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## **Lore and the Process of Tradition: Locating the Place of Belief Narratives in Ka Phur Nongjri and Sohbar**

### **Abstract**

Since the earliest times, the villages of Nongjri and Sohbar, located in the Southern Khasi Hills of North-Eastern India, have had their own religious ceremonies, customs, ways of behaving and beliefs that they share in their practice and narration. Their beliefs in certain village deities are linked with the well-being of the entire village, and are said to have existed from the time these villages were established. In the beliefs of the inhabitants of Nongjri and the village of Sohbar, the deities, manifest themselves in various performances and folksongs, and therefore, have become part of the performance itself. Deities, often in the form of human beings, engage in conversation with the villagers. Folklore also tells us that during festivities the approval of the celebrations by village deities becomes the key aspect to foretell the particular nature of the coming year.

The lore gathered from the places considered for this study would provide us with a new perspective on belief narratives existing in the Khasi community, while continually locating the position of lore and various processes of tradition in the socio-cultural and religious milieu of both Nongjri and Sohbar. The narratives explored in this paper will also provide – in the Khasi cultural context – the essence of War-Khasi beliefs and rituals that have remained largely undocumented.

**Keywords:** Khasi Folklore, War-Khasi, Phur Sohbar, Phur Nongjri, Belief Narratives

### **Introduction**

On a field visit in the last week of July 2018 to Sohbar, one of the oldest villages established on the southern slopes of Meghalaya, located at a distance of 65.7 kilometres from the capital city Shillong, and once recognised as the traditional War-Khasi kingdom of Sohbar or Hima Sohbar, it was learnt that Sohbar is a place where “*there are thirteen rites for the twelve months*” (Mr. Wanjop



Khongmawpat, Sordar [Chief] Raid, [raj land] Sohbar).<sup>1</sup> In a land where the number of rites and rituals exceed the number of months in a calendar year by one, the study of even one rite alone will involve numerous aspects of storytelling, cultural experience, history, religion and performance.

This hamlet is home to the dominant indigenous cultural group known as the *War* or *War-Khasi* which is one of the groups that makes up the Khasi collective of *Khynriam*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, *War*, *Lyngngam*, *Maram* and the no longer existing *Diko*.<sup>2</sup> This small rustic village has a unique design which allows for only one entry and exit – a design which could structurally identify it as a fort. However, in recent times, the construction of roads has partially opened up the village, allowing it to have more than one entry and exit points. The Khasi word in use for a fort is *Kut*. The village of Sohbar, in the months following the Indian monsoon, welcomes its visitors with a massive and mesmerising non-perennial waterfall at Sohkhyleng located at the primary entrance to the village. The typical War-Khasi village layout of homes constructed in an almost vertical incline and decline cannot be missed, and further down the slope lies the plains of Bangladesh.

This village offered stories that expressed the soul of its very existence. With the permission of the *Sordar Raid* (chief, raj land), Mr. Wanjop Kharmawpat, the journey began with a simple enquiry into the nature of the village: its stories, legends, history, religious beliefs and customs. It was there that an account previously not known to folkloric research in the North-eastern part of India reveals itself through the words of Nancy Japang (female, 95 years old, 2018). Through her, it was learnt that the village follows and adheres to a strict and rigid tradition that has resisted the changes brought about by modernity. I begin by narrating a personal experience she related to me.

*“This village has seen and forgotten the ways of its ancestors and witnessed the advent of the British, their abolition of our traditions and customs (referring to a religious rite known as Tob-tan that is performed at a location called Mamsyrti Raja – A.W.J.) and has continue to retain the most crucial part of the village in its religion (Ka Niam Sohbar). Our ancestral father too was a priest from the Shullai clan and participated in various religious activities. One that I recall from my grandmother’s stories was that our family would offer a black bull in sacrifice. But we don’t do that now. We have converted a long time back. Many in this village did as well. But there remain the old Gods that made this village possible, that are still worshipped and remain tremendously powerful.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Proofreader of the article: George Seel.

<sup>2</sup> Nongkynrih 2007: vii.

It was also discovered that the villages of Sohbar and Nongjri are similar; the latter was an erstwhile province of *Hima* (traditional kingdom) Sohbar before its division by the East India Company following the Anglo-Khasi War of 1829. Nongjri village, located at a distance of 75.8 kilometres from Shillong is even closer to Bangladesh than Sohbar. This village is surrounded with lush forest and at its centre stands a magnificent Banyan tree, hundreds of years old, considered to have existed even before the village was established. This tree is also considered a place for the worship of the harvest that still takes place today. The connection between Nongjri and Sohbar is that despite their political division, they continue to share the celebration of *Ka Phur*<sup>3</sup>. Mr. Banrilang Rynnga<sup>4</sup> expands on the nature of '*Ka Phur*' and its importance in '*Ka Niam Sohbar*', which by extension also belonged to Nongjri because it was introduced by a priest from Sohbar who married and eventually settled down at Nongjri. Rynnga also notes that *Ka Niam Sohbar* is not the same as '*Ka Niam Khasi*' or the Khasi religion in general.

This shared legacy between Nongjri and Sohbar prompted another field trip in October 2018 which led to a meeting with Mr. Khywin Sing Dkhar (male, 89 years old, 2018) of Nongjri village, who said the following:

*"Yes, the stories of U Woh (U Woh Rieng) among others do exist here as in Sohbar, but I cannot tell you them. This village was not built by human hands alone. It started through a pact between U Nongseng (Initiator) or the first settlers and the Grandfather (U Woh Rieng). It is based on the first conversation between U Nongseng nongdang- u kni bad u kpa<sup>5</sup> – conversations between Woh and the first settlers in the presence of other forest deities with whose permission the villagers established their settlements. From that day began the pact, the exchange and the need for our religion to remain rigid."*

He also added that when you look at their religion you must know, that

*"an act (the performance of a religious ritual – A.W.J.) is just an act until its meaning is truly understood. The whole practice itself is an exchange that symbolises what pans beyond the idea of a religion but acts as a bond, through practice, between man and God.' This is why our religion is rigid and binding. To alter or change it is to destroy it. It is a mandatory requirement and a necessity."*

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<sup>3</sup> Ka Phur is a socio-cultural and religious practice of '*Ka Niam Sohbar*', or the religion of Sohbar, which is not connected to ka '*Niam Khasi*' or the Khasi religion.

<sup>4</sup> Rynnga 2012: 11.

<sup>5</sup> Often these words are used as synonyms to indicate the important role the first settlers played as fathers and uncles.

The narratives shared during those two visits prompted the need to look further into the notion of tradition as both lore and process. As lore, these narratives are still relatively unheard in popular Khasi discourse on belief and religion. Even as a cultural or religious process, there is still much that has not been studied. We will find, through this paper, that the lore collected from Nongjri and Sohbar have remained and become the backbone of a continuing practice that takes the shape of a rigid religion, alive in narration and performances and customs, and continuing with time. The role of narratives in the cases of both Nongjri and Sohbar are studied, not only to highlight the worldview of the two villages but to justify the required and necessary role of the supernatural and to understand the essential nature of such a tradition.

By applying existing notions of the term ‘tradition’ suggested by Sims and Stephens as “features that groups rely on to maintain their current sense of group identity”<sup>6</sup>, the attempt made by this study is to analyse the process of tradition in the ‘*Ka Phur*’ of both Nongjri and Sohbar, and to better understand folk narratives and their implications for their society. In doing so, we make an enquiry into various aspects of tradition by locating the role of narratives, the function of continuity, a sense of identity and the possibility of a potential threat to tradition in the context of contemporary Nongjri and Sohbar.

### **The relationship between Nongjri and Sohbar**

To comprehend the process of tradition in the context of both Nongjri and Sohbar it is imperative that we first perceive the relationship between the two villages in order to recognize the dynamics behind the exchange of tradition and the religious practise of ‘*Ka Phur*’. It should be noted once more that the villages of Nongjri and Sohbar were once part of the same traditional setup that is known to the Khasi as ‘*Hima*’ (traditional kingdom), and which operated prior to the British administration on the southern slopes of Meghalaya. Following the Anglo Khasi War of 1829, Nongjri was carved out of the Hima of Sohbar but their cultural ties remained and were strengthened by the shared religious activity of ‘*Ka Phur*’.

The folktales that emerge from the two villages offer accounts of the nature of the villages – their formation, spirit and identity – creating a distinct space for themselves among the many villages on the southern slopes of

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<sup>6</sup> Sims–Stephens 2011: 70.

Meghalaya known as Ri-War<sup>7</sup>. A deity, recognised as ‘U Woh (lit. grand-father) Riang’, is an enduring part of the cultural milieu of both Nongjri and Sohbar. He is one of the two villages’ chief patron deities whose place in the community is continuously expanding and elaborately designed in the folkloric domain and in the practice of religious festivities.

One such religious festivity of Nongjri and Sohbar is ‘*Ka Phur*’, our subject for study, which takes place annually and is exchanged between one village and the other. That is, if ‘*Ka Phur*’ takes place in Sohbar one year, then the next annual *Phur* must take place in the village of Nongjri. The roots of this religious practise can be traced to Sohbar while its great importance is also felt at Nongjri, which will be discussed later. Although, ‘*Ka Phur*’ is attributed to the village of Sohbar in terms of its origin, both Nongjri and Sohbar have been chosen to study the immense space and value this religious practise has in the socio-cultural and religious atmosphere of the two villages.

The cultural and religious environments between the two villages are in sharp contrast with one another, apart from ‘*Ka Phur*’, which they share. Nongjri has its own way of articulating its tradition – its cultural and religious affairs are based on its design, just as is the case with Sohbar. While Nongjri also has ‘*Ka Niam Iew/Hat Nongjri*’ (religion of the market) and another religious festivity based on offering and prayers associated to the ‘*Diengjri*’ (banyan tree) which is a monumental tree rooted at what is considered the centre of the village, the village of Sohbar also has ka ‘*Niam Beh Ksuid Dkhar*’ (religion to purge evil spirits) and ‘*Ka Khang Kut Shnong*’ (closing of the entrance) among others, as narrated by one of the informants, Bedos Khongngai (male, 84 years old, 2018). As mentioned earlier, ‘there are thirteen rites for the twelve months’ in Sohbar. These festivities differentiate the villages from one another, while ‘*Ka Phur*’ connects them.

Oral narratives, as articulated by Nancy Japang and Bedos Khongngai, also suggest that the ‘*Ka Phur*’ was introduced to Nongjri by an elderly ‘*hng-doh*’ (priest) from the village of Sohbar who eventually settled down in Nongjri after marrying a woman from that village. This is how ‘*Ka Phur*’, as it is today, has become a shared socio-cultural and religious phenomenon between the two villages, adding to their relationship with one another. The exchange that is carried out by Nongjri and Sohbar from one year to the next is also symbolic of the deep bond the two villages have shared right since the time the two villages were essentially within the same traditional setup.

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<sup>7</sup> This is a term used to denote the southern slopes of Meghalaya.

## **Belief narratives on Ka Phur-Lore**

E. W. Chyne<sup>8</sup>, in the chapter on ‘Ka Hima Sohbar’, describes in details U Woh Rieng as ‘U Ryngekew U Basa’ or the village chief patron deity who oversees the well-being and affairs of the village. It was also recounted that he would take the form of an elderly man and engage in conversations with the villagers from time to time. According to field sources, U Woh also has a scar on the left side of his body caused by the negligence of one of the villagers – remembered as U Woh Sihon – who did not take care when performing slash and burn close to Woh’s sacred grove.

U Woh also commands a very high place of respect and awe because of his nature, as he is projected as being both a mortal and a divine entity. The human stature that is attributed to him as an elderly man stems from various accounts of meetings and interactions that are continually articulated in lore even today. From Nancy Japang, it was learnt that while a great many things are lost from her memory, what she can recall helps to create an idea of one of the chief patron deities Sohbar believes in. She narrated the sacred nature and the role these divine beings (*The Shan Shnong*) or patron deities embody for the village even today. She noted:

*“The Shan Shnong included U Woh Rieng, U Phan Jyrweit, Syntei and Rajuli who dwell in the four parts of the village. Phan Jyrweit is also considered the son of U Woh Rieng and he looked like any other man in human form. Just like U Woh. His abode is close to the entrance of the village beside the waterfall at Sobkhylleng. I also remember how after the ritual we would proceed in a procession that is meant to guide these divine beings back to their abode where they would disappear. This was way back then, and it was before the Seng Khasi<sup>9</sup> ever existed. These were his children (the Children of U Woh Rieng). The village exists in communion with the divines.”*

On further enquiry, Nancy Japang noted:

*“It was said that U Woh would sometimes appear like an old man and engage in dialogue with the villagers. People knew it was him and believed that he was there to protect them.<sup>10</sup> There is a sacred grove too, ‘U Maw Loh Rieng’ which is considered his abode. He is said to have a non-human family including five children, who appear in human form. But as a deity, he takes part with the crowd in ‘Ka Phur’ and would leave signs of approval or otherwise.”* (Even

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<sup>8</sup> Chyne 1994: 39–40.

<sup>9</sup> This is a religious socio-cultural organization of the indigenous Khasi belonging to the Niam Khasi/Khasi religion with the aim of protecting, preserving and promoting the customs and tradition of the Khasi people, which was established on November 23, 1899.

<sup>10</sup> Chyne 1994: 34–40.

today, U Woh's family are believed to participate in the annual festivities, notably the second day of the event called *Ka Phur Bab*. – A.W.J.)

She also recounted one other story:

*"It was a long time ago that a group of thieves were heading towards Sohbar to steal but by some providence, never reached this village. They reached Laittyra (a village situated 1.7 kilometres away – A.W.J) and they were caught. People then believed that whenever they leave their homes for their fields, U Woh will take care of their homes whenever they called out to him. We don't do that now."*

From another informant named Antonio Tynnaw (male, 76 years, 2018), it was also learnt that the earlier narrative offered by Nancy Japang has become a very important part of the religion of Sohbar. Although numerous scholars, among them Major P. R. T. Gurdon in *The Khasis*<sup>11</sup>, and prominent Khasi historian Hamlet Barch Ngap Kynta in *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*<sup>12</sup>, are in accord that the Khasi did not have an idea of an institutionalised religion before the arrival of Christian missionaries, the narratives recounted from Sohbar tell us that some villages did practice and follow their own vernacular religion. However, Mr. Tynnaw was not able to narrate as much lore as related by Nancy Japang for these stories were unknown to him. Much traditional and cultural lore seems to be lost and unknown, to even a number of the elderly.<sup>13</sup> He did, however, narrate that:

*"Ka Phur definitely has its story, as U Woh Riang and all the Shan shnong have their own. The fact that we have our Shan shnong is reason enough to perform our divinations and ceremonies. But that is not all, for the divine spirits have their own roles to play and of them all, the most prominent is U Woh Riang because he interacts with the people and the stories tell us that. He is important in the stories and in the religion too. He is the patron deity who reveals to us in divination and in the Phur, as the others do. But I am a little younger than her (Nancy Japang) and do not know many of these stories and have forgotten some too. But there is a format: there comes the divination first, followed by teachings and preparations of the young, and finally the Phur."*

There has always been a particular format, strictly adhered to and followed, for hundreds of years if not more. It is not only the performance of the *Phur* and its success that is significant for the village; it is in its prepa-

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<sup>11</sup> Gurdon 2016: 105–116.

<sup>12</sup> Barch Ngap Kynta 2016: 354–376.

<sup>13</sup> After consulting at least two more elderly people from the village, it became obvious that there was a great lack in the articulation and preservation of cultural narratives.

ration, right from the days of performing the divinations that the Phur begins to materialise. When the Phur is conducted by either Sohbar or Nongjri, it does not become a cultural and religious affair of the former or the latter alone. Mainly people following the vernacular faith from both villages participate in the Phur and this has been one of the most distinctive features of this religious celebration.

E. W. Chyne (1994), in the chapter '*Ka Hima Sohbar*', also notes that U Woh Rieng as 'U Ryngkew U Basa' participates in '*Ka Phur*' which further supports the narrative from the informant and the published material that U Woh could present himself both as a man and a divine entity. The position 'U Woh' holds in the cultural context of both Nongjri and Sohbar is immense. According to belief narratives, shared by both Nancy Japang and Antonio Tynnaw, U Woh Rieng, along with his family, would participate in the festivities of '*Ka Phur*', donning the traditional attire of the War-Khasi. His children would participate in the dance known as '*Shad Kynthet*' and the '*Shad Khalek*' along with the youth from the village, while U Woh and his wife would be seated along with the musicians and the drum masters. On the other hand, not many narratives are available about U Woh from Nongjri for two main reasons: the first is that Woh is situated close to and directly linked to Sohbar and hence more narratives exist in Sohbar than in Nongjri and the second is that the religious ethos of Nongjri would not allow for our informants to divulge details on the various narratives that could be available about U Woh.

The main reason for focussing on U Woh within this study on lore and religion through '*Ka Phur*' is that U Woh is directly linked to '*Ka Phur*' itself. He is the main deity that presides over the festivity, and although he is not the only deity invoked in the prayers and offerings of both Nongjri and Sohbar, he holds a position of great importance. According to both Chyne and Ryngnga, U Woh responds to the festivities and it is usually acknowledged that it is he who leaves his mark on the festivities through sounds near the village's Umneng (stream), or an almost white-washed Maw Loh Rieng (his abode), as a sign of his approval of the celebration following a procession that generally takes place to escort the divine spirit back to their abode.

### **Origin and practise of Ka Phur – The process of tradition**

According to the folkloric tradition of Sohbar, the origin of '*Ka Phur*' is linked to the establishment of Sohbar itself. According to Khywin Sing Dkhar of Nongjri village, the origin of a belief to a Khasi is associated with



the foundation of an establishment: in this case the village of Sohbar. He also opined that for a Khasi, a formal conversation with the spirits and the elements of the land is an important factor when founding a village. In the same manner, it can be said that Sohbar and the practise of 'Ka Phur' extends from the beginning of the village itself, with its various village deities forming the central figures for the practice.

In the case of Sohbar, the central figures making the religious endeavours consist of Woh Rieng, Phan Jyrweit, Syntei and Rajuli as the dominant entities that cater for the well-being and protection of the life in the village in general and its people in particular. These divine entities serve as the pillars the village turns to. They have their own roles to play in ensuring the proper balance for life to continue and flourish in the village. Their invocation at religious festivities is symbolic of their value to the village. Their presence is what makes the village exist.

'Ka Phur' was introduced to Nongjri by one of Sohbar's priests, who married a woman from the village of Nongjri and eventually settled there, as stated above. Another feature of the belief narratives associated with 'Ka Phur' is that, at Nongjri, U Woh Rieng is the only deity that is actually named in field surveys done for this study. However, it should be noted here that the absence of any other named deities does not imply that U Woh is the only patron deity of the village. It is in the nature of the village of Nongjri itself that the identities of various divine spirits, even their names, are to be kept secret and contained only within the village of Nongjri. The very nature of this secrecy, mystery and rigidity is what gives the 'Ka Phur' practised at Nongjri a very distinct flavour from that of Sohbar, while its religious fervour and essence remains essentially the same. However, in religious festivities and prayers, the names of all the divine spirits associated with the two villages respectively are invoked.

The informant Mr. Tynnaw, when talking about the structure, format and rigidity of *Ka Phur* also noted that:

*"Ka Phur requires divination in order to have a proper start. It is required for setting a date fit for the celebration and worship. This takes place on Saturdays except for the days when the Iewdub market is held.<sup>14</sup> Ka Phur also includes the Ka Phur Shad Miet (lit. the performance of the evening) where the young are instructed and taught for two whole weeks in preparation for the same. Syndat or Divination requires seven days while the Phur itself requires three days to complete."*

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<sup>14</sup> Traditional market day on which divination should not be performed.

Considering ‘*Ka Phur*’ from the perspective of a socio-cultural and religious performance, three main categories of activity can be classified:

- Rutlang: A ritualistic performance where the first bounty of fruits and harvests from the land are given as offerings to the Gods (no documentation permitted).
- Phur Bah: Beh Shalai – Shad Shalai (no documentation permitted).
- Phur Lasu : The last celebratory dance (documentation permitted).

The first two categories, which involve the main aspect of the belief and religious practice in U Woh and the numerous deities of either Nongjri or Sohbar, depending on where the Phur is taking place, are articulated and shaped into formal practice, and do not permit any form of audio-visual documentation, indicating yet another rigidity of practice. On the other hand, documentation is possible when it comes to *Phur Lasu*, which is a more culturally inclusive performance that is not too deeply involved in religious performances. It is an open arena for the village in its entirety to be a part of its own cultural life. This is one of the numerous reasons we may take into account in noting the uniqueness and peculiarity of this religious belief and ritual. Despite its uniqueness, the *Phur* is often unheard of and much less spoken about in popular discourse on the nature of the religion and religious beliefs of the Khasi collective.

### **Socio-cultural and religious significance**

Considering the dimensions of the belief narratives associated with the practice of ‘*Ka Phur*’ the words Khywin Sing Dkhar used earlier to discuss the nature of religion should be noted: “*An act is just an act until its meaning is truly understood. The whole practice itself is an exchange that symbolizes what pans beyond the idea of a religion, but acts as a bond*”. This explains the deep socio-cultural and religious ties which exist between the ‘*Nongseng*’ (founder/initiator) of the established Nongjri and Sohbar, and also the conversations between ‘U Woh’ and the first settlers in the presence of other forest deities whom the initiator seeks out before establishing their settlements, which is an important constituent in the existence and continuation of ‘*Ka Phur Sobbar/Nongjri*’ today.

The exchange that is presented through ‘*Ka Phur*’ suggests the significance of a rigid Man-God relationship that is deeply linked to the land and the Khasi collective ethos as a whole, as Khywin Dkhar himself suggested. This relationship is no longer a new phenomenon in Khasi religious discourse. It

is also not the performing of the rituals and the articulation of numerous narratives that is socially or culturally important, but rather understanding and acting on the bond or the pact established between Man and God on the southern slopes of Meghalaya. This bond needs articulation: Man performs his rituals, and the divines reveal in signs and symbols meanings that have deep implications for the whole society, mainly in the form of their well-being, harvest, protection from famine, prosperity and good will. Hence, '*Ka Phur*', which manifests the idea of the belief in U Woh into a palpable reality, takes shape. While the village performs the '*Phur*', the deity reveals his satisfaction or dissatisfaction through signs and sounds at Umneng or at 'U Maw Loh Riang' (the abode of U Who).

As indicated earlier, stringent measures are taken not only to maintain rigidity in practice but also not to allow audio-visual documentation to take place, apart from *Phur Lasu*. For Nongjri and Sohbar, '*Ka Phur*' is not only a ritualistic performance. In fact, there is a need to preserve the inviolability and purity of the religion of Sohbar and Nongjri through '*Ka Phur*'. The cultural spaces that the divine entities of the two villages occupy are exceptionally large. The fact that the villages are not willing to detach themselves from them and have a policy of taking whatever steps that are necessary to protect the integrity and form of this socio-cultural and religious performance of '*Ka Phur*', confirms its significance.

Memorates and legends regarding U Woh and numerous deities that are associated with the cultural environment of the two villages continue to weave and colour existing belief narratives, especially those concerning U Woh and his interactions with the village. Signs and symbols take on the utmost importance in creating a concrete position for beliefs which are often found to be fulfilled within the cultural spaces of the two villages.

### **Continuity, identity and tradition**

When we consider the continuation of folk narratives in the context of these two villages, it can be seen that there has been a mass erosion of folk memory and lore. It is not only that the elderly have forgotten the stories they grew up with, they have also not shared a considerable amount of these stories with the youth of the village. From the field visits and the number of informants that were interviewed, it was evident that the folk tradition in the form of lore is at great risk of disappearance. Even the accounts provided in this brief paper will never be able to contend with just how much tradition has already been lost. However, when we consider the process of tradition in

the case of ‘*Ka Phur*’ from the perspective of a living performing tradition, it was noticed that the rigid attitude towards documentation and the insistence on repetitive practice as it was performed hundreds of years ago has helped and aided the continued survival of this tradition.

Toelken’s *The Dynamics of Folklore* highlights that

“[t]here will always be, in an informal setting, a number of people who remember parts of various traditions... they are active bearers... of tradition, want very much to express themselves and their lore in a communicative, satisfying way...as time goes on, [so] that traditions will maintain their viability or change so that they can survive or die off.”<sup>15</sup>

To Nongjri and Sohbar, *Ka Phur* is this expression of tradition which is maintained exclusively by those who bear it. It is in its performance that the cultural memory is articulated and preserved, even though many associated narratives have already been lost to time.

Similarly, Sims and Stephens’ *Living Folklore* suggested the importance of repetition and continuity in the process of tradition:

“Repetition is important in establishing continuity, since a group repeats something because it matters to the group; if it isn’t meaningful, it won’t be repeated, and if it isn’t repeated, it won’t become a tradition. Continuity doesn’t mean sameness or exactness... continuity refers to the threads of meaning and significance that connect traditions with groups.”<sup>16</sup>

*Ka Phur* is repeated not because it is a cultural tradition. It is repeated because it is the identity of the human individuals of Nongjri and Sohbar. It is continually performed without change. Even without modern documentation it continues to survive. This is what makes *Ka Phur* Nongjri and Sohbar unique, for it can only be experienced there.

As far as identity is concerned, there is a clear difference between the popularised religious performances of the Khasi from the *Phur*. While the popularised Khasi performances are associated with the Khasi as a group, *Ka Phur* is specific to Nongjri and Sohbar. Identity can also be seen in the adherence to structure and exactness, where belief and practice are preserved in the same form and format as they once were. The sense of identity for ‘*Ka Phur*’ is founded on its unchanging pattern. ‘*Ka Phur*’ does not reshape the cultural content of the past to prove itself a counterpart of the present, as

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<sup>15</sup> Toelken 1996: 43.

<sup>16</sup> Sims–Stephens 2011: 70–71.

argued by Ben-Amos when discussing on tradition in *The Seven Strands of Tradition*: “Since the past serves as such a powerful authority in culture, no society could afford letting it just be; it must add to it, subtract from it, mold it in its own image.”<sup>17</sup> In ‘*Ka Phur*’, we find the continual process of tradition amidst modernity and the changing times without the need to create for itself a new platform for sustenance.

## **Conclusion**

In contemporary War-Khasi society, especially that of Nongjri and of Sohbar, ‘*Ka Phur*’ continues to be a dominant cultural and religious activity. However, belief narratives associated with any of the deities linked with ‘*Ka Phur*’, especially of U Woh, are now less articulated, shared or revisited by the elderly in oral discourses and the youth of these villages too are left with very little idea of what was once a rich folk tradition. Even so, the role of the two villages and their religious councils enable ‘*Ka Phur*’ to continue in the same repetitive form as has existed for ages – a continuum through time. Their insistence on the rigidity of structure and their rejection of documentation challenges the need for any audio-visual archive since ‘*Ka Phur*’ is a living process of tradition, just as the villages themselves are.

## **Informants**

Mr. Antonio Tynnaw, interviewed between the second and third week of July, 2018.

Mr. Bedos Khongngai, interviewed between the second and third week of July, 2018.

(L) Mrs. Nancy Japang, interviewed between the second and third week of July, 2018. She passed away the following year.

Mr. Khywin Sing Dkhar, interviewed between the second and third week of October, 2018. He passed away in February, 2020.

Mr. Wanjop Khongmawpat, Sordar (Chief) Raid, (raj land) Sohbar.

## **Local Guide**

Mr. Meaker Japang

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<sup>17</sup> Ben-Amos 1984: 114–115.

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