, the task of teaching the children was entrusted to Lewis and his wife while Jones devoted his time to the translation of the New Testament to Khasi using the alphabet he himself has developed. Under William Lewis' charge, the number of primary schools increased and more people were made teachers. By the time William Lewis left for Wales, there were schools established at Nongwar, Jowai, Shala, Sohbar, Tyrna, Kharsawphra and Lamin. Early education among the natives was also encouraged by Captain Lewin who was keen to see the children complete their studies. He set up a scholarship which he sponsored from his own pocket and awarded to twelve pupils every year. This scholarship lasted until the Captain's death in December 1846. The efforts and hard work of Thomas Jones I, Thomas Jones II and William Lewis did not go unnoticed by the Welsh Mission which sent more missionaries to the Khasi hills – Griffith Hughes, Hugh Roberts, Thomas Jerman Jones and John Roberts to name a few. These missionaries continued the work of their predecessors and were instrumental in taking the education system in the Khasi hills to the position that it has reached today.

The hard work of the missionaries paid off bountifully. Under William Lewis' charge, there was an increase in the number of mission schools as the Khasi people became more receptive to the idea of an education. With education also came a change in lifestyle and soon not only did the people learn how to read and write but they also saw the value of cleanliness and hygiene and incorporated healthy practices into their daily lives. Of course, this did not mean that the missionaries did not face any opposition from the natives though. There were sections of Khasi people who viewed the missionaries and their work as a threat to their indigenous beliefs. For example, T. Rodborne mentions that Khasis initially had misgivings about writing. This was due to the fact that the writing instrument used at that

point of time was a quill and the Khasis believed that it came from a rooster, a bird which they hold sacred in their faith. Because of this, missionaries often had a hard time trying to convince their students to use the quill. But more hostile were the people who accused the missionaries of establishing schools to get more people to convert to Christianity. Their fears were somewhat justified as quite a number of Khasi people who had chosen to leave behind their indigenous faith were those who attended the mission schools. However, it would be erroneous to say that everybody who attended school converted to Christianity. Even so, many village elders issued a dictum to stop the parents from sending their children to school. The hostility towards education continued for many years and quite a number of school buildings were burnt down by non-Christians in many instances. Yet despite the hardships faced, the missionary work in the Khasi hills continued undaunted and the region saw an increasing number of missionaries who arrived and contributed to further the cause of their mission work.

Nearly fifty years after the first Welsh missionary had set foot upon the Khasi hills and established their foundation, the Roman Catholic Church made its presence felt with the arrival of two of its missionaries, Otto Hopfenmueller and Angelus Muenloher, in 1890. The arrival of the Roman Catholic Church in the Khasi and Jaintia hills then led to a tense situation in the region wherein there was three parties involved: “non-Christian writers assailed the alien faith; on the other, the Catholics attacked the Presbyterians and the latter retaliated.” (Sten, 1990)

This religious controversy gave impetus for a surge of written literature, both by the missionaries and the newly educated native people. The controversy started when a Catholic priest, Gebbard Abele, criticised a biography of Martin Luther written by John

Roberts which was included as a chapter in a school textbook. It went so far as to result in the publication of another book in 1901 on Martin Luther from the Catholic perspective, in which the author denounced Luther and criticised him for defying the Pope's orders. Due to the issue raised, Roberts withdrew the book from the syllabus as a gesture of goodwill. The mudslinging between the Protestant and the Catholic factions was made the more interesting when a Khasi writer, Hormu Rai Diengdoh joined the fray. Diengdoh was a Christian who reconverted back to his indigenous faith. Furthermore, he was a well-read man who could effectively back his criticisms that C. Becker admitted that the solid content of the "anti-Christian and atheistic papers of Europe and America" was so well-read that it reached even into "tranquil reaches of the Khasi hills."

The period when the controversy was taking place saw the mushrooming of journals and newspapers through which various viewpoints were contested and pitted against one another. The first Catholic journal called *U Nongialam Katholik* (The Catholic Leader) released its first copy in January 1902 and served as a retaliating force against the writings of the Presbyterians and the non-Christians. However, it did not remain in circulation for long. A second attempt at defending the Catholic doctrine was initiated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, 1907 through the publication of a new journal titled *Ka Iing Khristan* (The Christian Household). As for the Presbyterians, they had two publications which they used against the Catholics – *Ka Pateng Khristan* (The Christian Generation) which was started in 1897 and *U Nongialam Khristan* (The Christian Leader) established in 1902. Also, a group of native Christian leaders got together and released a monthly journal called *U Lurshai* in 1910. This journal sought to elevate the status of Khasi statehood and it also tried to cultivate political consciousness amongst the people. Although we could see that

newspapers and journals of this time catered more to the religious sentiments of the people, it cannot be denied that literary activity was rigorous.

Khasi literature had its beginnings mainly through the works produced by the missionaries. H. W. Sten had stated that “Khasi literature owed much to translation... through translation the Khasi literary acquired notions of art forms and literary style.” This cannot be further from the truth because literature that existed during this period of time mainly dealt with religious themes and the literature that existed then was translated works of the missionaries. The first ever translated literature dated back to the year 1831 when the Serampore Mission released its first translated version of the New Testament. However, it was Thomas Jones’ first ever Khasi primer, *Ca Citab Hicai Ca Citin Khasi*, which went a long way in facilitating the works that were to follow at this point of time, works done both by the missionaries and later the natives themselves.

The development of Khasi literature was largely due to the efforts of the Welsh missionaries. The Khasi primer by Jones was a major benefit to native and missionary alike. Besides the primer, Jones had also translated many other books, some of which are still in circulation till today; the most well-known booklet titled *Ka Kot Tikir* (1842) was translated from a Welsh booklet called *Rhodd Mam* (My Mother’s Gift). Other well-known translated works of Jones’ are the translation of the gospel of St. Matthews, a book on Christian catechism called *Ka Kot Laiphew*, the Health Reader (1842) and *Ka Kot Nongialam* (The Christian Instructor) which was published in 1843. Jones remained in the Khasi Hills till the year 1847. Before leaving, he lost his wife on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August in the year 1845 and this was followed by the deterioration of his health for which he had to leave for

Kolkata. However, he continued his work even from Kolkata and thus the gospel of St. Matthew and the rest of the book, *Ka Kot Nongialam*, was published there itself.

William Lewis and his wife were also active in translating literature and took up the charge after Jones left the mission. In the year 1856, Reverend Lewis released a translated works of the Four Gospels and the Book of Acts. But perhaps, more significant was his wife's translation of the first part of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which was published in the year 1867. This translation of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was significant because it was considered the first ever attempt of writing fiction in the history of Khasi literature. John Roberts had revised this work in 1882-1883 but he passed away before the entire book was completed. The work was then continued by his wife with the help of Mondon Bareh. It was only in the early twentieth century that the final revision was completed. Titled *Ka Jingiaid U Pilgrim* in Khasi, this book quickly reached all the Christian homes that were in the Khasi Hills. Though this version was not strictly a translation and was more of a transcreated version of the original work, it became one of the most widely read books and the form of the allegory was used widely by later authors.

Besides *The Pilgrim's Progress*, another book which was widely read among the Khasi public and which left a strong influence upon authors of this time was the Bible. Work on translating the Bible goes back to the year 1831 when the first Khasi translation of the Bible came out, albeit done in the Bengali script. This version was a clumsy effort though it was done out of sincerity. The use of the Bengali medium neither did justice to the Khasi language nor was it something that the native understood or made sense of. Thus, the first Bible never made an impact upon the natives and soon it was relegated and then forgotten. It was Thomas Jones I who later re-initiated the translation of the New Testament

and this work was consequently carried on by other missionaries like William Hugh, Hugh Roberts and John Roberts. Following this, there were many published translations of various parts of the Bible coming out one after the other – the Gospel of St. Matthew came out in the year 1846, followed by the gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John and the book of Acts in the year 1856. In 1868, a translated version of the New Testament, starting from the gospel of St. Matthew till the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon was published in the year 1868. Titled *Ka Jiw tang Ka Bathymmai Ka Jong U Illsous Khristos* (The New Testament of Jesus Christ), it was a direct translation from Greek to Khasi and the major work of the translation was done by Rev. Hugh Roberts. Though it was a vast improvement from the 1831 version, it still needed further work with regards to the words and spellings used and this was corrected in the 1885 translation which was re-titled *Ka Testament Kaba Thymmai ka jong U Jisu Khrist* (The New Testament of Jesus Christ). The translation of the full New Testament was completed and improvements made by John Roberts. It was also John Roberts who was actively involved in the translation of the entire Bible into Khasi. In 1891, the first ever complete translation of the Bible was completed with the help of many translators, both foreign and native and the entire work process was supervised by Roberts. According to H. Myllemngap, John Roberts alone was involved in the translation of twenty-three books of the Old Testament into the Khasi language. He was also entrusted with the final editing of the final manuscript of the Bible before it was sent for publication. In 1897, the Khasi Bible or, *Ka Kotbah* as it is called in Khasi, was published, therefore completing the journey started by Thomas Jones I. This provides testament to the hard work and dedication that the translators took in making this book easily accessible to the natives. In the words of Douglas Bush, the translators had “raised



above themselves by the consciousness of their responsibility for making the divine word clear and persuasive” to the native people.

John Roberts was credited with many other accomplishments with regards to his contribution to the development of Khasi literature. Besides his transcreation work of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and his contribution to making the complete translation of the Bible a reality, Roberts had also authored many short stories and anecdotes that had been published in the Khasi First Reader in 1896 and the consequent Khasi Second Reader, Khasi Third Reader and Khasi Fourth Reader. These stories that have been included in these readers were adaptations of the stories in the Bible – the stories of Adam and the fall of Man, the great flood, Abraham, Joseph, Samson, Daniel, Joshua were portrayed in such a way that they would impress upon the peoples' minds Christian teachings while making them easily relatable to the native thinker. D. R. L. Nonglait states the following:

All the anecdotes and short stories have a clear moral lesson of their own, through which the author aimed at imparting moral teaching to school children. The stories were taken from the Bible but the author has transcreated them with a motif to suit the outlook of the native Khasis (Nonglait, 2005).

Another equally significant contribution on John Roberts' part was his adaptation of *Aesop's Fables* which were included in his Khasi Third Reader. In his adaptation, he employed creatures which were known to the Khasi people and also attached a moral lesson after each fable. John Roberts' initiatives and contributions were also significant because they helped preserve early writings which would have otherwise been lost. Roberts' immense contribution to Khasi literature, whether it be translation, fiction, poetry, drama, etc, has led to him being regarded and respected as one of the founding fathers of Khasi literature.

With time, the advent of Christianity and western knowledge led to an eroding of traditional values and increasing ignorance of the Khasi knowledge systems. Before the end of the nineteenth century, there was a revivalist movement which took place and this was reflected in the literature of that time. S. M. Amjad Ali was one of earliest non-missionary writers who heralded this movement. His most well-known work was *Ka Myntoi: ka Kot Boit kaba Nyngkong*, which was the first known book of self-composed poems in the Khasi language. Soon, there emerged a number of Khasi writers who saw that it is crucial to produce literature on Khasi culture and religion. Writers like Jeebon Roy, Rabon Singh and Radhon Sing Berry were most instrumental in bringing about this awakening. Later writers include Sib Charan Roy, Homiwell Lyngdoh and Soso Tham.

Jeebon Roy Mairom was one of the first of the natives who saw the denigration of Khasi culture and he went on to produce works of his own as a reaction against that. He was fluent in Sanskrit, Bengali and English and was a well read man. However, he produced works that dealt with the Khasi tradition and culture as opposed to the literature produced by the missionaries. In 1897, he published two of his books, *Ka Niam jong ki Khasi* (The Religion of Khasi people) and *Ka Kot Shaphang Uwei U Blei* (A Book about One God). He also contributed translated works of Indian literature such as *Ka Ramayana*, *Ka Kitab u Chaitanya* (The Book of Chaitanya), *Buddha Deb Charittra*, among many others. He also helped write Khasi primers for school education, *Ka Kot Pule Ba Ar* (The Second Khasi Primer) and *Ka Kot Pule Ba Lai* (The Third Khasi Primer). In 1896, Jeebon Roy set up his own printing press called *Ka Ri Khasi Press* at Umsohsun, Shillong which is still active. He was also the chief patron of *Ka Seng Khasi*, a social organisation that aims to preserve Khasi dances, songs and art and which is still functioning. Jeebon Roy's main

aim was clearly elucidated by Dr. Hamlet Bareh Ngapkynta in his book, *A Short History of Khasi Literature*, where he stated:

Jeebon Roy's conception appeared to be two fold. He saw in cultural heritage an immense force for literary creation in which he did a certain spade work, besides focusing his original contribution on religious thought. He also sought to enrich literature by creating adaptations from Indian literature, in a marked contrast to the missionaries who wrote under the direct influence of English, Welsh and Latin later on. (Ngapkynta, 1990)

Rabon Singh Kharsuka was equally instrumental in bringing about a revivalist movement in Khasi literature. He along with Radhon Berry Singh, were once Christians but later reconverted to the indigenous faith. Rabon Singh started writing on Khasi religious practices and these articles were serialised in the first Khasi periodical, *U Nongkit Khubor* (The Messenger). In 1899, he published a book, *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (The Book of *Phawar*). This text is an important documentation of the Khasi culture and practice. It contained stories and fables, old adages and verses. It also dealt with writings on religious practices and contained prayers and invocations for religious rituals. Rabon Singh also criticised the Christian missionaries for declaring taboo on many traditional customs of the Khasi people and imposing their moral code on the natives. He also bemoaned the deterioration of Khasi social values. The book can also be seen as a commentary on the divergent trajectory Khasi society seemed to have taken at this point in time. Another book of Rabon Singh was called *Ka Niam Kheih Ki Khasi*, which is a more elaborate work on the Khasi religion.

Like Rabon Singh, Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang started his literary career by writing for *U Khasi Mynta* (The Khasi Today). He contributed many poems and articles for

this periodical. Like Rabon Singh, he also viewed the apathetic attitude that the natives had towards their own culture with disdain. His most well-known work till today is *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, a book on Khasi proverbs. This book was divided into two parts and dealt with three main topics – social etiquette, ethical standards and man’s relationship with God. In this book, Radhon Berry included a criticism of Christian teachings; curiously though, many of the adages that he included in his book seemed to have been inspired by Christian teachings. Today, this book is very significant due to the relevant cultural commentary that it contains. The author himself had stated in the Preface that “he collects and writes all he has heard about the nuances of Khasi etiquette and manners” so that they would not be forgotten. (Sten, 1990)

There were also other prominent works of literature that were produced by other authors during the cultural revival. We have Sib Charan Roy whose works included *Ka Niam ki Khasi* (The Religion of the Khasis), *Ka Kot Tohkit Tir Tir*, *Ka Jingiakrenpule Shaphang ka Niam* (A Treatise on Religion), among others. In 1903, he also started a journal called *U Nongphira* (The Guardian). This journal ran for many years before it was discontinued and during that time, it served effectively as a platform for public opinion. There were many books which were written on the Khasi language as well. U Nissor Singh was an important figure who produced three important books on the subject. The first was published in 1900 and it was entitled *Hints on the Study of Khasi*. This book was written in order to facilitate the quick learning of the Khasi language, as the book provided by Hugh Roberts was far too elaborate and in 1903, he produced the *Khasi-English Dictionary* and in 1917-1918, he followed it up with the *English-Khasi Dictionary*.

Yet alongside the cultural revivalist movement, there was another contrasting movement that emerged and that was the religious awakening. This movement was propagated by the evangelised Khasi people and therefore, it was more or less an offshoot of the evangelical mission of the Welsh itself. This movement was just as influential and literature produced during this time served as inspiration to many later authors and poets. Most of the works that were produced during this time were inspired by the works of Mrs. William Lewis and John Robert. Among the first literary works produced during the movement, we have an adaptation of the song of Moses into an epic poem by Reverend Amirkha Khaiñ and this appeared in 1894. The concluding stanza of the poem was published in the journal *U Nongkit Khubor* and it was the only surviving copy of the poem; the rest of the manuscripts were unfortunately lost. In the same year, another poem appeared on the same journal. Entitled “Ka Bor bad Ka Burom U Blei” (God’s Glory and Power) and written by Joel Gatphoh, it was a lyric poem describing the poet’s wonder at the glory of Nature that God has created; the poem concluded with the poet submitting himself to God and carrying on with his mission to preach the Gospel.

There were also those who sought to address social evils through their work. Robert Evans was one of such people. In one of his poems called “Is It True that There is Cholera at Mawkhar?” Evans criticised the lack of unity among the people who, instead of helping those afflicted, chose to flee their homes because they feared the disease. He noted that even Christian leaders showed the same kind of apathy and berated them for being hypocrites. In another poem called “The Word of Wisdom”, he observed that people were gradually moving away from God as Shillong continued to grow. He condemned the social

evils that have spread in society and asked the people to not forget the wisdom of God that was surely their only weapon against sin.

Another prominent literary figure of this movement was Morkha Joseph. Once a former student of John Roberts, he saw the importance of an education and often encouraged the people to send their children to school. His progressive outlook can be reflected in his poems like “Ka Spah Barieh” (The Hidden Riches) and “Ka Maian Shongskul” (The Wonders of Attending School), where he regularly exhorted the readers to pursue knowledge and to value the educational opportunity that had been made possible for them. He also penned Christian themed poems but the poems for which he was known particularly were “U Sier Lapalang”, “U Jumai Bah ha Ri Khasi” (The Great Earthquake in Khasi land) and “Ka Jingwan Hiar u Mynsiem Bakhuid ha Ri Khasi” (The Holy Spirit’s Descent in Khasi land).

Another important period in Khasi literature that followed was the “awakening of imagination” (Sten, 1987). Literature produced during this period was inspired solely by imagination and appreciation for nature, as opposed to the cultural and religious undertones that the previous literary movements contained. The person who ushered in this movement was a poet by the name of L. Lewis. Not much is known about him or his works and the only evidence that we have of his literary endeavours are four poems that he had written. These poems were not published in book form but were featured in the Khasi monthly, *U Lurshai* in the years 1913 and 1914. Each poem dealt with the four seasons of the year respectively; they were also named after the four seasons. Though they were no different from the type of poetry that existed in the past, nature occupied a pivotal role in the poems. This period in Khasi literature was similar to, or was inspired by the Romantic period in

English literature that took place by the end of the eighteenth century. In his poems, Lewis spoke chiefly about nature and the feelings that were invoked during each and every season. He observed how each season affected the surroundings around him and the people's daily activities. In his poems "Ka Pyrem" (Spring) and "Ka Synrai" (Autumn), he glorified the two seasons as seasons of life and happiness; on the other hand, he highlighted the destructive element and the merciless aspect of nature in "Ka Lyiur" (Summer) and "Ka Tlang" (Winter). Even though his poems still contained religious inclination, Lewis presented his thanksgivings and appreciation for Nature through his observation of the natural surroundings around him.

By the time Lewis brought out his poems, poets like Soso Tham, Bronath Thangkhiew and H. Elias had already written and made numerous contributions to *U Lurshai*. However, they too picked up the trail and their poetry started showing the influence of the Romantic poets. Another poet of this period, D. Nihon Singh Wahlang alluded to their works in the preface to his book of poems, *Khasi Poems* that was released in 1930. However, amongst the contemporaries, it was Soso Tham and his son, Primrose Gatphoh who truly did justice to the spirit of the movement. Both father and son, through their works, embodied the worship of nature; they brought to light the power of nature over an individual and how one could learn from it, not unlike the views of the English Romantic poets. Gatphoh especially translated this quite well in his work. Poems of his like "Lukhimai", "Ka Sohlyngem", "U Sier Lapalang" and "Ka Per Tyrso" not only touched on the aspect of nature but they were also adaptations of Khasi folklore. In "Ka Per Tyrso", Gatphoh narrates the story of the peacock who, though married to the sun, became enamoured by a mustard flower (in another version, it was a field of mustard flowers) that

he saw from his place in the heavens. Restless and unheeding of the Sun's advice to not indulge in lust, he finally gave in to temptation and, promising the Sun that he would return, left her, indifferent to her pleas. When he finally reached Earth, he was dismayed to discover that what he had beheld as the object of his desire for so long was only a mustard flower. Repentant, he attempted to return back to the Sun but was no longer able to do so. In this poem, Gatphoh dealt with the topic of lust and the consequences of allowing one's temptations get the better of them.

Similarly, in "U Sier Lapalang", Gatphoh narrates to the reader the popular tale of how pride ultimately leads to one's downfall. U Sier Lapalang was a young and handsome stag born and brought up in the plains. As he grew older and stronger, he yearned to visit the Khasi hills that he had heard so much about but his mother had always forbade him from doing so. Ultimately, he succeeded in persuading his mother to allow him to leave and promised her that he would be back. Upon reaching the hills, he became more arrogant and was disrespectful towards the other creatures who warned him of the dangers of such behaviour. Their advice fell on deaf ears and soon, his destructive nature caught the attention of the Khasi people, who then hunted him down and ultimately felled him. As mentioned before, these poems were all adaptations of traditional folklore but they also served their purpose well in embodying the spirit of imagination and nature worship, which is a characteristic of the Khasi way of life.

However, it was Soso Tham whose works truly embodied not only the spirit of imagination but also the spirit of the age. His final poetry collection, "Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep" (The Ancient Days of U Hynñiew Trep), serves as testimony to his prowess as a poet. The themes that he dealt with and the content of his poems led many to view him



as a prophet, who foresaw the shadow looming over the Khasi motherland and who tried to warn his fellow people about it through his verses. If put together, the totality of his literary creations are few yet they continue to captivate his readers till today. Tham was truly one of the few litterateurs whose works have surpassed the man and though recognition for them was lacking during his lifetime, today he stands tall as the “Khasi National Bard”<sup>1</sup>, U Myllung<sup>2</sup> Soso Tham.

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1 As called by Kynpham Singh Ningkyngrih in his book, *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham*.

2 U myllung is a Khasi term for a poet.

## Chapter 2

### U Myllung Soso Tham and his Works

The early poems of Khasi literature existed in the form of “sermons and moral lessons in verse and translation of the metrical psalms and hymns from the Welsh and English languages into Khasi” (Sten, *Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development*, 1990). They were used in church sermons, worship services and schools. The Khasi Hymn Book contains the earliest poetry of Khasi literature. However, there is lack of record keeping resulting in dilemma with regards to the authors of the hymns. As a result, the history of Khasi poetry remains veiled in obscurity. Very little is known about the authors or the authorship of the hymns that are still sung till today.

Because there was no written literature before the arrival of the missionaries, we can safely assume that the earliest written poetry was that of Thomas Jones and William Lewis. Thomas Jones was the first to introduce and use the Khasi alphabet; he, along with William Lewis and his wife, translated and transcreated hymns for use in the schools and church. The first poem that he wrote was a translation entitled “Ki Lok Jong Nga Ki La Leit Noh” (My Friends Have Gone on Before). According to Sten, it was translated on the occasion of the deaths of Reverend Daniel Jones and Captain Thomas Herbert Lewin. Other translations of Thomas Jones include “U Mawsiang U Khristan” (The Christian’s Rock) and “Ka Nongrim Jong Ka Jingim” (The Foundation of Life).

William Lewis and his wife also translated and contributed quite a number of hymns. Two hymns that were first taught by Lewis were “The Commandment of the Lord” and “The Act of Baptism”. These songs spoke about the importance of Baptism and till

today, they are still sung in churches. Other well known hymns include “The Dearness of Redemption” and “A Christian Amidst Tempest”. Most of the hymns were inspired by their experiences working in the Khasi hills. Mrs. Lewis had composed many poems which talk about the trials that they faced. One such poem is called “Shine like Stars”, in which she compared the children to stars. Other songs which may have been composed by her include “Jesus Likes Little Children”, “God Loves Me” and “The Loving Care of God”. Mrs. Lewis’ poems and hymns were easy to remember; they were likely composed for the school children who were under her care. Unlike the poems of her male counterparts, Mrs. Lewis’ poems taught the children a “non-theological and non-evangelical ideal of good life.” (Sten, Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development, 1990)

The theme of persecution was also present and this could be seen in the poems of John Roberts and John Ceredig Evans. Evans’ poem “Kynmaw Trai ia Nga” (Lord Do Remember Me) speaks of the despair that he faced from those who opposed the new faith. Similarly, another poem entitled “Ka Jingsngewskhem u Khristan” (The Christian’s Confidence) speaks about the travails a persecuted Christian must face for his faith. Yet he bears them all cheerfully as he believed that they will be recipients of God’s rewards in the world that is to come. Other poems that followed this theme were “Ka Jingduwai ha ka Khuslai” (A Prayer when Afflicted) and “Ka Jingsting ka Jingjynjar” (The Lightness of Suffering). The latter was inspired by John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

John Roberts’ contribution towards Khasi literature had earned him the title of being one of the founding fathers of Khasi literature. Unlike the case with the works of his predecessors where authorship is uncertain, Roberts’ works had been well-recorded and had also gone on to serve as inspiration for later poets. Most of the poems of John Roberts dealt

with Christian themes. He sought to spread Christian values through them and they were used extensively for public worship. However there were also poems that he wrote which veered from the didactic nature of the earlier poems and placed more emphasis on the land. “Ri Khasi” (Khasi land) was one such poem that was written in praise of the Khasi hills. Till today, it is being used by the Khasi people as their national anthem. In the poem, Roberts identifies himself with the land and its people that he had come to love. He exhorts the people to be proud of their history and culture and he urges them to inculcate feelings of patriotism towards their land. He also tries to inculcate feelings of brotherhood between the natives and those from the plains who had come to settle in the Khasi hills. Besides composing poems, Roberts also contributed translations of famous poems such as “The Psalm of Life” by H. W. Longfellow, “The Burial of Moses” by Mrs. C. F. Alexander and his most well-known work, “Casabianca” by Felicia Hemans. Through the many accomplishments that he has achieved and the work he had done, John Roberts had inspired many later authors and poets. Among those whom he inspired was a former pupil who would later go on to build a legacy that overshadowed even that of his mentor. That person was U Soso Tham.

U Soso Tham was born at Saitsohpen-Nongsawlia in Sohra in 1873. He was the third and only son of four children and belonged to a poor but God-fearing household. During this time, Sohra was the erstwhile headquarters of the British Empire. Thus, Tham was a recipient of an early school education by the Welsh missionaries and he was believed to have studied up to the sixth standard. His father passed away while he was growing up. Shortly after, the family shifted to Shillong where Tham resumed his studies at the Government High School. However, the death of his father meant that the family was in

financial constraints and he was forced to drop out while he was still in the seventh standard. Shortly after this, he made an attempt to attend the newly established Theological College at Sohra but that too did not work out. In 1893, Tham left for Shangpung to work as a teacher at the Upper Primary School which was run by the Presbyterian Mission. He also taught at Mawkaiaw for a while before returning to Shangpung again. It was around this time that he married Kerila Dora Gatphoh. They had four children; of the four, it was their third-born, Primrose Garfield Gatphoh, who went on to create a legacy of his own in the Khasi literary scene.

Tham had always shown proactive interest in education and often sought to address issues which he felt were problematic. By the year 1906, Tham had already been appointed as the headmaster of Shangpung Upper Primary School. Along with Hajom Kissor Singh, the then headmaster of the Unitaraian Free School and Samuel Shalam, a headmaster from Jowai, he wrote a letter to the Director of Public Instruction, Assam. In the letter, they brought to attention the difference in the way the question papers were framed for their students; according to them, Bengali and Assamese students were allowed to answer their papers in the vernacular while Khasi students were required to do so in the English medium. They pleaded that the same facility be allowed to the Khasi students, to which the Director conceded. Later on, we will see that it was this same concern for his students that would later inadvertently kick start Tham's literary career.

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1905, Tham was appointed as a teacher at the Government High School where he remained till his retirement in 1931. It was during his tenure in this school that Tham discovered that there was a notable lack of Khasi textbooks in the schools. Instead, what were being repeated again and again were mostly religious texts; apart from

those texts, the only works were John Roberts' *Khasi Fourth Reader* and Rabon Singh's *Ka Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam*. The lack of Khasi texts was likely due to the influence of the Christian missionaries in schools and also because at this point in time, though there had been efforts from Khasi writers, Khasi literature was very much still in its pubescent stage. Thus, books by Khasi writers were yet to be included in the school curriculum. As a result, teachers had to repeat the same texts again and again for fourteen years. The malaise that accompanied the task of teaching the same sorry texts was addressed by Tham himself in his Preface to his book of poems:

When I grew tired of teaching the same texts for years and when the ears of the learned (missionary and Khasi both) grew deaf to my pleas to introduce new texts, there came a whisper in my ears while on the cliffs of Sunapani: "Do it yourself!" (Tham, 1936)

Indeed, Tham did take matters into his own hands and thus began his journey as a translator and poet. From the poet's own account, his foray into the literary world happened one fine day when he marched into his classroom and announced to his students that he was tired of repeating the same texts again and again. Upon hearing his students echo the same sentiment, he then suggested that they try their hand at writing their own texts. Amidst the laughter and bewilderment of his students, he asked for a textbook and attempted a translation of W. E. Hickson's "Drive the Nail Aright". Within a few minutes, the translation came to him: "*Sah beit ia u prek, hep*". And from that moment onwards, in the poet's own words: "I raced forward toward my goal." (Tham, 1936)

Due to his limited education, Soso Tham had no prior training in translation nor did he have a clear idea of what Poetry meant. "I never knew what Art is – what Poetry is: foot, metre, rhyme, rhythm, idea – scattered like cattles' bones in the hills: there was nobody

who taught me how to plough and work in the gardens of the Khasi language,” he confessed in his Preface. For Tham, poetry was more than simply lines and verses; he held it in high regard and saw it as a powerful medium with which he could convey the truth to his fellow people. Most importantly, he believed in its ability to impact the reader. It was with this mindset and sense of responsibility that Tham started his poetic endeavour and this is evident from the work that he had left behind. The simple start in the classroom was the seed from which he went on to reap a bountiful harvest.

Yet the road towards the goal was long and fraught with difficulties and discouragement. Tham spent nearly three years perfecting the translation of Hickson’s poem. During the translation process, he compensated for his knowledge of poetry or lack of, by earnestly reading and studying the works of English authors and poets like William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Wordsworth, among many others. However, the time and effort invested was worth it because Tham did full justice to his rendition of the poem. In the words of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih: “... Tham had clearly succeeded in the task he had set out for himself, that is, to achieve an absolute understanding of English prosody.” (Nongkynrih, 2012)

Besides Hickson’s “Drive the Nail Aright”, other translations of Tham include Lord Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib”, William Shakespeare’s “The Passionate Pilgrim”, Jane Taylor’s “Little Star”, Thomas Moore’s “Last Rose of Summer”, Sir Walter Scott’s “Patriotism”, William Cowper’s “The Diverting History of John Gilpin” and William Wordsworth’s poems like “Lucy” and “The Solitary Reaper”, to name a few. Besides translating poems, he also undertook the task of translating Charles Dickens’ *The Year of Our Lord* and more significantly, *Aesop’s Fables* into Khasi, just as his mentor John

Roberts did. Known as *Ki Phawer u Aesop* in Khasi, the book is still in use till today. The book was released in the year 1920 and it also happened to be the first ever book that Tham published. His adaptation of the stories was immaculate; his proficiency and mastery of the Khasi language in the translated version still commands the reader's imagination. He also included a moral at the end of each and every fable to counsel the reader about moral and ethical values. As Sten aptly puts it: "His mastery of the Khasi language and his wit has made many common readers fancy that the characters in Tham's translation had roamed about in the Khasi land and accomplished their works there." (Sten, 1987)

Tham's translation endeavour went a long way in bringing out his own creative ability. Through his efforts at understanding what poetry is and his own aspiration to express his thoughts, he ended up making poetry of his own. Tham started slowly, first beginning with nursery rhymes and then gradually working on his poems until his final collection. In the year 1913, Tham's first ever printed work came out in the form of an article about the Khasi language in the newsletter, *U Lurshai*. In the consequent years, he would continue to contribute his articles and translated poems. Among those that were featured were "Ka Jingpynjot ia u Sennakherib", a translation of Lord Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib" in 1920; "Ki Aw" in February 1921, which was improved and later called "Ka 'Er Pyngngad ki Aw"; "Ka Pyrem" in the April-May issue in 1921; "U John Gilpin", a translation of William Cowper "The Diverting History of John Gilpin" in 1922 and again, a reworked version featured in 1924. Many of the poems that he had contributed Tham re-worked and they were featured in his later poetry collections.

His first collection of poems was called *Ki Poetry Khasi*, which was released in the year 1925. It had nineteen poems and about five hundred copies were printed of this



version. On the 5<sup>th</sup> February 1931, Tham released another edition of *Ki Poetry Khasi*. This edition came with a Foreword written in English, by Professor S. K. Bhuyan. The content was also updated, with the inclusion of other translated poems and the poet's own poems. This edition was praised by many including the erstwhile Director of Public Instruction, J. R. Cunningham; S. J. Duncan, erstwhile S. D. O of Manipur, Rev. J. C. Evans, among many others. Their reviews were also included in this edition of the poetry collection. The final edition of *Ki Poetry Khasi* was released in 1936. It was renamed and from then onwards, prominently known as *Ka Duitara Ksiar* (The Golden Duitara<sup>1</sup>). In this edition, Tham included children's rhymes, translated poems and added more of his own, some of which are often quoted and invoked until the present day. His poems were earnest embodiments of his experiences and reflections made in life. Many of them were inspired by the natural ambience that he loved; poems like "Kynjai Ha La Ri" (Peacefully In My Motherland) "Ki Kshaid Ba Pymphum" (Cascading Waterfalls) and Ki Sngi Ba La Leit Noh (Days Gone By) were accolades to Sohra, the village where he spent most of his childhood. In other poems like "Ka Duitara<sup>2</sup> Ksiar" (The Golden Duitara), "U Phlang Jyrngam" (Green Grass), U Simpyllieng" (The Rainbow) and "Ki Saw Aïom" (The Four Seasons), Tham praises and glorifies Nature. Yet again, there were poems that were celebrations of life like "Ki Sngi U Hynñiew Trep" (Days of U Hynñiew Trep) and "Ka 'Er Pyngad Ki "Aw"<sup>3</sup>" (The Fresh Breeze of Ki "Aw") and poems which bear testimony to the human spirit, such as "U Dieng

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1 Duitara is a four-stringed Khasi musical instrument, resembling a lute.

2 Duitara is a Khasi musical instrument resembling a lute.

3 The title of this particular poem is wordplay on Khasi terms for the in-laws. In Khasi, the father-in-law is called "kthaw" and the mother-in-law is called "kiaw".

Bilat” (The English Pine), “Ki Mawlynnai” (Diamonds), “U Khlor” (Star) and “U Khun I Mei” (A Mother’s Son), to name a few.

### **Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep**

That same year, Tham also unveiled to the world his magnum opus, *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep*. It was a narrative poem divided into ten sections; it deals exclusively with the ancestry and history of the Khasi people, starting from their origins and talked about their gradual evolution as a people. This collection had obviously been inspired by the poet’s observations of the changes that have taken place in Khasi society. Through this collection, he constantly sought to bring the attention of the reader the darkness that has become prevalent in present day.

During his life, Tham had been witness to many changes that took place in the Khasi hills, not only socio-political changes but more importantly, cultural changes. The first was the introduction of the new faith and western education. Many felt that although the introduction of education did have its benefits, it was done so solely for the benefit of the British rulers. Thus, as a consequence, the education that was provided was at a rudimentary level, designed also only for facilitating the spread of Christianity. It may also be the explanation for Tham’s unhappiness at the syllabus that was set for school education then. Secondly, with the arrival of the British also came foreign cultural elements that soon percolated into the otherwise secluded Khasi society. As a result, there was a gradual diffusion of these different cultures which soon threatened to overwhelm Khasi culture. Kynpham Nongkynrih quotes Meenakshi Mukherjee’s article “The Exile of the Mind” when he explores the condition of the native people during that period of time. Western

education had driven a wedge between the people and their roots and “naturally mass-produced hundreds of exiles of the mind”. The introduction of Christianity also contributed to this condition. The people who had introduced this new faith sought to cleanse Khasi society of anything that they deemed as unholy and sinful; social and religious activities of those who still followed the indigenous faith were curbed and banned by the missionaries. Another external factor was the fact that towards the end of Tham’s life, the struggle for independence had taken place, raising the uncertain question regarding the fate of the Khasi people. All these factors led to the Khasi people experiencing “angst of the age”. (Nongkynrih, 2012)

Tham felt all these emotions and this affected him deeply. Although he was himself an evangelised Khasi, he was never captivated by the new cultures and foreign elements that he saw take over the Khasi society. However he was unhappy with how his fellow people so easily discarded their own knowledge system which he saw was necessary for their well-being. Seeing many of his own people getting carried away from their roots and trying to ape other cultures, he was greatly saddened and this was reflected in his poems in *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynniew Trep*. In this collection, he sought to remind his fellow people of their rich cultural heritage and called out for them to not forget or discard their own roots. In this regard, Soso Tham was very much inspired by the three Khasi scholars who brought in the cultural wave in Khasi literature – Rabon Singh Kharsuka, Jeebon Roy Mairom and Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang. These eminent writers celebrated the glory of Khasi culture in their literary works; by doing so, they also sought to preserve the unique aspects of their own traditions and beliefs. Similarly, Tham tried to do the same with his poems. However, he did so by beautifully bringing in together elements from the Khasi oral

tradition like myths and folklore with those that came with the western influence and Christianity. In his review *Na Ka Hyndai Sha Ka Lawei*, Sten had mostly explored *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep* from a theological point of view, referring often to the Bible and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. However, Tham had never indicated any such predisposition; he was known to have been paid visits by church elders and chastised for being seen at traditional sport competitions and other events which were deemed as pagan practices and thus, were not suitable for attendance by someone who had already professed to follow the Christian faith. Tham did not endorse such isolating ideals and saw little sense in how his Christian upbringing should prevent him from celebrating his own culture and traditional heritage. By using both Khasi and Western elements in his poems, he sought to effectively edify the readers about where they were going wrong and what they must do for their own land and their fellow people. Even S. K. Bhuyan notes this about Soso Tham:

Mr. Tham embodies a combination of the spirit of western culture and the stolid simplicity and straight-forwardness of a Khasi clansman; and though he has accepted the Light emanating from the Cross of Calvary, his patriotism has led him to an overwhelming bias for the manners and traditions of his native land. (Tham, 1936)

Throughout his poems, Tham speaks highly of the ancient days of the Khasi people and often exhorts his readers to not disparage their own past. One pertinent theme that Tham repeatedly touches upon in his poems is that of *Ka Jingshai* or Illumination. He himself was a recipient of the advantages of western education and so he does not discourage people from obtaining it. But he was saddened by his own people drifting away and altogether shunning their own culture and their roots. We see a strong trace of wistfulness in Tham's poetic voice as he speaks about the past and the glory of the days

then. This may be further corroborated by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih. While exploring the theme of *hiraeth*<sup>4</sup> in the poetry of Soso Tham, Nongkynrih drew an interesting parallel between the Welsh missionaries and the Khasi people and their “political and military defeats” – both were defeated ultimately by the British – and the turmoil that their cultures suffered in the process. Accordingly, he states:

Therefore, like the Welsh poets who had witnessed the political and military defeats of their nation at the hands of the English, and like others who had witnessed the loss of much of their cultural heritage as a Celtic nation at the hand of Methodism, Tham also turns to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes and the heroic age... he attempts on his *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynniew Trep* to rehabilitate the past of his forefathers as high culture, for in their ways he recognises a merit unmatched by the new ethos that was flowing in. In fact, he sees his forefathers’ ways as the only means of preventing his people from losing their direction completely in the chaos of his times. (Nongkynrih, 2012)

Another pervasive theme in Tham’s poems is the love for his own motherland. He was deeply patriotic and he constantly advocated for his fellow people to come together for their motherland. Several foreign elements, in the form of the foreigners and plainsmen, had started influencing Khasi society at this point in time and changes were taking place at a rapid pace. John Roberts sang about it in one of his poems in which he claimed that enlightenment had arrived in the Khasi hills. However, though he saw an opportunity for the natives to learn something new from the phenomena which he believed would help them become more versed in the ways of the world, there was also a note of caution in this message of optimism, which can be seen he says:

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<sup>4</sup> Hiraeth is a longing for something that one once possessed but which is theirs no more.

In former times when you lived alone before the advent of the British or the coming of the Indians, whether you learnt or you did not it did not matter much because you lived among your fellow ignorant persons. But now it is no longer so... And when you face the world in this way, you must train yourselves in that social intercourse, you will gird your loins well, because the competition is not easy... now the Khasi must equip himself till he reaches the position when none can or dare push him out. (Sten, 1990)

However, many felt that the optimism of Roberts was misplaced and patronising, at best. It was true that the Khasi Hills indeed became a cultural crossroad during that time, which undoubtedly led to its fast progress and development into a hub but this came at a cost for the Khasi society which saw a decline in its own unique culture. In his Introduction to Tham's *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep*, S. K. Bhuyan did not hesitate to point out the major flaws in a Khasi society that was getting increasingly modernised and more advanced with the passage of time:

But the two factors which distinguish all advanced societies, love of literature and love of the past, are not to be generally found among the educated section of the Khasi community. They have been allured by the charms of the culture with which they have come in contact, and never perceive that there is good in their own. They have desisted from building a new structure over the old, nor have they made any organised attempt to lay the foundation of their cultural progress which will serve as a link between the past and the present... annihilation or supplantation is the order in Khasi enlightened society. (Tham, 1936)

Tham and Roberts thus were poles apart in their respective perspectives on the topic of development and betterment of the Khasi society. Roberts seemed to view the integration of the natives as part of a greater society as something that was good and which was necessary for them to grow. However, Tham, a native himself, could foretell that the people will be swept along by the strong tides of another culture that may overwhelm their own.

The worrying signs had already manifested themselves during his lifetime; the people had begun following other religions and begun aping Western culture and idolising the Western civilisation while abandoning their own. Tham knew that without strong roots in their own homeland, the Khasi people will soon be like chaff, easily blown whichever the wind goes. In his Preface, he spoke candidly about his unease of the times and his anxiety upon perceiving the perils ahead that may soon befall upon the Khasi people:

I also see my motherland perched on the edge of a fearful precipice. It will not be long that, we being of lesser resources, unless we awaken and do something about it, that we will be carried away by the current, and we shall be like the Gibeonites, forced to chop wood and carry water for someone else. Will the Rulers and the ones in Power remain as they are or will they deliver their guileless people from the wolves...? (Tham, 1936)

It had been mentioned before that Tham placed poetry in the highest regard. Being largely self-taught in the art of composing verses, he himself stated that his poetry was self-explanatory. However, besides seeing it as a medium in which he could give life to his own musings, he also saw poetry as “a spirit which enables a poet to express life, and to present righteousness and truth to the world” (Sten, 1990). If we read through his entire collection of *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep*, we will notice that the themes of truth and righteousness also feature prevalently in his poems. In harkening back to the days of old, Tham also seeks to return to an age when people placed emphasis on the importance of truth and righteousness. Righteousness or to earn one’s righteousness (*kamai la ka hok*) is a vital tenet of Khasi society; it stresses importance of struggle (*ban ksaid*) and hard work (*ban trei shitom*) for an individual to earn what is rightfully his/hers. Sten notes that the change in the demeanour of the Khasi people was observed by Mill who saw them depreciate from being “upright simple people” to being “arrogant, deceitful, and untrustworthy” due to their coming in contact with

“civilization and wealth”. While we must not take these observations literally, it may be indicative of the changing trajectory of the Khasi society and the people.

Tham also likened poetry to a “two-edged sword”, a likely reference to a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews in the Bible. By employing the metaphor in describing his poetry, Tham in turn transcends the role of a poet to that of a prophet who foresees events and who warns people to mend their ways. When he speaks of mythical events like the end of the era of *U Lum Sohpet Bneng*, the era of darkness as seen from *Ka Diengiei* and *Ka Krem Lamet Latang*, he is effectively trying to warn the people that these periods of darkness and disillusionment are likely to happen again, lest something is being done to counter them. He cautions the readers time and again about the pitfalls of ignorance, pride and deceit and he urges them to seek out truth and illumination in an age where evil abounds in plenty. Tham’s poems also have a steadfast message of hopefulness in them; despite the pessimistic circumstances which inspired his poems, he believes that all is not lost yet and that humanity can still be saved. He exhorts his readers to not allow their spirituality to fade away, lest another severance of the Golden Ladder may take place again. This is again reflective of the first vital tenet in Khasi belief: to know man and to know God (*ban tip briew tip Blei*). People should understand their relationship between their own kind and their relationship with God; only by strengthening both can they be able to live in peace with one another and it is only through God’s mercy that they can truly absolve themselves of their misdeeds and free themselves from the errors of their ways.

Bhuyan once lamented that “Soso Tham has been born in an age too early” and it was right of him to say so. Despite producing extraordinary works of literature, Tham suffered from the general apathy that has become characteristic of Khasi society, especially



towards their own works of literature. We can see an example of this listlessness from Tham's own experience of having to peddle his translation of *Aesop's Fables* from one house to another. We also know from various accounts that it was this disinterestedness that constantly hindered him from producing more literary masterpieces as "even the most poetically-minded genius will languish for want of inspiration and stimulus for self expression." (Tham, 1936)

Soso Tham passed away on 18 December, 1940. He left behind a great and vibrant legacy, not only as a poet and writer but also as a teacher and person whom his students and acquaintances remember with fondness and respect. From the difficult life that he had growing up till his ultimate success as a Khasi writer, Soso Tham has served as an inspiration for many people. He had ventured into places untrodden and created a path which many later writers would follow. Though appreciation for his work had evaded him during his lifetime, the seeds that he had sown soon bore fruit for he later rose up to become the most beloved of Khasi poets and whose works will forever remain on the lips and memories of readers in times to come.

### Chapter 3

#### **Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep: A Translation**

This chapter contains translations from Soso Tham's final poem collection, *Ki Sngi Barim u Hynñiew Trep*. For my research, I have attempted six poems out of ten for translation. The poems were chosen specifically in order to present a story line to the reader.

The first poem is titled "Grains of God" and it is a translation of the first poem in the collection "Ki Symboh Ksiar". In this poem, the poet speaks about Khasi culture and traditions and highlights the importance of Khasi history. It encompasses many topics and mythical events which are of great importance and brings into fore the historical milieu of the Khasi people and their beliefs.

The second poem is titled "The Flower Garden" and it is a translation of the second poem "Ka Persyntiew". This poem harks back to the first stirrings of the Khasi people, starting from their foray into agriculture and how they ripened as a race, till they established their own kingdoms, their own languages, their song and dance, their traditional customs and attires, and most importantly, their Faith.

The next poem is a translation of the third poem, "Ka Pyrthei Mariang" and it is called "Mother Nature". This poem talks about a time of peace and prosperity before the severing of the Golden Ladder at *U Lum Sohpet Bneng* (Heaven's Navel). It takes place during a time when God and the people still shared a good relationship with one another, before the advent of evil.

The next poem is titled “The Cloud” and it is a translation of the fourth poem called “U Lyoh”. This poem narrates the beginning of a dark age for the Khasi people who have strayed from God following the destruction of the Golden Ladder. It talks about an age of confusion and disillusionment and how people instead began worshipping wealth and riches and became blind to their own folly.

“The Rainbow” is the next poem following “The Cloud” and it is a translation of the sixth poem, “U Simpyllieng”. It narrates the legends of *Ka Krem Lamet Latang*, which symbolises a period of darkness and suffering that humanity went through for drifting away from God. It also introduces the saviour of man, the Rooster, who bravely steps in to save humanity by offering himself as sacrifice.

“A Golden Age” is the last poem and it is a translation of the last poem of the collection, “Ka Aïom Ksiar”. Here, the poet speaks fondly of a golden age that has already passed by but expresses his regret and sadness that it still has been left behind as he yearns for another Golden age to follow.

## Grains of Gold

For the world's knowledge we yearn

Yet we are oblivious to our own -

How our ancestors and fathers old

Conducted politics and kingdoms ruled,

While all of the land still lay

In darkness, benighted and astray?

Amidst the Sun, the Moon and the Stars,

In hills and forests where spirits fly,

Man, animal or demon – every being

Could still converse in the same tongue.

Before spirits of deceit made their mark,

The Almighty was worshipped and revered.

Man's word was as good as truth;

Ka *Phreit*<sup>1</sup> could freely feed on seed.

From morn till noon an earnest toil,

Wisdom gained was safely kept;

From there arose the tales we know,

The fables that today still fluidly flow.

Many an Allegory was spoken:

“Tis here,” they said, “emerged *u Thlen*<sup>2</sup>.”

“Of sin, then,” wherefrom it flowed?

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<sup>1</sup> A *Phreit* is a small bird that often acts as a bearer of news, in Khasi folklore.

“From *Lum Diengiei*<sup>3</sup>,” the reply showed.

And of *u Sohpet Bneng*<sup>4</sup>, all did know

The reason why it is called so.

Parables of God, of Sin and of Truth

Between the people freely flowed:

How, charlatan spirits, in ancient days,

Tried to twist and contort people’s way:

Some men now reside among the stars

While in dense woodlands, the rest sank.

“The load of mankind’s sins to shoulder

At the cave of *Lamet Latang*<sup>5</sup>,

Selflessly bore the Rooster,” it was said,

“To preserve the covenant of God.”

Thus Faith was born and rites observed

By *U Khun u Hynniew Trep*<sup>6</sup> from then on.

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2 A *Thlen* is a demon which often takes the form of a huge black snake. It demands human sacrifices from its worshippers and in exchange, it rewards them with wealth and riches.

3 *Lum Diengiei* was believed to be the place where a gigantic tree grew which threatened to overshadow the world with its ever-growing foliage. It was felled by the Khasi people with help from a bird called phreit.

4 *U Lum Sohpet Bneng* (literally, the Navel of Heaven) was believed to have been the location of the Golden Staircase which was originally used by the Sixteen families to travel to Earth and back.

5 *Ka Krem Lamet Latang* was the cave where the Sun hid herself after she was shamed by the other creatures for arriving to the traditional dance late and for dancing with her brother, the Moon. The rooster offered to go plead with the Sun to come out and henceforth, it was said that is the reason why the rooster crows thrice before the sun rises in the morning.

6 The Khasi people call themselves *Ki Khun U Hynniew Trep* (literally, The Children of the Seven Huts) which refers to the seven families who were left behind on earth when the Golden Stairway was severed.

A grieving mother wept and her heart broke

As her beloved son's funeral she did follow,

It was immortalised in tales of lore

The tale of the arrogant *u Sier*<sup>7</sup>:

How ascended the rusted Arrowhead,

How freely followed tears of sorrow.

Ancient markings upon the rocks

Ensconced deep in woods, from sight hid

While famed intellects and philosophers

Here, other worldviews to us do offer;

Yet, from the darkened vales of the hills,

Shall Nature's chords resound still.

The olden multitude of *Khasi* and *Pnar* -

They are one broad race of the world.

Illumination for us to seek -

Look among the homes and hearths!

Then we shall obtain what we look for,

The light of the Ancient days of Yore.

For Illumination of the world we hunt,

But that of our own, we shun.

A day will come when they shall emerge,

When wisdom of our own we shall plough,

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<sup>7</sup> *U Sier Lapalang* is a tale about a young stag from the plains who grew too proud in a place that was not his own. He was ultimately hunted down and killed by the Khasi people.

For the Seed of Illumination has taken root  
In the depths of bygone days of old.

After a spate of sudden sun shower

Will the moss-flecked rock finally show!

The Dark Cloud will reflect colour

And the skies make way for the Rainbow:

Do cast your hue, oh Gilded Pen,

The benighted man to enlighten.

### **The Flower Garden**

As I took a stroll alone,

I traversed hills and valleys below.

And nestled in a rustic land of hut and hay,

A land which under obscurity still lay –

I discovered profound Grains of Thought  
From the pool of Tears' shadowy depths.

These Grains of Gold of bygone days

Are scattered yet within us still they stay,  
Like a hillock recently left abandoned  
Still yields spud and yam, millet and grain.

These Grains – they speak of another time,  
Of how the Land was, in the days long gone.

The bird resounds from within a tree,

A great distance the kite's eye does see.

I weave melodies to create a song

While I hark back to the ages gone

And to awaken thus from ashy *Kpeps*<sup>8</sup>

The ancient days of *u Hynniew Trep*.

When the Land still unsullied lay,

It was once but an empty space.

Until the *Hynniew Trep* descended,

Until they began to plough the earth:

Gardens of fruit and flower to raise

And to create a land fit for people to stay.

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<sup>8</sup> *Kpeps* are traditional cremation grounds of the Khasi people.



Slowly then they began to spread,  
 From the land they sowed and reaped.  
 When they reared orchards from the earth  
 And when beads of gold adorned their necks,  
 The Land that was once empty and unlived  
 Rejoiced, and the mute rocks resounded.

Gradually a race they became and  
 Soon ripened a language of their own,  
 A faith to unite diverse branches and  
 Uniform colours for song and dance.  
 Rite and ritual they established over time  
 Until it became a Land of their own.

Nature took on a lively glow,  
 Creatures rejoiced and the birds soared;  
 Whether housed in sun or shadow,  
 Flowers with man did freely converse:  
 The lone Violet among the weeds  
 Sat ensconced in thoughts deep.

In the day, the Peacock danced with delight  
 While the boar wallowed contently in the mud.  
*U Shersyngkai*<sup>9</sup> glided gracefully in pools,  
 While the deer rested among the shady ferns.

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<sup>9</sup> *U Shersyngkai* is a fish.

When *u Sim Rynniaw*<sup>10</sup> let out its song,  
It lulled to sleep the monkeys on branches.

Stags contently fed on the green grass

While the tiger rested in the cool shade;  
Breezes blowing under the warm sun  
Lured Fairies out to bathe in waterfalls.

From the East, West, South and North,  
It was indeed a land where the Gods reside.

On the willowy pine, *u Sim Kairiang*<sup>11</sup>

Aloud his melodious songs did resound  
Songs of the old days that are long gone,  
The songs that I will gladly sing along:

As the forests resounded once more  
And the rocks let out a united roar.

The Great Himalayas from their lofty peaks

When will they tire of gazing upon it?  
Amidst fruit trees and flower gardens  
Will walk handsome men and maidens.

Right from *Rilang* to *Kupli*,  
It is a Land that belongs to the Khasi.

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<sup>10</sup> *U Sim Rynniaw* is a long-feathered bird. It was also the lover of *Ka Sohlyngem*, in a tragic love ballad of the same name.

<sup>11</sup> *U Sim Kairiang* is a bird which only sings out when it sees something unusual. Here, the poet likens himself to the bird as he sings of the olden days.

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**Mother Nature**

When the Land was still in the dark,  
    There were Stars of Truth shining bright.  
To gather Knowledge from them, one may  
Before they all fade away one day;  
    Oh Diamond, Oh Golden Pen!  
Awaken thus for your light to shine.

Shine your light and to me, do show  
    Where the crystal clear streams do flow;  
To the woodland's dense shade of relief  
Where I shall wander, content by myself -  
    From waterfalls' tops, by deep pools' banks,  
The One we love – oh where is he?

The Land still was dark and ignorant  
    Until gradually came in Illumination;  
In the ears of man – an Echo rang -  
And slowly Truth made its way in:  
    And so gradually it was made clear  
In the light of the day – Mother Nature.

When the soft breezes gently blew  
    And the rays of the warm Spring Sun  
Coloured everything in gilded green  
Be it in plains or the shady woodlands,

The people then lived honestly  
Within the holy sanctions of a family.  
  
And in the halcyon Autumn days,  
When birds and insects sang joyous strains  
With all of Nature in glorious beatitude,  
And seeing all this, man became content.  
  
Yet tears from lustrous eyes did flow  
But where they came from, he did not know!

Mother Nature stayed hidden from sight  
Perhaps she saw clearly in the light  
That within the deep depths of the ocean  
Were where precious tears collect, unbidden -  
  
Amidst a flower garden, God did descend  
To keep good company with man.

Progenies of the gods, from mountain tops  
Did cast their sights to lands far off;  
Great rivers from around the world  
Harked intently to melodies of the song bird.

Thus before the severing of *u Sohpet Bneng*<sup>12</sup>  
Peace once did abound all around.

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<sup>12</sup> *U Sohpet Bneng* (literally, the Navel of Heaven) was believed to have been the location of the Golden Staircase which was originally used by the Sixteen families to travel to Earth and back before it was severed by God.

Like the path of a river over a bedrock,  
 A straight and narrow road they followed;  
 Up and down the Golden Stairway  
 They traversed regularly, night and day:  
 The night was a time for peaceful slumber,  
 An age of innocence reigned during the day.

Under a roof, soot covered and crudely laid,  
 Listening to the night go *kynting-ting-ting*<sup>13</sup>;  
 The young maiden blushed fiercely  
 As she faced *u Naikhadsaw synñia*<sup>14</sup>:  
 A simple living at Mother's house,  
 Yet it is there where peace could be found.

They knew no Lies, practiced no Deceit,  
 Among them reigned supreme the Truth.  
 When Heavens shone clear and bright,  
 The Golden Age still continued;  
 While all that was there on the world  
 Still fell under God's tender care.

This Land was once young and pure  
 But it soon ripened and matured;  
 From their bountiful gardens and orchards,

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<sup>13</sup> *Kynting-ting-ting* is onomatopoeia.

<sup>14</sup> *U Naikhadsaw synñia* is a Khasi idiom to indicate a good-looking young man.

The eyes of men and women afar did sight:

Oh! Give me wings so I can fly

And visit the unknown lands afar.

The Cloud

When young generations still flourished,

And there were no signs of old age;

Both crop and fruit ripened gladly,

And there was no want or need.

The day was a time for honest living,

Before departed the Age of Innocence.

They all knew their manners well,

But they knew not how to pay caution;

They rested under the trees' cool shade;

Among themselves, they laughed and played.

It was only the Vulture's keen eye

That saw the dark signs from afar.

Wickedness could not be found,

'Til *Diengieï's* branches the sky did crown;

The distant Cloud descended slow,

Until the Bright Sun, it did swallow;

From mountaintops across the world,

God disappeared from the midst of man.



A Bee lost without its Queen

Flew blindly, searching for its home;

Nine families with God did stay,

But what of man? Where did he stray?

U Hynñiew Trep has drifted apart,

After they lost touch with God.

Often he would dive in waters deep

Around the world, he makes his trip;

To the Caverns where the ceilings sparkle,

To Arid Wastelands, wading through Marshes;

Till he reaches the depth of Hell

Where he shall suffer his birth-pangs.

In the underbelly of a darkened cave

The air reeked of evil incense;

Down under – a Snake lay coiled,

Above – its mother, a human dame<sup>15</sup>;

That was how Suffering made its home,

Nested in humanity's heart and soul.

---

15 This is a reference to the Khasi tale of how U Thlen (a demon man-eating snake) survived death through the actions of a Khasi mother who saved a piece

God from above stared down, confused –

Heavenly bodies were darkened by an eclipse;

Goblins, Worms and Snakes abound,

For there was no longer anyone sound;

The golden Throne of the Golden Age

By the Prince of Darkness was usurped.

He killed all sight, he killed all sound,

His progenies' own thoughts stay dulled;

Darkness reigned alongside Ignorance,

Rampantly raced all Fears and Dreads;

It was no wonder that demons fierce

Amidst humanity did exist.

As fertile soil washed away, only stone remained

And the towns and villages lay doomed;

Once it was a bountiful garden,

Now by people it was shunned;

The Days of Peace will come to an end

Once the Dark cloud does descend.

The Sun slowly ceased to exist,

Swallowed entirely by an eclipse;

Life was leeches out of the living  
By Poverty, Hunger, Suffering and Pain.

Thus, a seed nestled in the ground  
Turned yellow, untended and uncared for.

The Sightless Demon stumbles about,  
Walks clumsily and randomly strikes out;  
Thus shrank the tribe and the clan,  
Thus an ugly frown a face adorns.

There is not honour left in man  
And from his eyes, no mien remains.

When from a person, their Aura flees,  
Their facade changes and turns surly;  
The tools are laid out, ready for use  
Yet no hammer upon the anvil resounds;

Can there be any greater demon  
Than a man with a disposition sullen?

Within man collects unimagined evil,  
From within him rises bitter bile;  
Are these 'the gods' they claim to be?  
Where can she be found, the Queen Bee?

Day and night he blindly gropes  
And chases after the Goddess of Wealth.

She traverses the shadowed caves,  
She crawls beneath the dirt and weeds;  
To Towns, to Plains, towards *Lyngngam*<sup>16</sup>,  
Where jobs lay waiting for the man;  
Where there is Rice, there can she be found –  
Where the Goddess of Wealth is, there is man.

From the precipice's edge of *Riat Mawiew*,  
The trees their leaves no longer blow;  
For a Fog so thick has stifled all,  
Honour and respect lay trampled;  
Can there be pools as dark and deep,  
As the heart that Man does keep?

Like a Moth that flutters in the sky,  
It emerges from where the Worm does lie;  
Or like the Wasp, the demons dark,  
Their evil to spread in the world throughout;  
There is no honour and respect to be found

---

<sup>16</sup> *Lyngngam* are the people who reside on the borders of the Garo Hills

During the dark hours of Pandemonium.

For one handful of Silvery coins,

Every one shall stubbornly hold on;

Like when the god Mammon was enticed

By the Goddess of Beauty's scheming wiles;

From the gold-laced streets to Heaven

Right to the depths of a fiery Hell.

The Goddess of Beauty covers her eyes

With silver coins to brighten her sight;

How dialogue gets twisted around:

Which is the Gold, which is the Worm?

How they plucked a nugget from the Truth

To bestow a mantle on Deceit.

'We are rendered timid by our shame'

Yet our wayward ways remain the same;

Mountains crumbled and Lakes simmered,

'We're neither hot nor cold but lukewarm'

Ruler, Judge and seasoned Warrior

For the Silver Coin they all aspire.

Great men's progenies both ways devour,

A moneybag's rope knows no bound;

Where there is Chaos and Turmoil,

The weight of his bag doubles there.

Truth seeks refuges in the house of God,

While Man's Lust reigned on Earth.

The Lust of man was like a hog

(That continues to eat until it bloats);

She knew how to used honeyed tones,

To flatter men and to fatten them;

But they soon shrank back, fearful and timid

When she turns into a leech, thirsting for blood.

A Silver Coin comes armed with teeth,

And the hands that hold it tighten in greed;

It bides its time, like a kite on the prowl

And like a hornet, its advances are bold;

When it finally becomes a creature untamed,

It will unleash works of malice and pain.

When Man finally becomes possessed,

Blood shall flow freely without rest;

Words shall be invoked to curse and bewitch,  
And Lightning shall colour the sky red.

The Thunder shall render people numb,  
It shall pierce till it reaches joint and bone.

‘Goodness was starved but Evil grew stout,

‘Twas broken the law of Man and of God;

In the past it was said that there will come a day  
When nothing will make sense, an absurd age;

For wealth, there is nothing he would not do

The Silver Coin has become the Demon.

They then said, ‘*Ka Riat Mawiew* –

*Bym-don-ba-lah-ban-pyndap-khyndew*<sup>17</sup>’;

A person who, over his desire, can wield control,

In a person within which resides a munificent will;

To such a person shall the palms be revealed,

Stirring in the wind at *Riat Mawiew*.

Across the world, as he continues to swim,

Into the depths of pools he dives within;

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ka Riat Mawiew-bym-don-ba-lah-ban-pyndap-khyndew* refers to a deep ravine that can be found in Sohra. In English, it means “a ravine that cannot be filled with earth”; the poet employs this metaphor to describe man’s never-ending greed and lust for things of the material world.

The once fair face has been rendered dim,

The Thick Fog has darkened all aspiration:

Nothing will wish to drift there,

Do let me make my way elsewhere.



## The Rainbow

For God no longer resides in the people's hearts,

Sin and suffering clouds the entire world.

All is lost; can there be a way back?

Fear and Dread has gripped their hearts

And from the evil and foreboding dark -

For Him who is beloved, anguished cries ring out.

For all their knowledge, people have come to nought,

They have rendered blind both Wisdom and Thought;

Like a grieving mother, of her child bereft,

Roams about wildly because she cannot forget.

The *Amirphor*<sup>18</sup> flower no longer spreads his scent,

*U Ekjakor*<sup>19</sup> finally seems to have won!

The world lays awake in the darkest of hours,

---

<sup>18</sup> *Amirphor* is believed to be a mythical fairy plant.

<sup>19</sup> *Ekjakor* is a mythical man-eating demon that takes the form of a serpent.

For the stars have sunk deep down into the abyss:

Oh bright night star! Do lend your light

For relief to pass through this dreary night;

Along with you, the Rooster shall resound,

Surely a sign of brighter days to come.

Plague and Disease have taken their course

And driven the people to the edges of Hell.

Just like one confronted by a creature untamed,

The spirit of man fluttered and grew dim:

As vibrancy is leached out of life,

‘What can Rites and Rituals now yield?’

‘No longer able to tell Wrong from Right,

As Sinning went on, so decreased the Tribe:’

In despair, they sought demons to pacify

Until their mistakes, they could no longer rectify:

The water is dried up, only the honeycomb remains,

‘Oh Lord Creator, from the heavens your ears do lend!’

As old age continues to claim the lot,  
The generations slowly dying out;  
The only kinds that continue to multiply  
Are those of the Worm, the Fly and the Vulture;  
The last rites of death they conduct,  
The loud cymbals of deaths they resound.

‘The more they sow, the less they shall reap;  
A meagre yield against a basketful of seed!  
One each at dusk, one each at dawn,  
Right from early morn till setting sun,  
Will become food for me to feed upon,’  
Thus gloats *ka ‘Ab-Kyllaiñ-Japha*<sup>20</sup>!

Eternally shall the fiery flames ascend,  
The people longingly gaze toward the heavens,

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ka ‘Ab-Kyllaiñ-Japha* may be a reference to the story of how God turned the crow’s (*ka tyngab*) feathers black for tricking his messenger into delivering the wrong news to humanity. In this context, it also means that due to people dying out, the crows regularly feed on *japha*, that is, the rice that is ritually left at cremation grounds after funeral rites have been completed.

As they wait for the bright morn to dawn,

For its bright red spark to colour the horizon;

And for someone, from amidst the demons of hell,

To stand in front of God to account for their sins.

They searched long and hard, left and right,

As they conducted their sacrificial rites.

They pleaded and reasoned with The Almighty;

'*Ku-ri-ei*<sup>21</sup>!' they called out, beseeching Him for mercy.

It is for Him to forgive misdeed and wrong,

Whether of the tribe or one lone person.

There was Sin to account for and consequence to bear,

The Spirit needed strengthening, to be cleansed of the Impure.

Amidst a council of earthly creatures, big and small,

Hark! The Almighty's voice as He clearly calls:

'For one to step up, until the Saviour arrives,

Who will be willing to usher hope for man?'

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ku-ri-ei* is a phrase used by the Khasi traditional priests to conclude rituals and to offer thanksgiving. It is short for *U Blei un kyrkhu ia phi* (May God bless you).

From above did the voice of the Almighty resound.

Yet the council below gave no response;

Nature seems to have been rendered mute

And every creature, lulled to a deep sleep.

In despair, man cried, ‘*Simpah Simsong, u Sim Karo*<sup>22</sup>,

When will he arrive to deliver my soul?’

Hark from the depths of *Krem Lamet Latang*<sup>23</sup>,

The resplendent cock steps forward, *u Khraw Jutang*<sup>24</sup>.

‘Until the day when arrives the Saviour,’

‘No matter,’ says he, ‘His place to take I do offer:

Fret not, for humanity shall be absolved of sin

And shall stand acquitted in God’s eyes eternal.’

And so he stood before the gathered council,

---

22 ‘*Simpah Simsong, u Sim Karo* is a person who is deemed fit by a particular clan to intervene and maintain peace within the clan. Often the individual chosen is someone who possess good and honest qualities, good with words and who can negotiate and settle disputes within the family or clan.

23 *Krem Lamet Latang* was the legendary cave where the Sun hid herself, thereby plunging the world into darkness. She hid herself after she was shamed and ridiculed by the other creatures for showing up late for a dance and for dancing with her brother, the Moon.

24 *U Khraw Jutang* is a person who is gifted in the art of advocating for others.

Champion and Deliverer, lofty and regal.

He perched upon the threshold of the Sun,

He flapped three times for her to awaken

And when thrice resounded his clarion call,

The light came pouring back into the world.

Once again Nature takes on a fair glow

And Fear reigns over the world no longer;

*Diengiei*<sup>25</sup> saw the routed return of Dread,

Along with the defeated demons that followed;

The Signs have shown themselves crystal clear,

The prayers have reached the Almighty's ear.

The visage of all humanity shone clear,

They had been shown the way once more;

Heaven and Earth once more are one,

With peaceful ties between God and man;

---

<sup>25</sup> *Diengiei* was the place where evil originated after the Golden Ladder was severed by God. It took the form of a huge tree whose branches and leaves threatened to overshadow the entire world in darkness until it was chopped down by the people with the help of a small bird.

Peace will abound all over the world

When the ruler of Heaven finally appear.

The moss-flecked rock shall reappear

After a spate of heavy sun shower;

The heavy grey cloud will then brighten

When the Rainbow finally emerge in the heavens:

When they finally trample their demons,

Humanity once more shall be God's children.

When the Land still was benighted

And the Moon and Sun cast not their light,

Through the dark and dreary night,

The Star of Hope shone forever bright.

For it is only through God's faithful mercy

That will thrive depraved humanity.

**A Golden Age**

It was during the Land's dark ages

That Truth gradually unfolded itself,

When Seven Springs descended from the heavens

For depraved humanity's thirst to quench;

Until people invoked the name of God,

Slowly then did the Light shine bright.

Sixteen families in Heaven then resided,

Till Seven of them down to Earth descended –

For the righteousness of God to show

In the governance of a world so low;

For all earthly creatures to rejoice,

To bestow upon silent ones a voice.

Their Names shall be known eternally!

Who is not aware of their legacy?

In the hills above and the valleys below,



Remain their teachings for generations to know;

Right from early sunrise till the sunset,

We are the progenies of *Hynñiew Trep*<sup>26</sup>.

My beloved Land, I bless you so,

A land where silvery streams of water flow;

In you, the *Amirphor* blooms brilliantly,

A luminous hue that stays eternally!

And from this precious Flower shall grow

Joyous strains from a heart overflowed.

A thriving race under the blue expanse,

Living on earth talking in the same tongue;

A unifying Faith all over the Land,

For festivities - a colour uniform:

Where else on Earth can be found

Rites and Customs unique as our own!

---

<sup>26</sup> *Hynñiew Trep* is the term used to describe the Seven Families who descended from Heaven to reside on Earth. In English, it literally means the ‘Seven Huts’.

Their Faith of utmost importance,

Our forefathers included in governance;

Around them, Evil may have abounded plenty,

Yet they still lived on with hope and bravery:

We live in days of a different time,

We know not where to take our Land!

Over the hills and valleys down below,

As I traversed them all, on my own;

Beloved Land of mine, do let me know

Why within my heart, I do fret so;

When I gaze at all that is around me,

Why do tears fill my eyes easily?

Mountains in the past were their defence,

What is there to defend us in the present?

The roaring rapids continue to descend,

And we see a dark cloud looming overhead;

Just as in the Past, so it is in days to come

That we come together for our Land.

That our beloved Land may rise again,

Let over us all blow a gentle wind;

Once more shall the blue expanse be clear,

Once more shall the twinkling stars appear;

The Evening Star shall shine during the day,

The Moon shall once again shine its silver ray.

We are no different from each other!

We require the same Sun, Air and Water.

In pain and sorrow, joy and happiness,

With them in the same tongue we converse;

When we continue our own arduous ascent,

The ones left down below must not be forgotten.

In the rustic fields of plant and seed,

We heartily call a starving *Phreit*<sup>27</sup> to feed;

---

<sup>27</sup> *Phreit* is a tiny bird that often acts as a bearer of news in Khasi folklore.

A flourishing race we shall become,  
Amongst us, Truth shall hold its ground;  
Heaven will then be clean and chaste,  
Hereby, heralding a Golden Age.

The Peacock dances at the Sun's first light,  
While in meandering *Rupatli*<sup>28</sup>, she delights;  
Hark! The silvery melodies that resound

From *Umiam*, *Kupli* and *Rilang*<sup>29</sup>;  
In a land where paths lay scattered in all directions,  
The Owl shall sway to the Mole's cadence.

Golden treasures of days gone by  
Harbour a fire that shall never die:  
Oh Lord who reigns over the world!

We who are of *ka Ri Khasi Ri Pnar*<sup>30</sup>,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Rupatli* is short for *Rupa-tylli*, which literally means a neck ornament. This term is used to describe the looping course of a river that flows into the Umiam lake.

<sup>29</sup> *Umiam*, *Kupli* and *Rilang* are names of rivers that run in the Khasi hills.

<sup>30</sup> *Ka Ri Khasi Ri Pnar* is an idiom used to signify the people belonging to the Khasi and Jaiñtia hills.

We shall sculpt and mould and sow our seed

So we can rise above our humble lot.

From waterfalls, along deep pools,

I finally arrived – I know not where:

From peaks of *Shyllong*, *Kyllang* and *Symper*<sup>31</sup>,

Where shall I soar to, oh Land of mine?

At last, when I arrive at heaven's door,

My beloved mother is who I long for!

---

31 *Shyllong*, *Kyllang* and *Symper* are names of well-known hills in the Khasi hills. Each has its own mythical significance in Khasi literature.

## Chapter 4

### Analysing the Process of Translation

*Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep* follows a narrative style and it is written in the form of an epic poem. It consists of one hundred and eighty one stanzas, each comprising six lines, and divided into ten chapters. The entire poem is composed in Iambic Tetrametre and follows the rhythm scheme of *aabbcc*.

This poem narrates the story of the Hynñiew Trep and how they came to be. The Khasi origin myth states that they were originally part of the Sixteen Families which resided in Heaven with God. It is believed that Heaven and Earth were connected by a Golden Ladder that was located at *U Lum Sohpet Bneng* (Heaven's Navel) and this was used by the families and God himself to visit Earth time and again. This peaceful co-existence continued for a long time until it was disrupted by the emergence of evil in the form of *Ka Diengiei*, a tree that continued to grow until it threatened to cover the entire world. God decided to sever the connection between Heaven and Earth; out of the sixteen families, seven of them chose to remain on Earth. The Khasi people believe that they descended from these seven families and thus, they call themselves *Ki Khun U Hynñiew Trep* (The Children of U Hynñiew Trep). In his verses, Tham attempts to trace the Khasi history through the myths and in doing so, he tries to rediscover our culture and our roots. In this dissertation, I have attempted the English translations of only six poems out of the ten; this was mainly due to time constraints which regrettably prevented the completion of the task at hand. However, in choosing which poems to translate, I hope that I am able to

present the story and events in a clear and concise manner which would make sense to the reader.

Before I start, I feel that it will be worthwhile to state that there have been quite a number of English translations of this collection of Soso Tham. Mr. Oscar M. Wahlang had contributed a translation of “The Rainbow” in the Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebration magazine. This translation was included in another book of English translations of *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep*; this English translation was done by Shlur Manik Syiem, the son of Mr. Wahlang himself. There was also a smattering of translations that appeared in H. W. Sten’s *Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development*. Recently, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, in his book *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham: A Study of the Great Unconventional Elegy and the Poetry of the Khasi National Bard*, also included his own translation of parts of Tham’s poems for his study. Besides the aforementioned, I am yet to encounter or come across any other translations of this particular collection. I can only hope that my humble attempt at translating these poems at least translates to some level of accomplishment and that I do justice to the poet himself.

While going through all of the poems from this collection, I noticed that the fixed structure of all one hundred and eighty one verses – each comprising of six lines, following the iambic tetrameter and a specific rhyme scheme – can potentially make a reading the entire book repetitive and monotonous. This opinion is highly subjective, of course and one’s views may differ from the other. However, having made the above observation, I made a conscious attempt to not repeat the same structure in my translation – firstly, because it would have required heavy-handedness with regards to the use of the language in order for me to replicate the poems in the exact same structure. Secondly, though the verses

were very structured, I noticed that there was a flow in them that I wanted to replicate in my translations. In my translations, I also made a conscious attempt to avoid language that was too elaborate; in the end, what I wanted to preserve was the quintessential meaning of the original poems in the translations.

The real significance of this poetry collection lies in its cultural, religious, political and social commentary on the Khasi society. Throughout his works, the poet makes several references to a number of mythical events – the legend of how the seven families came to reside among the people on Earth, the legend of *Ka Diengiei*, the legend of *U Sier Lapalang* and the legend of *Ka Krem Lamet Latang* and how a new covenant was formed between God and man, one that remained till the present generation – and he pieces them together to make a narrative that traces the “epic genesis of the Khasi race” (Lyngdoh, 1973)

In my translation of the poems, I refrained from using the word “Enlightenment” for the Khasi term “*Ka Jingshai*”. The main reason for my doing so is because the poems were written as a reaction to the adverse influences of Christianity and western education to Khasi society, thus using the term “Enlightenment” would defeat the entire purpose of the poetry collection. Hence, I deemed Illumination more suitable for use in my English translation. The same can be said of my choice to preserve the original Khasi term of *u Hynñiewtrep* in my translation. I have gone through the previous translations of the poems and I cannot deny that personally, it has always felt comical reading about the “Seven Huts”. I have always felt uneasy with how translation can deprive so easily an original text of the weight and meaning that it carries simply because of the unfeasibility of the target language to accommodate those same meanings. In my mind, “Seven Huts” may just as



well be seven huts literally, either clumped together or apart but just huts in the end. I view most Khasi terms in this poem collection as important as a given name, which may be spelt differently in different languages but whose quintessential meaning therefore remains the same. It is the same with many of the Khasi words and phrases which I did not attempt to change at all in my translation. I felt that it somewhat trivialises the profound content of the poems; certain Khasi terms such as “*U Hynñiew Trep*”, “*U Khrav Jutang*” and “*Ri Khasi Ri Pnar*” are terms that carry more weight being left as they were in the original poems. Other terms and phrases that I left unchanged include Khasi idioms such as “*U ‘Nai Khadsaw Synnia*” and “*Simpah Simsong, u Sim Karo*” for which I had provided explanations in the footnotes.

One of the main difficulties that I experienced in translating the poems was trying to decipher and uncover all the hidden layers of meaning that the poet has packed in each and every verse of this poem collection, a cursory glance through the text may make it seem as if the simple lines meant what they say. However, it is not so; Tham’s finesse as a poet is proven by his ability to imbue layers of meaning to his verses using his deceptively simple language. Poems like “The Cloud” require reading after reading for one to finally grasp what the poet is talking about; I confess that my understanding and consequently, my translation of this particular poem is not up to the mark and thus prone to many errors in my translation.



## **Conclusion**

Coming to the end of this dissertation, I can safely say that there are quite a number of things that I can take from my research. The first is my own reconnection to my own cultural roots which, so far, have only been of a superficial level. So far, the Khasi language is a language that I have simply been bought up in, a language that I have been using to connect and converse with people from my own place and from the tribe that I belonged to. However, my experience with translating one of the major literary works in Khasi literature has revealed how woefully behind I still am with regards to knowing the significance of knowing one's own mother tongue. It would be lying to not admit that I met my own shares of struggles; time and again, I had to ask friends and family for possible meanings of words and phrases. On many occasions, I ended up becoming even more befuddled after doing so. An important lesson I learnt from this experience though, was to not get sidelined by the many differing opinions but in the end, to trust my own interpretation of the poems and present them as I understood them.

Another lesson which I encountered in my journey was that my lack of knowledge of many Khasi texts and, consequently, that turned out to be a major hindrance in my task of translating the text. Although I am not happy to admit it, this is symptomatic of a larger problem that exists within the present Khasi society. Most people still believe tend towards pursuing Western education and completely neglect their own. This sorry state of affairs has become even more explicit with sections of Khasi society being fluent only in speech but not knowing how to read or write in their own mother tongue.

The only way to remedy this abysmal state of affairs is to awaken a more proactive interest among the people for their own literature and culture. S. K. Bhuyan and Soso Tham were right in highlighting the importance of encouraging the people to show more inclination towards something that only they can call their own. After all, it is the only legacy and the only thing which will ensure the survival of their knowledge system in the generations to come.

My experience working on this translation has been an interesting journey and an educational one as well. Although it was working on unknown territory, in time I have learned to appreciate and value Khasi literature that I have overlooked for the major part of my life. This exercise has helped me gain confidence in working with Khasi texts and it is likely that I will continue working on bringing Khasi literature to the forefront in the days to come. It is as if Tham had proven himself right – it is not necessary that you have to choose just one or the other to become wiser and more knowledgeable. You can have the best of both and learn a lot more than you can never imagine in the process.

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