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## Shapeshifting Traditions among the Khasi of Northeast India: Ecological Engagements and Multispecies Relationships

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# Shapeshifting Traditions among the Khasi of Northeast India: Ecological Engagements and Multispecies Relationships

Margaret Lyngdoh

## Abstract

This article engages with Water as a core medium in folklore among Khasi, an indigenous community in Northeast India. In the context of the corpus of narratives that engage, interact with, involve, and folklorise water—what will henceforth be called the folklore of water—I look at human-animal transformation traditions. Leaning heavily on empirical material derived from primary fieldwork, this article looks at the folklore of water as home to *sanghkini* or ‘hybrid’ persons who transform into weresnakes during the monsoon season. Aside from fulfilling its mundane utilitarian purposes, water among Khasi is more: water is expressive of the Khasi knowledge of the world around them. As will be discussed, water is a form of indigenous knowledge. If we look at water as a tradition-resource, it will allow disparate expressions of Khasi religious expression—gender-switching in shapeshifter form; astral travel in *sangkhini*-dreaming and examples of multispecies relationalities—to be viewed together as articulations of water as mediator, enabling new layers of understanding.

## Introduction

The Khasis are an ethnic community inhabiting the state of Meghalaya, where they number around 1.3 million. They constitute the communities of Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Lyngngam, Mulang, Nongtraï, Marngar, Muliang, Maram, and others. Their origin may be traced to the Mon Khmer and their language belongs to the Austro-Asiatic group. The social set-up of the Khasis is matrilineal in character, with descent being traced to the first ancestress (*ka*

*iaubei*). Clan descent is the prerogative of the youngest daughter and after marriage, children take the clan name of their mother; husbands shift to the household of the female and the youngest daughter becomes the custodian of family property.

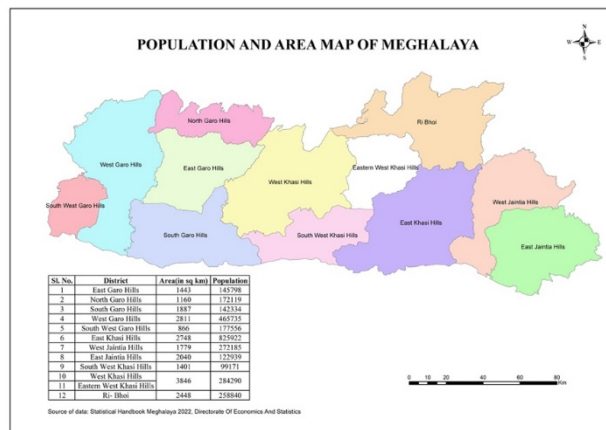


Figure 1: Population Map of Meghalaya

About 87 percent of the Khasi population have converted to Christianity of two main persuasions: Catholicism and Presbyterianism. Only about seven percent of the local population adheres to the local indigenous religion, *Niam Tynrai* (lit. root religion). In the Khasi Hills, an uneasy and uncomfortable relationship exists in the way that practitioners of different Christian confessions view each other, and, especially, attitudes vary towards those who practise the indigenous religion. While Catholics adopt an assimilative stance, the Presbyterians enjoy a radical discontinuity with traditional practices. In the Jaintia Hills however, friction exists between Khasi Christians and those who follow the indigenous religion. Christianity as practiced in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills has greatly adapted to the context of Khasi social and traditional practices. For example, Khasi Christianity, as a predominantly patriarchal religion, has not been able to dislodge the matrilineal custom even though Church hierarchies are dominated by men (Lyngdoh, “Transformation”).

It is necessary to briefly discuss the sets of ideas that comprise the Khasi indigenous religion.<sup>1</sup> I cite an earlier article, where I detail its main tenets:

The *Niam Tynrai*, or traditional faith of the Khasis is also called *Ka Niam Tip Briew*, *Ka Niam Tip Blei* (lit, Man knowing God knowing ritual) and the tenets laid down by the Seng Khasi, an institution set

up in 1899 to preserve the values of the Khasi clan and community practices, state that man's duty on earth is to earn righteousness—*"ngi wan ha kane ka pyrthei ban kamai ia ka hok"*. This is the primary duty of man, to live a good life, fulfilling one's duty to the clan. In order to do so he must follow the unwritten rules of "knowing-god" and "knowing-man," principles that outline the basic tenets of this religion according to the Seng Khasi.<sup>2</sup> "Knowing man" implies recognizing the relationship and the rules which are orally transmitted, and which guide how humans should relate with other humans, including other-than-humans. This can be perceived in two ways. First, man should know that he came into this world through God's decree. His life has a mission and a purpose and whatever power he has, it is bestowed by God ("Christian" 611).

The Khasi notions of clan and *rngiew*, which is the third aspect of personhood, are also important to introduce because they are key to communicating the ways in which the Khasi sense of social order is organised:

At the core of the Khasi social and religious organization is the clan, with the quality of matrilineality interwoven into the fabric of ritual and narrative, and in which knowledge and influence, including the wellbeing and upkeep of the clan, is the responsibility of the primeval ancestress. This responsibility is shared with the maternal uncle of the first ancestress, and other deceased relatives. The physical manifestation of this veneration is marked by the megaliths that dot the Khasi landscape everywhere. Megaliths are ritually erected to propitiate and sign memory of the clan ancestress in stone; the horizontal stone symbolizes the ancestress and upright stone symbolizes the *thawlang*, husband of the clan ancestress, who in some cases is also the first ritual performer in a clan (163).

The idea of *rngiew* is integral to the conception of Khasi personhood. To cite it simply, an individual is, in the Western sense, made of "body, mind, soul" (Lyngdoh, "Wealth" 175) with each aspect ordering a different aspect of personhood. Khasis have a different construct: a person is made up of *met* (body), *mysiem* (breath), and *rngiew* (that quality which invests a being with personhood). Places can have *rngiew*, as well as guardian deities. *Ka rngiew* (*lit. ka* is a feminine denominator in Khasi language) is that aspect of a person which is gifted by the supreme being<sup>3</sup> and protects an individual so as to remain impervious to the evil eye and the malicious words or intents of other people. Words, *ka ktein*, are powerful, and, if malice underlines the intent of spoken words, they can be harmful to the individual against whom they are directed. I may mention that, in the historical absence of a written script, the oral tradition of the community is highly developed and sophisticated. It was

only in 1841 that the Welsh Calvinist Missionaries began the institution of the Khasi script in roman letters.

The concepts of clan and *rngiew* are central to a shapeshifting experience because, during a transformation, it is the *rngiew* that separates from the human and transforms into a snake. Sometimes, shapeshifting abilities are transmitted through clans and their deities, while at other instances, the gift is bestowed directly onto persons by the guardian deity of *sangkhini*.<sup>4</sup>

In the Khasi 'ontology,' the entirety of knowledge forms, human, and other-than-human entities interact with and engage with each other to create a sustainable relationality. The multi-species world is thus lived and experienced on an everyday basis. Further, as mentioned earlier, since the clan is situated at the core of Khasi ontology, it also then becomes representative of social order. The human and other-than-human sentient worlds assist in the sustenance or the destruction of the clan. In the worldview of the Khasi indigenous religion, sublimity is achieved if, in the afterlife, the individual is able to rejoin the clan of ancestors together with the supreme being.

### **Ethnography and Fieldwork: Urban Spaces and Wilderness**

When I first visited the North-Western Khasi Hills in 2012, the perception of distance between the 'hyper urban' space of the capital city of Shillong in Meghalaya, contrasted with the forests of Nongtraï region, seemed vast. Shillong city, as the education hub of Northeast India, thus becomes a confluence point of ethnicities and worldviews. The city has undergone a profound transformation in the orientation of its space and landscapes that are now mediated through concrete structures and congestion. The exponential growth of the town with rapid migrations from the rural areas to the urban spaces in search of livelihood has triggered a massive demand for living places. Additionally, the city at present copes with the ever-present problem of traffic jams<sup>5</sup> that frequently brings life to a standstill.<sup>6</sup> Yet, car-ownership as status-denominator persists in the urban perceptions of wealth and prosperity. Thus, globalisation, in its encounters with small indigeneities of Northeast India, has reshaped and reoriented perceptions so as to accommodate tradition with modernity. But it has come at the cost of an ongoing negotiation of priorities, which has resulted in cultural and social dissonance: while cars as prestige symbols represent modernity, the lack of infrastructures to navigate them in presents a huge gap in the community aspirations towards 'modernisation.'



Figure 2: Photo by Sanjib Bhattacharjee. *The Shillong Times*,  
14.08.2023

The point that I discuss through these reflections on Khasi urban living come from eleven years of interacting and discussing about weresnakes with my main resource person in Shillong, to whom I will refer only through his initials affixed with his title: Dr PSN. I was first directed to meet Dr PSN in 2012 by a Khasi bookstore owner (Ri Khasi Bookstall). Dr PSN was immensely helpful in facilitating my consequent research on the topic of *sangkhini*. It later turned out that Dr PSN's deceased mother was a *sangkhini*. This was not a fact that Dr PSN wanted to share with me. At first, I thought it was just because of the conflicts between his being Presbyterian Christian and the fact that this transformation tradition remains outside accepted practices of accepted Christian dogma and practice. However, only in 2023, did I finally understand the complexities that are involved in accepting that one is *sangkhini* in a rural versus in an urban area. Such practices and beliefs, for example, human-animal transformations, are ascribed to states of being uncivilised and denote a savage state of existence which the Christian Church has effectively demonised. In the urban environment of Shillong, rationality co-exists as a layer over the indigenous cultural perceptions. These two perceptions—of educated, enlightened rationality on the one hand and being Khasi and embodying everything that makes one Khasi on the other hand—represent the mindset of most of the residents of Shillong.<sup>8</sup>

Positioned separately from this administrative and perceived 'centre' (of Shillong) are the peripheral Khasi communities who inhabit marginal locations and who live and experience the vernacular folklife of Khasis, where

indigeneity is a way of life. By ‘indigeneity,’ as used in the present context, I mean the ordinary Khasi-centric practices that organise daily life, for example, agrarian activities, narrated stories about seasons, especially the monsoon around which all human-snake transformation traditions are organised, and other vernacular activities. The variegated forms of engagement with the multiple species as well as their realities are performed every day in these spaces of the peripheries. In this article, I look at specific forms of multispecies engagement that pertain to the sets of practices and stories about water in its mundane, as well as its other-than-human manifestation. Water has a quotidian aspect in its everyday manifestation and usage; used in order to sustain life, water is, thus, a valuable component, especially in agrarian communities. But water is other-than-human for Khasis and this quality is expressed differently among the different communities of the Khasi.

My perspective of categorising stories, or folklore, based on where they come from primarily (the folklore of water or the folklore of the forest, etc.) comes from my own indigenous perspective of looking at ecology not as an organic whole, but made up of constituent parts that engage with persons separately. Thus, multi-persons (rather than species) interact and live alongside a cosmology that is constituted by separate parts. This point exemplifies the problematic category of ‘nature’<sup>9</sup> in social sciences. The Khasis interact with specific aspects of ‘nature’ but never with it as a whole. Contemporary views on nature envision it as a whole constituent category devoid of ‘humans’ (Ducarme and Couvet). The Khasi word for environment is *mariang* with *ka* as the feminine denominator. Thus, nature is female and is often attributed with maternal status. Thus, *Mei Mariang* (lit. mother nature) is the commonest way to refer to nature, in the same way as we would refer to a person. But *mariang* does not equal nature as positioned in a binary opposition to culture.

I carried out fieldwork mainly in the villages of Myndo, Mawkyllon, Langdongdai, Umsohping and Riangdo. Whereas Myndo and Umsohping villages are Presbyterian Christian villages, Mawkyllon and Langdongdai have a mixed population of Catholics and Presbyterians. Riangdo has a much more diverse ethnic and religious population of about 200 families. When I first visited the Nongtraï, Muliang, and Lyngngam areas, the roads were non-existent and the villagers had a lot of difficulty at times of illness or death. This was because, while most of the population had converted to Christianity and the western education as a way of life was introduced, the infrastructure to support these new ways of living was inadequate. It was only in 2023, that real attempts at coating the roads with tar begun. Thus, these forest villages still

exist at perceived, as well as real distances from urban centres.<sup>10</sup> In these areas, I have thus far made interviews with eight weresnakes, one weretiger, and one weremouse.<sup>11</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork is always a transformational process and I may mention that everywhere I went, I was welcomed and given the warmest hospitality. Weresnakes, tigerpeople, and community members now have become lifelong friends.

### **Narrating Transformations: The Storytelling Interview**

In the following sections, I will describe the phenomenon of the *Sangkhini* transformation tradition by presenting interview transcripts. But briefly, *Sangkhini* are humans who have an alternate *rngiew* that manifests during specific seasons as snakes that traverse waterbodies. The human *sangkhini* usually goes to sleep during the manifestation of the snake-body. It is when they sleep that they have the *sangkhini* dream where they manifest physically as snakes and as helpers of the guardian deity of all *sangkhini*. For the sake of clarity, henceforth, when I refer to the head of *Sangkhini*, I will use the capital letter. When a human is in the state of *sangkhini* dreaming, the physical body suffers with aches and illness because the primary work of *sangkhini* is to 'plow' ways for water to flow. Water is sometimes synonymous with the *Sangkhini* deity. The place of water is the place of *sangkhini*.

I present here a series of interview transcripts where *sangkhini* as well as community members have described their *sangkhini* experience or shared narratives of encounters with them and briefly discuss each of them. I discuss each story-interview in the sections that follow.

Excerpt from interview with Theocratis Riangtem, 68, former supervisor of sericulture at Malongkuna, field assistant as well as community elder, June 2013, Nongmyndo Village:



Figure 3: *Theocratis Riangtem. Nongmyndo, 2023*

ML:<sup>12</sup> So, *Bah* (respectful term for an older man), could you tell me about the *sangkhini*?

Bah Theo: These *sangkhini* have children. They are the *puri*<sup>23</sup> and they seek out sons-in-law for the prosperity and procreation of their clan. If a *sangkhini* wants a son-in-law, he makes it known. Once this is known, eligible men do not go to any water bodies during the monsoon season because if they do, their *rngiew* will be married to the *puri*, but in the physical reality, they will die. But if a man is 'marked' to become the son-in-law of the *sangkhini*, then, no matter what precautions he takes, he dies and begins life in the *sangkhini* reality. Such men's bodies will be found near the pools of water.

ML: In the community, what is the general feeling directed towards the *sangkhini*?

Bah Theo: People are afraid, yes, we are afraid. *Sangkhini* are people who turn into water entity, and when they are in human form people are not afraid, even if they know that a person is a *sangkhini*. For instance, If I have to go to the paddy fields or to collect wood, if you are my friend and you are a *sangkhini*, I would feel very safe. If a person is killed by a *sangkhini*, the community would not blame the person, whose *sangkhini* has killed him/her. Because it is the *rngiew* which does it, not the person. The *sangkhini* adhere to very strict rules. You see, they cannot just kill anyone. They have to receive the command, and this command is given by the Supreme Being. People who have committed mortal sins may be killed by lightning, a bear, a tigerman or a *sangkhini*. If there is a big feast of the *sangkhini*, perhaps in one, in two years or five years then they devour human beings. But they don't eat the flesh, they just drink the blood. The signs that a *sangkhini* has killed a person is if the dead body is missing the nail of the little finger of one hand and feet and a piece of the nose, ear and eyes. If a person dies near or in water in our areas, we are able to recognise the signs of a *sangkhini* kill.

*Sangkhini* is a 'spirit' serpent. Christians also become *sangkhini* but they don't know the rules and the covenant so clearly. There are food taboos related with the *sangkhini*: it is forbidden to eat onion or garlic, or *jaut* and *jinlang*, arum and spice, some species of fish, or snakes.

The body is connected with the *rngiew* in the case of the *sangkhini*. If a *sangkhini* is wounded in his snake form, the physical body also suffers. *Sangkhini* realms exist in a state between sleep and waking.

This narrative is descriptive of *sangkhini* habits and expresses community perceptions towards *sangkhini*. The interlocutor mentions a key element in the belief-world of this community: *sangkhini* kill those persons who have committed unforgivable sins (*sang*) because they have the permission to do so from the Supreme Being.<sup>14</sup> The killing preference of *sangkhini* is also described clearly. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2023, I made an interview with a man from the Diengan clan, Dolishon Diengan, who belongs to the clan of *sangkhini*. He mentioned that *sangkhini* have yearly meetings, and, when I asked him what they discuss, one topic was how many people they would take (i.e., kill) in a particular year. I asked him, how many people would *sangkhini* take in this year (2023) and he said, one person. I connected this information with the reports of three fishermen being swept away at the Wahblei River in West Khasi Hills on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2023<sup>15</sup>. On 21<sup>st</sup> July 2023, I had a telephonic conversation with Theocratis Riangtem. I asked him if the death of three fishermen was the work of *sangkhini*. He introduced me to the concept of *shim sangkhini* which means that in case of a *sangkhini* killing, if there are three people, one person will be killed. In any group, if a *sangkhini* 'takes' them, then it is imperative that witnesses are left behind in order to inform the community that the deceased person has been killed by *sangkhini*. *Sangkhini* claim their kills and thus take responsibility inside the community. Thus, the death of three fishermen was not due to *sangkhini* but was a result of flash flooding. Also, in Myndo village, no person has suffered because of water or rain related damages this year because the multitude of *sangkhini* in this village ensures the safety of the villagers. *Sangkhini* warn people of death or damage by water.

The following narrative is explicit in its descriptions of how *sangkhini* know about the landslides and water damage that they are responsible for during the rainy season. In an interview with *sangkhini* Menisha Ñianglang from Nongmyndo village on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, I collected this experience-narrative of a *sangkhini* origin. Menisha is a 19-year-old female in the mundane reality. She first became aware of her *sangkhini* nature in 2014

when the transformation dreams first manifested. She was working in the fields and it was at night. She was sleeping (at the hut that is constructed in the fields to shelter from rain or other eventualities) and then she started dreaming. In the dream, she was working as usual in the fields.



Figure 4: Celestina, Menisha, and the author (left). March 2020

MN: There was a young man from Mawleng Village. I dreamt of him...There was a cucumber growing on a creeper near a tree. I wanted to eat that fruit but I didn't dare to. That young boy was there from Nong Mawleng and at the time he came, the rains, the water came too. There was a bamboo pole, and he intended to use that as a bridge to the other side [bank of the temporary stream that formed during the monsoon]. But you see (she laughs) I wanted to eat that cucumber fruit and I could not eat it. And that was the *rngai* (or *rngiew*) of the [my] *sangkhini* self. Because I was inside the water, the river.

ML: How many times have you had the *sangkhini* dream?

MN: During the rainy season, I dream of it every night. I recognise every river and water body. I travel in my *sangkhini* form, like the big rivers Rwiang, Mawlyndep, Damsait, Pomphyrnai.

ML: What do you do in the water?

MN: Well, I see those who go to the river to fish, or for leisure, or to wash clothes.

ML: What is the purpose of your going to the water?

MN: I have no purpose, I go for leisure, for pastime....

ML: What do you look like in your *sangkhini* form?

MN: I look like I have the face of a cat and the body of a snake. I don't really know the colour of my skin (discusses with others); perhaps like fish-colour (so silver-grey).

ML: Have you ever been able to foretell events or misfortunes related with water and landscape?

MN: In 2014, when the paved road sunk under (got destroyed), I recognised it. It happened in Nongbaeu village. Even house, fields, etc., get destroyed because the *sangkhini* pave the way for water.

ML: Have you ever met the guardian deity of the *Sangkhini*?

MN: No.

ML: Why?

MN: He didn't show himself or reveal himself to me—I spend time and play with the *sangkhini* of Kedrid Diengngan.

In this interview excerpt, we notice the distance that Menisha takes from her *sangkhini* self. She does not refer to the *sangkhini* person as herself, but as another person. This narrative reveals the linked network of *sangkhini* who communicate knowledge about landscape, destruction brought on by the rains during the monsoon season, and other information between different *sangkhini*. Interactions between multiple species—water, earth, *sangkhini*, cucurbit (cucumber) and humans—are demonstrated in this narrative. Such multispecies interactions and engagements characterise the rehabilitated concept of neo-animism as clarified by Graham Harvey (“Animism”, “Food”). Mutuality or reciprocal relationships are a distinct feature of the ways that vernacular engagements are lived in everyday life. I employ this concept in the way that Harvey has used concepts of mutuality in animism as characterising the religions practised by indigenous people, because weresnakes mediate the multispecies world, so that humans would be able to survive in it. However, humans have to transform into these hybrid-snake other-than-humans. Humans on their own are unable to cope with the vagaries of rain and water that cause the entire landscape to breakaway (through landslides) and floods (through the overflowing of rivers) that lead to extensive destruction of human property and agricultural crops.

Seasons are tied with the folklore of water also manifest in the bodies of all *sangkhini*. The elder *sangkhini* and the guardian *Sangkhini* are most active during the monsoon season. Narratives about the activities of the *sangkhini* are plentiful because people in the community encounter them all the time. Kennedy Nachugrei is a farmer and currently resides in Riangdo, West Khasi Hills. He used to be a tigerman and had the ability to have a tiger transformation dreaming, which he consequently lost on purpose, by eating taboo foods.<sup>16</sup>

KN: There is a *sangkhini* in our village, (her husband forced her to eat taboo foods and her vision and experience of being a *sangkhini* lessened dramatically). Once it so happened with this lady *sangkhini*. We have fields and we usually cultivate on the hilly areas. There is a stone on one of the fields which served as a great obstruction to the flowing of water into the field. The owner of this field, a lady, was very perplexed what to do with this stone. She thought that, even if she had the boulder broken, there would be pieces of it around and this would create a great nuisance. So, she thought and thought. Then, the *sangkhini* lady said, "Shall I help? And if I help you how much will you give me?" The lady owner of the field thought that the *sangkhini* lady spoke in jest and said, "Do it and I will give you 500 rupees!" At night, the *sangkhini* really did move the boulder from the field. Later on, the *sangkhini* lady told us that in reality her whole being was hurting because she was removing the boulder. She was sick for three whole days. But the work got her 500 rupees, even though she is an elderly *sangkhini*.

This story, told with a lot of humour, elicited laughs and humorous asides. Kennedy is a gifted storyteller. The physical strength of the weresnake that surpasses human strength is stressed in this narrative. And the story is told as an everyday encounter between village members and *sangkhini* persons. As I stated above, there is no fear involved when the *sangkhini* is in human form.

K.D.<sup>17</sup> lives in Umpohsohsan village and she realised her *sangkhini* being from the time when she was a teenager. Although she has now converted to Presbyterian Christianity, her *rngiew* still serves the main *Sangkhini* deity. She is about 80 years old now and she has always led an agrarian way of life. K.D. is an acknowledged and beloved *sangkhini*. Menisha, the 18-year-old female *sangkhini* mentioned above, talked about how she plays with K.D.'s *sangkhini* (interview, March 2020). Bistilin Sohmat, another *sangkhini* from Myndo village, told me about how it is only K.D. who can help her physical body from *sangkhini* induced illness (interview March 2020). Bistilin has a daughter who is also a *sangkhini*. Her name is Shembianglin and she recently moved out of her mother's home to get married. Shembianglin also mentions K.D. as the *sangkhini* who has the highest status (interview, March 2020).



Figure 5: Celestina Tynhiang and Bistilin Sohmat

Here is an interview excerpt with K.D. from June 2018:

K.D.: I am from the D— clan. When I walk alone, I encounter it. The transformation happened through the *rngiew*. In a group, with other *sangkhini* we walk/move through rivers and water bodies. I dream that I am walking through the water, clearing pathways for the main *sangkhini*. It is hard work and when I wake up, I am ill for two three months. The *sangkhini* are most active during the monsoon season.

ML: I understand that *Sangkhini* have the ability and responsibility to punish those people who have committed mortal sins. Have you ever punished someone like that?

K.D. No, I only try to do good to people in the community, I never harm anyone.

It is worthwhile to clarify that this interview was carried out in the presence of church elders, community members, and K.D.'s brother Bisuroy, who is also a *sangkhini*. Church-prescribed morality is expressed in this interview with K.D. asserting that *sangkhini* exist only to enable the villagers. All *sangkhini* I have interviewed suffer greatly during this time because they do not get rest (while they sleep) and work tirelessly during the night. Water, then, is *sangkhini* and sources the entire corpus of narratives about *sangkhini*, seasons, taboo-purification and hygiene, among others. But *sangkhini* are not always benign.

Below is a narrative told to me by Kennedy Nachugre, about a *sangkhini* killing in an interview in January 2013, in Nongmyndo village:



Figure 6: Kennedy Nachugre. Nongmyndo, 2012

In 1979, I was a small child, I remember the incident...There were three sisters, and they were working in the fields all the day, cleaning the weeds, ploughing etc. It rained heavily the whole day but at sunset, the rains stopped. The three sisters decided to return back to the village from the fields. The youngest sister had a disability, she was dumb. But the other two were normal. The older sisters wanted to wait for the water in the River Rdiak to subside, but the one who couldn't speak wanted badly to be back home. In this way, she forced them to cross the river. The three sisters held hands with the eldest in front, the middle one in the centre and the youngest one in the rear. Holding each other's hands, they walked across the river. But when they reached the middle of the river, the middle sister disappeared, the water washed her away. Just a little further from the place where the girl was washed away was a pool in the river called *thwei Thowsan*. It exists even now. The other two sisters were frightened, in case they too would be washed away by the raging waters. So, they returned to their village and raised a hue and cry so that a search party was organised. People went looking, but they were unsuccessful, because the sun had set. Early the next day, when they went looking for the girl again, they found her body laid down on a rock next to the *Thowsan thwei*. The waters had also subsided. When they examined the body, they found no obvious marks except that the little fingernail of one hand, an eyelid, a piece of ear and her navel were taken. So, it was that the *sangkhini* took what they needed. They buried her body near the river, they did not bring her back to the village. There was an old fellow belonging to the Garo tribe, whose name was Changro. After the girl's last rites were performed, the *sangkhini* appeared in Changro's dream and told him not to worry anymore about the girl because they had taken her as a daughter-in-law. It is so with the *sangkhini*, that in this reality he/she is he/she but, when they transform, they turn into the

opposite gender. So, the girl's *rngiew* became that of a man's so that the *puri* could marry him.



Figure 7: Thwei Thowsan is the sacred place of the Sangkhini on the Rdiak River.

The authenticity of the *sangkhini* killing is established through the dream prophecy of Changro. However, narratives of this nature have become rarer now in the context of Christian conversions. All the *sangkhini* I have interviewed only stressed upon their benevolent nature, which is why they are accommodated into the fold of Khasi Christianity. Let us consider the previous interview with K.D. again: “No, I only try to do good to people in the community, I never harm anyone.” The benign aspects of *sangkhini* are stressed upon. In the ongoing encounter of tradition with modernity, these strategies may be seen as the mechanisms through which *sangkhini* are accepted into social belonging in the Nongtraï, Muliang, and Lyngngam Christian communities. But, in popular folk belief, when mortal sin (*sang* in the Khasi language) is committed, it is lightning, the weretiger, and the weresnake who are recognised as responsible upholders of justice. They have divine permission to kill such a person and, as such, a death that is recognised as a *sangkhini* killing is interpreted to be just. However, within this transformation tradition, the presence of rogue *sangkhini* who kill without reason is also acknowledged. I would like to clarify that *sang* is not sin as is understood in the Christian context. While robbery, assault etc., do qualify as

‘sin,’ the Khasi concept conceptualises *sang* to be a kind of action that has no remedy; a kind of action that cannot be forgiven. Thus, for example, murdering someone else without cause qualifies as *sang*, as well as marrying into the same clan.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2023, I carried out an interview with Dolishon Diengan, who is 62 years old and works as a farmer and healer. He lives in Upper Nongkyndang village near Nongmyndo. He narrated a peculiar story about the origin of *sangkhini* and the affiliation with the Diengan clan. (I may mention again that three *sangkhini* I interviewed come from the Diengan clan: Bisuroy, K.D. and Dolishon.)



Figure 8: Dolishon Diengan. Nongmyndo, March 2020

D.D. This our clan, our clan...We emerged from Kharduhsaw. Why we are called the Diengan clan!...We were chased out of Kharduhsaw, one man and one woman. The woman was pregnant, she was pregnant. They walked through a very dense and thick forest. They carried with them some food, some clothes to cover themselves and sleep in the forest. They slept each night in the forest. After nine days were passed, there was a huge tree with big roots. It was the Diengan tree. At that time, the man stopped there because the woman started to feel the pangs of childbirth. He said, “We will bear the child here; we will care for it here, we will use the tree leaves and wrap the child with it”. The child was born with ease and without any illness and brought a lot of joy for the parents. Then the father said, “we will stay here for three days and three nights until the mother is able to walk again.” The mother asked, “why should we stay here for three days? After childbirth, my stomach

feels light and at ease and I feel well and I can walk.” “If so, then we will stay here for two nights,” the father replied.

So, when the child was born under that tree, before the couple crossed over to Meghalaya, they decided to take the name of the Diengan tree as their clan name and ancestor. That’s how we got our clan name. The descendants became the Diengan clan.

An old man called our Diengan clan the *sangkhini* clan. *Te*,<sup>18</sup> to prove this he said, “you will see your species (the *sangkhini*) anyplace where there is a big river”. Then afterwards, the female progenitress of the Diengan clan gave birth to five children—two were male and two were female. At that time, in the month of May, when the first rains come, the second son said “Come, let us go to fish from a big river, because we want to eat fish.” The mother said, “We are the *sangkhini* clan. When you are at the river and there is a flash flood (*um saw*) don’t worry because the *sangkhini* is in the water. The water cannot take you or drown you. You can cross the river from any point because the *sangkhini* is there.”

The second son thus went to the river and he began to fish. He caught three fishes. He had crossed the big river and was fishing and he got three fishes. After he got three fishes, he was very hungry. And what would he do? There was no fire! He only had some rice. When this happened, the *sangkhini* took the form of a human male and came to speak with the second son.

“Why are you eating only rice? I am astonished! Why is it like this?” “Oh, my mother had told me beforehand that there is *sangkhini*! *Te*, he asked, “Who are you?” “I come from the same clan as you, I am *sangkhini*, I will take care and nurture you, wherever you will walk, I will take care and look after you. No *nongshohnoh*,<sup>19</sup> no tiger,<sup>20</sup> nothing will bother you because I will be with you. Do this: before you eat your meal, put your fish on a stone that is a bit raised.”

*Te*, as soon as the *sangkhini* had said this, he disappeared and sank into the depths of the water.

The boy thought, “why do I keep this fish on this raised stone, there is no fire to cook it.” *Te*, still he put the fish on the stone and he kept flipping the fish from one side to the other as if he was cooking it. After some time, perhaps half an hour, the fish had dried up and was well cooked. *Te*, the boy was astonished, why this happened. When he had eaten the rice, he ate it together with the fish, he also drank some water.

After he had finished eating the meal, *ani*,<sup>21</sup> there was a huge flash flood that took place. The rain began to come down heavily, and he took shelter on the riverbank. His village was on the other side, but he was on this side. Then he wondered how he would cross that river in order to get back home. He had caught the fishes: two and three, thus he had caught five fishes. And then, he wanted to hurry back home because the sun had set already. He was in a dilemma as to how he would cross that big river!

At that time, again, he heard a voice: “I have told you, you can cross this river, for I am there!” It was the *Sangkhini*. The boy stopped in his tracks and again wondered how he would go through the huge deluge of water that the river had swollen into. Again, he heard the words “cross the river, nothing will happen to you because I am there”.

That man thought that, if he was really the *Sangkhini* clan, then he would walk across the water and nothing would happen. *Te*, he said, “*Ko sangkhini*, we are the *sangkhini* clan. Don’t obstruct me as I walk across the water, this huge river. Nothing will happen to me because you are there. I believe strongly that our clan is the true *sangkhini* clan”.

Then he carried his basket with the five fishes and cross the river. The *sangkhini* became a huge bridge that was wide and big for the man to walk over. After he had crossed over to the other side, this *sangkhini* again, spoke, “Look I belong to your clan, whenever you venture into the mountain or the river, I am always with you. I will only look after the Diengan clan. Other clans are not my responsibility.”

At that moment, only the mouth of the *sangkhini* was visible (gestures to the mouth). He had the likeness of a man with the visage of a cat. “Henceforth, believe in me, and our clan affinity.”

This narrative is primarily oriented towards establishing clan hierarchies with attention directed to the fact that it was the prerogative of the Diengan clan that is legitimised as the ‘*sangkhini* clan.’ Dolishon narrates this story as an origin narrative of the association of human and *sangkhini*. In another conversation that I have not included in this write-up, Dolishon rationalises that the *sangkhini* likes and associates with the Diengan clan, because they are so “hygienic”<sup>22</sup> and close to water. But other stories from other clans, like Ñianglang, also narrate a counter claim to be the *sangkhini* clan with the first *sangkhini* being born from the toenail of a man named Malcha.

### **Multispecies Relationships and Multiple Realms**

In this article so far, I have described and provided examples for the transformation traditions pertaining to weresnakes. There is no previous work done on *sangkhini*, except a pamphlet written in the Khasi vernacular by Lostin Lawrence Kharbani. In this little pamphlet, Kharbani records a different origin of the *sangkhini*, through the narrative of a man named Stepiong, who was married to the sister of the main *Sangkhini*. What emerges dominantly from the narrative presented in Kharbani’s pamphlet is the life

Stepiong led after he married the sister of the *Sangkhini*. There is a description of an alternate reality that *sangkhini* inhabit, wherein time moves slowly. When Stepiong had the desire to visit his earthly family, seven years had passed since his disappearance, whereas only about a month passed in the *Sangkhini* realm.

The interview excerpts presented above demonstrate multispecies entanglements in realities that exist parallelly with the mundane human one. Multiple species: flora, fauna, elements, all engage with each other to organise indigenous knowledge through the medium of water which is the pathway through which the ecology, alternate or parallel realities, the body, and the land around are mediated. In this way, Khasis sense the world around them through specific tradition tropes that recur across the oral narratives, and storied places. In this article, I touch specifically on water as tradition trope and as a key motif and how it interacts with other aspects of Khasi ontology. The clan is connected with the Khasi sense of the world around them. The only way to rejoin one's ancestors and to *bam kwai ha dwar u blei* (*lit.* to chew betel nut at the doorway of God), is to fulfil one's duty towards God, the signs of which may be seen through entrail divination, and in extreme cases to invoke *jutang*, so that the premise of *ka ieng rangbah u brieu, ka ap jutang u blei*, (*lit.* God waits for man to fulfill the covenant) is fulfilled. I mention this phrase because it is only used in ritual performance and is “a cornerstone in Khasi religious philosophy” (personal correspondence, Íasaid Khongjee, Khasi tradition bearer, 6 March 2020, Cherrapunjee). By this, Khongjee explained that in the circumstance that there is a grave and heavy *cause*, a human mediator in the form of a ritual performer reminds the creator of the law, or *jutang* (also covenant) which is that life is given to creation by the creator, hence, He (the creator) must preserve it. Further, Khongjee, commented that,

The whole nature is the manifestation of the creator's desire that nature shall be born. The word ‘manifestation’ fits well into our philosophy though we use the word *Nongthaw* [one who creates], a word that creates duality of existence of cause and effect. The desire (*jingthrang—jingsliang jong ka hok ban long ka pyrthei—ka Mariang, ka Longbrieu, longjingthaw* [lit. the desire—longing of truth/righteousness/or a fundamental right for the becoming of the world—ecology, humanity, creation]) of *ka Hok* [here, implies the Supreme Being] that nature be manifested. So, the appearance of this nature itself is the consummation of that desire */Jutang*.

Thus, nature is a manifestation of the longing of the supreme being [*U Blei*]. But nature is made of composite portions—ecology, human persons,

creations—that function together as a whole and fulfil their own ontological orientations.<sup>23</sup>

I refer now to an ethnographic vignette to elaborate upon my next point: I was walking along the main path in Nongmyndo village on 21 April 2020, when I met a villager, Harjit Tynhiang, who was carrying a great weight of freshly harvested broom crop leaves. I was accompanied by my interlocutors Celestina and young weresnake Shembianglin. They pointed out that I should ask Harjit about his experience with *sangkhini*. He told me that he dreamed that the rock on which he had built his house stood on the site of the marketplace of the *sangkhini*. He dreamed of the *sangkhini* one night, who begged him not to touch the site that the house was built on with a machete or any iron implements because it would hurt his (the *sangkhini*'s) body. In exchange for not using a machete or metal implements, the *sangkhini* agreed not to move his body (thereby protecting Harjit's home from earthquakes).



Figure 9: Harjit Tynhiang. Nongmyndo, 2020



Figure 10: Harjit's home. Nongmyndo, 2020

### **Water Is Knowledge: Concluding Remarks**

This article has illustrated the previously undocumented or researched tradition of *sangkhini* persons through the lenses of multiple species relationality. The connections between water, landscape, and the human body intertwine to manifest into the solution of the *sangkhini* person who helps the community cope with the devastation and destruction wrought on by nature. The overwhelming role that water has in the indigenous ways of knowing forced a rethinking of how to contextualise or interpret this everyday element.<sup>24</sup> There is no space in this write-up to outline how water in its non-mundane nature performs multiple tasks among other Khasi communities. But, to illustrate: among War communities in South Khasi Hills, water is a pathway for ancestors; in North Khasi Hills, water is the divinity Ñiaring who houses inside her the 30 kinds of illness that afflict humankind; in East Khasi Hills, water is home and pathway to the realm of seductive water entities, *puri*, who lures people to their madness and consequent deaths; in Jaintia Hills, river deities are the most powerful entities that demand sacrifice and ritual in exchange for their divine intervention in the affairs of humans. And of course, among the Nongtraï communities, water is *sangkhini*. I return to the concepts within neo animism as outlined by Harvey, wherein he isolates the qualities of reciprocity, relationality and mutuality to be key markers of indigenous worldviews that defy religious categorisation. From this view then, the Khasi indigenous religion, (that I may even call a set of worldviews,) is comprised of

relational and reciprocal relationships between all species of sentient beings that exist together. This mutuality, however, is not peaceful, beautiful, or harmonious. The Khasi do not live in a peaceful or harmonious relationship with their ecology: this relationship is punctuated with death, destruction, and bloody sacrifice. I pinpoint this aspect to highlight the fact that contrary to idealised views of the way that indigenous people exist in the world, Northeast Indian indigenous people's relationship with 'nature' is fraught with attempts at survival: people exist despite nature, not in harmony with it.



Figure 11: The Thlumuvi waterfall is where the progenitress, (named Lih Dakha) of the Chiefs of Sutnga emerged from. She was said to be a “fish woman.”

On the first level of analysis, the answer to the question of why water is so crucial to the continuity of *sangkhini* tradition, in the context of Christian conversions, could be because of the geographical locale wherein these transformations take place. I may mention that Mawsynram in Khasi Hills of Meghalaya receives the highest rainfall per annum in the world. It is not surprising that the density of water folklore is highly evolved in such contexts. Thus, *sangkhini* serve a function: to become bridges for people to cross over rivers. Water is a generic resource that sources the authority of tradition of narratives about *sangkhini*. It provides a trope that is at once easily identifiable and recognisable because water is also ordinary and part of everyday activity and living. But this necessity and the inextricability of the part that water plays in all aspects of human life, even in human biology, furthers the notion of its ontological nature. Then, water is deity and

embodied by *sangkhini* who are at once human and water. When the forces of nature become uncontrollable and threatening, the *sangkhini* steps in.

Secondly, *sangkhini* establish community in an indirect manner by coming to help each other in the parallel as well as mundane realities. Thus, the alternate reality where *sangkhini* go to when they transform constitutes a reality that is parallel to the one we inhabit, and is governed by its own rules and traditions. An injury to the *sangkhini* in the parallel reality results in injury to the physical body. For example, when the higher-status *sangkhini* fall ill due to their exertions during the rainy season, it is only another higher-*sangkhini* who can help: K.D. helps Bistilin Sohmat by healing her, but at the moment K.D. is getting older and thus Bistilin is left without help in the mundane reality. Relationships, not determined through kinship, exist and are upheld in the *sangkhini* world. In the event of a death of a weresnake, death rituals are held in the mundane as well as in the parallel reality. All *sangkhini* come to pay their respects to the deceased. Another act that establishes community among weresnakes is a play which sometimes has serious consequences. Competitions are held as to who can swim faster, as well as how strong one is. Water is where all such narratives originate from and also constitutes the scene of all activity for *sangkhini*.

Lastly, I acknowledge the invaluable help, assistance, and hospitality of village members wherever I went for fieldwork. This documentation and interpretation would not be possible without the constant support and cooperation of my *sangkhini* friends.



Figure 12: My interlocutors in Nongmyndo. March 2020

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While the classification of what ‘religions’ are usually follows scripted traditions, I consciously use ‘religion’ to designate the orally transmitted cosmology and ritual practice among the Khasi.
- <sup>2</sup> The Seng Khasi is a socio-cultural organization that was instituted in 1899 by 16 Khasi intellectuals in order to promote and preserve the interests of the Khasi religion.
- <sup>3</sup> The supreme being is *Blei*. The words to denote the highest entity are *U Blei, ka Blei, ki Blei, lit.* (He) God, (she) God, (they) God.
- <sup>4</sup> To clarify, while weresnakes (people who shapeshift into snakes) are called *sangkhini*, the guardian deity of the *sangkhini* is also named *sangkhini*. In every case, I explain whom I refer to.
- <sup>5</sup> “Special Purpose Vehicle should be created for decongesting traffic in Shillong: Report.” *The Economic Times*. 13.04.2023. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/special-purpose-vehicle-should-be-created-for-decongesting-traffic-in-shillong-report/articleshow/98612719.cms?from=mdr#>. Accessed on 19.07.2023.b
- <sup>6</sup> “EKH DC says study found local cabbies, buses main cause of traffic jam in Shillong; Odd-even system has eased congestion.” *HubNews* 12.06.2023. Available at: <https://hubnetwork.in/ekh-dc-says-study-found-local-cabbies-buses-main-cause-of-traffic-jam-in-shillong-odd-even-system-has-eased-congestion/> Accessed on 19.07.2023.
- <sup>7</sup> Here I mean Khasi persons as being part of the Khasi ontology with its oral traditions, stories and inclusive cosmologies.
- <sup>8</sup> See also Lyngdoh “Wealth.”
- <sup>9</sup> In anthropology, sociology, and in the social sciences and humanities in general, nature is the domain of the non-human.
- <sup>10</sup> For these areas, the closest urban center is Nongstoin, which is the district headquarters of West Khasi Hills.

- <sup>11</sup> Mouse transformation tradition is a topic that is prevalent in this region but which I have not delved extensively into. Additionally, there are gecko transformations, *ksar* (an animal belonging to the cat family) transformation, wereeagles, werepigs, and werebirds.
- <sup>12</sup> I carried out all interviews presented in this article, including their transcription and translation into English.
- <sup>13</sup> Puri are entities that dwell in the water realm and are narrated to be beautiful and seductive.
- <sup>14</sup> In Khasi cosmology, *blei* is the word for God and it can be denominated by pronouns like *u* (lit. he), *ka* (lit. she) and *ki* (lit. they).
- <sup>15</sup> See <https://themeghalayan.com/three-fishermen-missing-from-west-khasi-hills/> and <https://themeghalayan.com/decomposed-body-of-missing-fisherman-found-after-one-month/>
- <sup>16</sup> See Lyngdoh “Tiger.”
- <sup>17</sup> This female *sangkhini* did not want her name mentioned, hence I refer to her via her initials.
- <sup>18</sup> *Te* is a Khasi exclamation to denote a continuity or a pause.
- <sup>19</sup> Generally it refers to the helpers of the demon-deity Thlen who requires human blood in exchange for wealth. But in this context as is used by Dolishon, it could mean people who carry malicious intent.
- <sup>20</sup> There can sometimes be rogue weretigers or natural tigers who also intent to harm. See <https://datadoi.ee/handle/33/573>
- <sup>21</sup> Khasi expression used to convey surprise.
- <sup>22</sup> In terms of cleanliness, etc.
- <sup>23</sup> Bah Iasaid told me that by this he means that every being must do what they have been created to do. Thus, fish will swim in water bodies, birds will fly in the sky, and thusly.
- <sup>24</sup> See <https://datadoi.ee/handle/33/574>

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