London School of Economics and Political Science

Grounded Entanglements: Land and Landscape in the Khasi Hills

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand the complex entanglements between the Khasi people and their land and landscape today. The Khasis are a matrilineal tribal group who largely inhabit the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills in the North-East Indian state of Meghalaya. Like many indigenous communities, the Khasis perceive their land and landscape as central elements of their identity and ways of being in the world, and one of the ways in which the Indian State recognises this is through the Sixth Schedule provisions which grant tribal people special rights over their land. Thus, the relative autonomy that the Khasis have over land and resources is an important consideration in this thesis. However, land in the Khasi Hills is understood as a multifaceted entity; land is animated, sacred and spiritual, it is an embodiment of kinship and land is also a resource that can be exploited and capitalised. Grounded on fifteen months of fieldwork in three Khasi villages – Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar – and three months of archival research, this thesis seeks to highlight the multifarious and at times, seemingly contradictory ways in which people relate to their land. It does this through a study of various materials embedded in the landscape which include a colonial road, *bri* farms, indigenous-built memorial resting places, a sacred forest, limestone quarries and tourism infrastructure. The thesis asks: how should we understand the Khasis' view of land as animated, symbolic and exploitable? What kind of effects does the exploitability of land have on the community and social relations within it, particularly in the context of present-day manifestations of market capitalism? Further, do we need to reevaluate our approaches in studying tribal and indigenous peoples and their relationship with land in order to explain such contexts where the trope of indigenous people living harmoniously with their environments is not always consistent? In addressing these questions, this thesis speaks to the larger anthropological literature which examines the question of land among tribal and indigenous communities, and also works in the anthropology of landscape.

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A Note on Translation and Pseudonyms

All the quotations from interviews have been translated from Khasi into English by the author.

The names of informants and villages in the field site have all been anonymised for ethical reasons.

Glossary

Bah – A term of respect for a male elder which means Elder Brother.

Bar Shnong – A non-native to a village/ locality.

Bri - Plantation

Durbar - Council

Elaka – Sub-District

Haat – Weekly market especially in the border areas.

Hima – A Traditional State

Iaid - Walk

Iew - Market

Ja – Cooked rice

Jingkynmaw - Remembering

Ka Khadduh – The youngest daughter.

Ki Lum Ki Wah – Literally, hills and rivers meaning the outdoors.

Khoh – Conical basket.

Kong – Elder sister.

Kwai – Betel nut

Kur - Clan

Lawkyntang – Sacred Forest.

Lynti – Way, road, trail.

Maw – Stone, rock.

Menshohnoh – Hired killers.

Ri Kynti – Ancestral property

Ri Raid – Community property

Shi Iing - Family

Shongthait - Resting

Shnong – Village/Locality

Trai Shnong – Native of the village/ locality

Tympew – Betel leaf
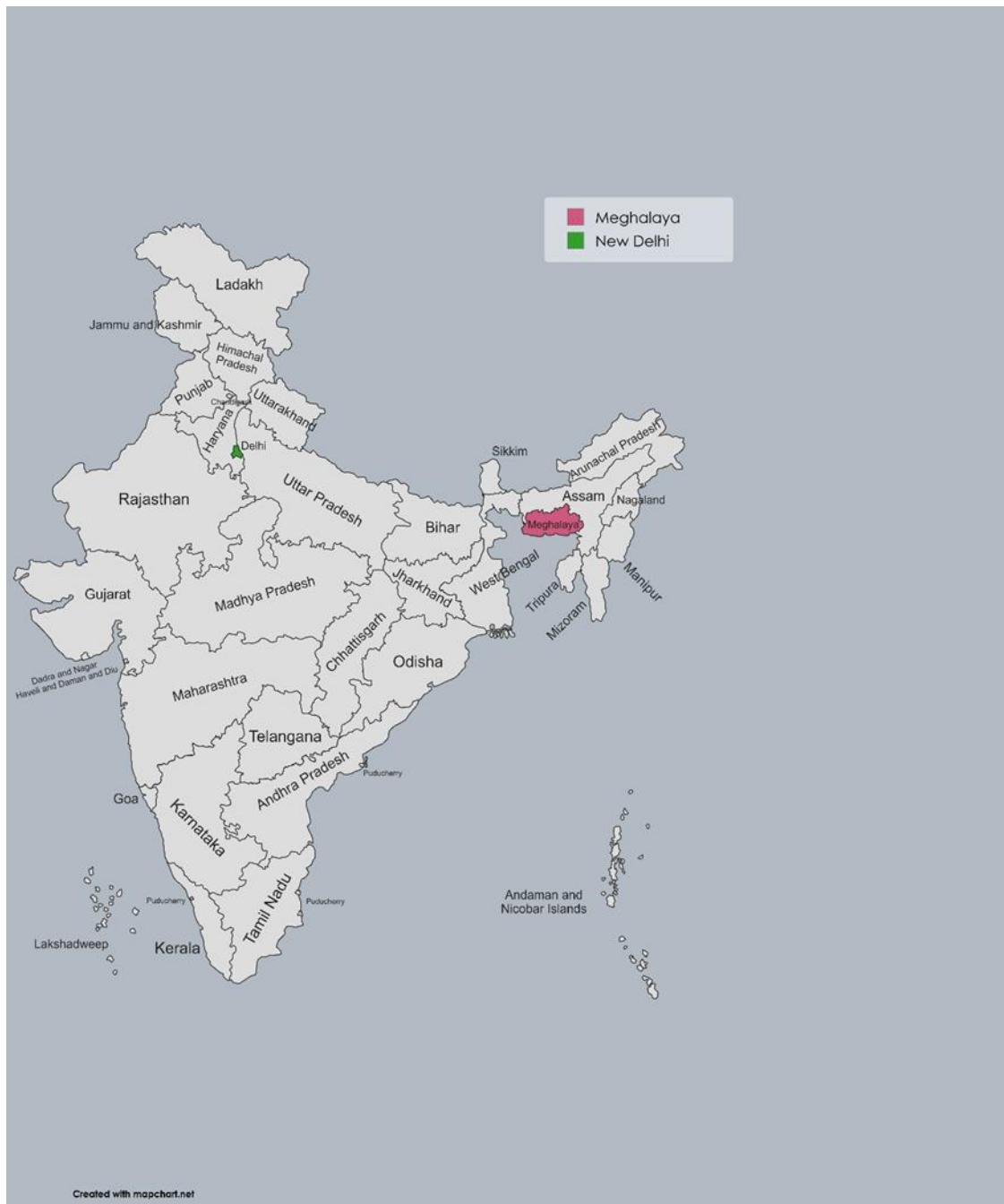
Figure 1 Map of India highlighting Meghalaya. (Source: mapchart.net)

Introduction

On an autumn morning in 2021, Bah Hunlang and I descended the precarious stony path of the Scott Road, following its route between Mawkliar village and Laitrum, where Bah Hunlang lives. The road was built in the 1820s by the East India Company and now lies in ruins; its stone walls are broken and have fallen off in places as thick grass covers much of its surface. We were there tracing what is left of the road in this area of the Southern Khasi Hills. At Mawkliar, we went past the Noh Sngithiang viewing point, a tourist spot in Mawkliar from where Noh Sngithiang waterfall could be seen in the distance. To the east of the viewing point was the Mawlong Syiem hill covered by a *lawkyntang* (sacred forest) which houses the spirit of *U Ryngkew U Basa*, the deity of the forest.

Just before entering the vicinity of Laitrum village, Bah Hunlang suggested we paused at a *mot shongthait,* a resting monument built along travel routes in memory of deceased kin, a tradition particular to the region. Bah Hunlang offered me a bottle of a citrus fruit juice that he had made and packed for us. It was only 10 A.M but having walked down a 300-metres drop, we had started to feel the heat of the plains in the distance. "Next week, we can go to my *bri* in Waitang, and also try to find fragments of the Scott Road down there" Bah Hunlang said. Waitang is further downhill from Laitrum, and closer to Sohtrai. It is largely known for the vast spread of plantation farms called *bri*, mostly belonging to the people from Laitrum village where they grow cash crops like areca nut, betel leaf, black pepper, jackfruit and bay leaf. *Bri* farming and subsequently, the trade of *bri* produce, is one of the main sources of livelihood in the area, and although it is no longer as profitable as it was when the *haats*[1] at the foothills existed, many families still engage in it. Bah Hunlang's family have been dependent on *bri* farming for their livelihood for more than a century.

As planned, we travelled to Waitang the following week, walking in the *bri* forest among tall palm betel nut trees occasionally interspersed by sturdy jackfruit trees. Bah Hunlang told me that up until the late nineteenth century, Waitang had a small settlement which was abandoned after the Assam Earthquake of 1897, a seismic

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[1] *Haats* are open air rotating markets particular to certain parts of South Asia, including the areas bordering the Khasi Hills like Assam and Bengal.

rupture that killed over 600 people in the larger Cherrapunji region. What is left of the old village are a few round ossuary stones which Bah Hunlang did not fail to read as a firm sign of the ancestors' presence on the land. As we walked further, we reached a karst forest, where trees grow not on soil but on a bed of limestone, their roots tightly wrapping around the sharp grey cavernous rocks. Bah Hunlang and others in Laitrum village call this place and the particular limestone it has "Maw Ramsong," and to them, the rocks are the skeletal remains of a giant called U Ramhah[2]. According to the myth, U Ramhah, who always carried a conical basket called "ka khoh," had a habit of exploiting humans by plundering their *bri* and looting the *haats*. One day, people decided to trick him into eating a plate of rice within which a sharp knife was hidden. The giant consumed it all and after the meal, he collapsed and died in the foothills where we now find limestone. Just a few kilometres from Maw Ramsong are stretches of limestone quarries whose presence betray the tranquillity of the karst forest we encountered and the overall animated vitality of the land. In the quarries, the same stone that makes the bones of the giant belongs to a different register of values; there, it is a resource and a raw material for the construction industry and not the substance of myth. While the limestones in Maw Ramsong are believed to be U Ramhah's bones, a huge conical limestone boulder which stands in an upturned position in Laitrum village is said to have metamorphosed from U Ramhah's beloved *khoh* (basket). Named "Ka Khoh Ramhah" (Ramhah's Basket) after the myth, the location is now a well-known tourist spot, where people come to enjoy the spectacle of the rock as well as the sweeping views of Bangladesh below the Khasi Hills.

Landscape Gatherings

The paragraphs above present a window into the world of people in the Southern Khasi Hills, one distinguished by the forceful presence of lands and landscapes as they coexist and survive with and through humans, animals, spirits and things. Indeed, the land here is understood as tribal land, belonging politically, economically, legally and cosmologically to the Khasi community. Like many tribal

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[2] Although the limestone is most popularly associated with U Ramhah, some people also believe that the rocks are the remains of another mythological being, the human-eating "rakot."

people in South and South-East Asia, the Khasis have deep, complex, and sometimes unpredictable entanglements with their lands and landscapes, those which have been made more complicated by the particular ways in which colonisation, Christianisation and capitalist formations have manifested in the region. In the above vignette, I use the experience of the foot journey with my informant Bah Hunlang, one of the people with whom I travelled on several similar journeys, to help introduce the rich textures and multivalent aspects of these lands and landscapes, as shaped by various historical processes, and more importantly, as perceived, conceptualised and felt by people who inhabit them every day. Keeping in mind Tilley's (1994, 28) statement that movement through space is a way of telling "spatial stories", of narrativizing the land, the foot journey here is an engagement with telling, a practice in mobility which weaves together the different physiographies, meanings, temporalities, and values of the lands. Indeed, my informants' narration of their land to me frequently took place during and through foot journeys. The act of walking on a path stretching across the heterogeneous landscape underlines how these varied elements and facets in and of the land coexist in the now, have coexisted in the past and will remain so in the future. The Scott Road, the tourist spots, the sacred forest, the mythic sites, the *mot shongthait*, the quarries and the ossuary stones, are all connected by their embeddedness in this particular landscape, even if they each represent different temporalities, frames of value, persuasions, materialities and political economies.

In this thesis, I look at the particular ways in which Khasi people in the villages of Mawkliar, Laitrum and Sohtrai in the Southern Khasi Hills relate to and engage with their land and landscape, and also with each other. I view these in the context of the community's perceived special relationship with land as tribal and indigenous people. Using the concept of *place-making* (i.e., the processes through which people create meaning in places and landscapes), I pay attention to the complexities that exist in their varied forms of entanglement with place and landscapes in this part of the Khasi Hills, a region historically shaped by frontier policies of both the colonial and postcolonial governments. I seek to understand people's relationships with place, land and landscape specifically through a study of various materials embedded in the landscape which include a colonial road, *bri* farms, memorial resting places, a sacred forest, and tourism infrastructure. In agreement with Ingold (1993, 154) that objects

on a landscape (human, animals, artificial components) are together parts of a working landscape or rather "a taskscape", I view the materials here as continuities of the landscape itself and therefore not as separate or external to it. Thus, even though some of these objects are not naturally-occurring soil-like entities, their historical emplacement on and with the landscape make them fundamental textures of and within it.

In each chapter, I examine the conditions of emplacement of each entity and more importantly the differential effects of their presences which includes both productive and disruptive processes, all of which shape and constitute people's experiences and understandings of the landscape. Since each entity enfolds into itself distinct meanings, values and temporalities, they also represent different types of relationships that people have with them and the land and landscape. The Scott Road tells us about people's appropriation of colonial infrastructural space, the *mot shongthait* represents the significance of kinship, the *lawkyntang* is a manifestation of the spirited landscape and the tourism infrastructure highlights the view of land as an exploitable resource which supports livelihoods. Thus, this thesis attempts to delineate the variegated and diverse ways of engaging with land and landscapes among tribal and indigenous people today, as manifested in the lives of Khasis in the Southern Khasi Hills. Further, this thesis also examines the emerging effects of the notion of land's exploitability on the community and social relations within it. Although this Introduction briefly explores how this unfolds in the context of mining, to provide background for these processes of social and economic transformations in the region, the focus of my thesis is on the status, value and perception of land as a resource under tourism in Mawkliar village. Thus, I ask, how does the growth of the "tourism landscape[3]" reassemble the relationship between people and land, and how does it rearrange relationships between people in what is understood to be a relatively egalitarian tribal society?

Landscape explored in this thesis is not simply the physical environment with its geological features and topographies, or the substrate on which living things grow, even though those elements are a part of it. It is not mere "background" or a material

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[3] The "tourism landscape" is a concept I introduce in this thesis to formulate my understanding of tourism and its emplacement on the Mawkliar landscape.

context against which human lives are staged with all their complexities. Landscape is also not just a concept as it exists in art and art history, whose premise is the aesthetic experience, particularly the visual. Indeed, as cultural geographers Cosgrove and Daniels (1988) have stated, landscape in art is ideological, making landscape in this context a symbolic cultural image constituted by a *way* of representing nature and surroundings. However, I critique this form of landscape discourse in Chapter Three where I look at the representation of the Khasi Hills in colonial writing and tourism media, arenas which have historically contributed to the discourse of landscape in the region.

My approach to landscape is inspired by works in the anthropology of landscape (Ingold, 1993; Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995; Tilley, 1995; Strathern and Steward, 2003; Allerton, 2009) which treat landscape as a powerful category through which human subjectivity and social processes can be gauged. Rooted in phenomenology, this literature views landscape as a chronicling matrix which enfolds into itself various elements and forms - human, sub-human and non-human, matter and spirit, feelings, memory and activities - all of which exist in and across time. In other words, the "cumulative" (Allerton, 2013) and "gathering" (Tilley and Cameron-Duam, 2017) potential of landscape is given focus. Ingold (1993, 152) calls this a "dwelling perspective" where landscape can be understood as "...an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it..." This dwelling perspective challenges the binary notions of landscape as strictly either natural surroundings or cultural construct and emphasises that landscape is fundamentally constituted by acts of engagement by humans (or non-humans), as much as human (or non-human) engagement is constituted by landscape. Indeed, the role of time, and therefore temporality, is central to the dwelling perspective since living is a process that takes place in time and is also a form of perpetual engagement with a landscape "pregnant with the past" and precipitating the future. Thus, landscapes are by definition always in process, never absolute and never completed (Hirsch, 1995; Tilley and Cameron-Duam, 2017).

The adoption of landscape as a theoretical framework impressively features in Allerton's *Potent Landscapes: Place and Mobility in Eastern Indonesia* (2013). Allerton uses landscape to explore the complexities surrounding the relationship that the

Manggarai people share with their places and landscapes, an approach I find very useful to consider. Moving between different scales from the intimate realms of rooms and houses to the world of missionary work, state development and resettlement projects, and further into farming and migration, Allerton (ibid, 16) is able to explain "...how valued places emerge both through the explicit creation of presence in ritual performance and through everyday practices and movements that do not have the creation of place as their explicit goal." Emphasising landscape-focussed ideas of process and dwelling, the book explores land and landscape as multilayered temporal entities and underlines the potency of people's everyday engagement with landscape as much as their engagement through ritualistic and sacrificial gestures.

Thinking of landscape as processual, temporal and accumulative is a productive way to approach the multifarious elements with varying temporalities and histories that coinhabit the landscape of my field site. In each chapter of this thesis, I explore the various ways in which people negotiate the meaningful relationships they have with land and the various elements that constitute the landscape, including their acts of dwelling and their subjective experiences vis-à-vis other beings on the landscape, humans and non-humans. While these elements bear their own temporalities and represent different times in history, not to mention different fields of relations, they are nevertheless continual parts of the same landscape. To explain further, landscape is as much about its symbolic aspect, embedded in the socio-cultural lives of people, as it is about people's practical encounter with and participation in it. Discussions in the anthropology of landscape as represented in Ingold (1993), Tilley (1995) and Arnason, et al. (2012) insist that the division between landscape as cultural and symbolic and landscape as material is misleading. Therefore, referring back to my introductory ethnographic account, for the Khasi people in my field site, the landscape of mythological persons like U Ramhah is the same as that of their *bri* farms and the quarries. Indeed, the story of U Ramhah has long been used to explain the "origin" of limestone in the Khasi Hills.

The Field Site*: Ri Khasi* and *Ri War* in the Southern Khasi Hills Landscape

Figure 2. Map of Meghalaya showing the location of villages in the field site.

The fieldwork that informs this thesis was conducted in three Khasi villages – Laitrum, Sohtrai and Mawkliar – located in the southern Khasi Hills in Meghalaya which borders Sylhet in northern Bangladesh. Although lying in the same geographical area and belonging to the same electoral constituency (Shella Constituency), the three villages are parts of different Elakas (administrative units within the Khasi Hills Autonomous District). While Sohtrai and Laitrum are in Elaka Sohtrai, Mawkliar is classed separately as Elaka Mawkliar. This division can be traced to the precolonial and colonial periods when Sohtrai and Mawkliar were independent "Hima" or Khasi states, both of which became "British Villages[4]" after succumbing to the authority of the East India Company during the Anglo-Khasi War of 1829. Laitrum, on the other hand, is a relatively young village which was established only in the late nineteenth century.

Whether one is at Mawkliar, Laitrum or Sohtrai, in the autumn months, just after the rain-borne monsoon clouds leave the hills, the wide expanse of the Sylhet plains is the constant visible sight. I often wondered about the reverse – a view of the Khasi Hills from Sylhet and whether I would be able to spot each of the villages as they lie at different elevations along the slopes of the hills. I never found out because I was

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[4] The colonial administration of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills was characterised by the strategy of indirect rule which established the hills as existing outside the parameters of British law. People in much of the region were not revenue subjects and their traditional heads (Syiem or Sirdars) retained political authority, albeit greatly weakened. However, there were few former Khasi states identified as "British Villages", Sohtrai and Mawkliar being two of them, and the people of these states were compelled to pay small dues to the government, however not in the form of land revenue.

never able to go to Sylhet. Sohtrai stretches from the hills at 500 metres above sea level to the flat lands below where the India-Bangladesh border stands. Laitrum and Mawkliar are higher up on the hills, the former at 800 metres and the latter at 1100 meters. It is worth considering the elevations of each village because this has contributed to the existence of varied climate and vegetation in each, which have in turn shaped landscapes and practices of land-use and, therefore, patterns of livelihoods in these places. Situated in the lower part of the hills, Sohtrai and Laitrum are generally understood as parts of *Ri War* (country of the War people) and Mawkliar is seen as a part of *Ri Khasi* (Khasi country). Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to critically delineate the historical differences between the War and the upland Khasis, in order to provide clarity for the chapters to come, I shall pay attention to a few elements and processes that inform these distinctions.

Sohtrai and Laitrum have a more tropical and warmer climate and both are known for their fertile lands and rich vegetation. These conditions have aided their people's engagement in horticultural crop cultivation (growing areca-nut, betel leaves, bay leaf, oranges and jackfruit), an occupation that can be dated to the eighteenth century, if not earlier. People of Sohtrai and Laitrum are therefore not subsistence farmers, even though they grow tubers in small amounts for their own households. Their farming has been mostly carried out for the purpose of trade. On the other hand, Mawkliar which is located a few kilometres north of Laitrum and Sohtrai, is cool, less tropical and distinctly barren without much tree cover, except for the few patches of village forests on the landscape. Instead of trees, the hilly terrain is covered in grass and shrubs. Thus, no kind of agricultural occupation is practised at Mawkliar in the recent past, making people reliant on a variety of activities like mining, trade and most recently, tourism. Unlike their neighbours whose engagement in *bri* cultivation has always supported their economic well-being, in Mawkliar, livelihood has been precariously changeable. However, it should be mentioned that despite the difference in elevation, the hills in Mawkliar and Sohtrai both have reserves of limestone and therefore share a history in limestone mining.

Elevation and climate are not the only markers of difference among the villages. As I moved from one village to the other in my field site, I discovered that despite their close proximity, people did not see each other as the same type of Khasi. In Laitrum

and Sohtrai, people identify as War, a Khasi identity associated with the southern Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but those in Mawkliar call themselves Khasi[5]. These distinctions were not usually portrayed as completely antagonistic but they were important enough to be mentioned and communicated to me, the ethnographer, lest I carelessly conflate the different types of Khasis in my mind. Interestingly, such an expression of social differentiation is legitimised in the myth of *U Lum Sohpetbneng* that I recount later. The mythic story not only explains the Khasis' place in the world, but also clearly illustrates the heterogeneity of the Khasi tribe, in that it is made up of seven sub-tribal families. Apart from the extinct Diko, all sub-tribes are largely associated with particular regions in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills; the Pnar, popularly called the Jaintias, inhabit the Jaintia Hills in the east, the Bhoi are in the Ri Bhoi District in the north, the Lyngngam inhabit the north-west, the Maram are in the west and south-west, the Khasis in the central uplands and the War inhabit the entire southern region of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills just above the Sylhet plains.

Needless to say, these associations between groups and particular regions and landscapes are far from rigid because people have always moved, migrated, inter-married and assimilated. However, it is also true that intra-Khasi identities continue to be potent social markers that manifest in various everyday settings, something I witnessed regularly in the field. This variation in my informants' sub-tribal identities is matched by a difference in language. While people in Mawkliar use the standardised Khasi, in Sohtrai, a different dialect is spoken. In Laitrum, which is midway between the two and therefore becomes somewhat of a liminal zone, people speak a mixture of both. These examples from my field site represent the linguistic diversity that exists across the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, where Khasi, an Austro-Asiatic language[6], has multiple variants. Most times, a dialect is regionally bound but there are times when, like in the case of Sohtrai, a dialect is associated with one village. On the other hand, the standardised[7] Khasi spoken in Mawkliar is spoken in the larger Cherrapunji region.

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[5] As pointed out previously, here the term specifically refers to the upland communities of the eastern Khasi Hills and not the general identity of the Khasi tribe.

[6] This distinguishes Khasi from other tribal languages in North-East India which are from the Sino-Tibetan family.

[7] The history of its standardisation can be traced to the transcription work of Welsh missionaries who settled in Cherrapunji in the mid-nineteenth century. Although there were previous attempts to use the

Lastly, there is slight variation in the religious demographic in the three villages. Much of the Khasi population has adopted Christianity — over 80% (Census of India, 2011) — with the majority of the conversion[8] taking place in the colonial period between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is important to note that over 15% are followers of Ka Niam Khasi or the Khasi faith (Census of India,2011). Ka Niam Khasi as represented primarily by Ka Seng Khasi[9] today is a relatively organised version of otherwise variegated and diversified Khasi religious beliefs[10] that differ across regions and even across clans and families. Turning to my field site, Mawkliar is almost completely Christian, with only one or two households following Ka Niam Khasi. In Laitrum, there are a sizable number of non-Christian households but majority of the villagers belong to different Christian denominations. Among the non-Christian households in Laitrum, many have stopped participating in religious festivals and ceremonies of Ka Niam Khasi but continue to articulate their identity as followers of the religion. In Sohtrai, more than half the population are followers of Ka Niam Khasi, making it one of the few Khasi villages in the area where Niam Khasi retains a strong socio-cultural and religious significance. However, Niam Khasi followers of Sohtrai were keen to point out to me that their religion is in fact "Niam Sohtrai," which is similar to, yet different from the more organised and centralised Niam Khasi of Ka Seng Khasi. Although I wanted to learn about these differences, I was quickly told that religious knowledge surrounding Niam Sohtrai is sacred and therefore extremely private, and that only ritual experts and ritual performers are allowed to know the

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Bengali script for Khasi, it was the Welsh missionaries' adoption of the Roman script that eventually became successful.

[8] The earliest and most successful missionaries were the Welsh Presbyterians (or the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists) who started proselytising in the 1840s. Others like the Anglicans, Salesian Catholics, Baptists and Unitarians established themselves gradually a little later.

[9] Ka Seng Khasi first started as a socio-cultural and literary movement in 1899 responding to the perceived threat to Khasi culture and beliefs under British colonialism and with the spread of Christianity. It later evolved into an organisation which also took responsibility over religion as much as being the custodian of Khasi traditions and culture. Conscious of the orality of Khasi beliefs and practices, members of the Seng Khasi went on to publish many books and essays on the same in the early to mid-twentieth century.

[10] Khasis believe in *U Blei U Nongbuh Nongthaw* (God, the keeper and maker), as well as a whole host of deified natural elements and non-human beings, leading some to consider Khasi religions to be forms of animism. More importantly, Khasis worship their ancestors, compelling Khasi academic F. Lyngdoh (2016) to argue that "...in reality there is no 'Khasi religion' with a common godhead" because the Khasi religion exists in the clan (*kur*) and family (*shi iing*). Khasi writer A. O. Mawrie (2010) also underlines the diversity of Khasi religion and locates it in the ritualistic and ceremonial sphere, arguing that the observance and practice of rites can vary from one region or family to another.

depths of it[11]. We shall observe later that this tendency to insist on their own distinctiveness by the people of Sohtrai is replicated in other areas as well.

The Khasis: Tribal Identity and Indigenous Articulation

The Khasis are a matrilineal tribal group with a population of about 1.5 million in India. They predominantly inhabit the hilly regions with their namesake – the Khasi and Jaintia Hills – in the North-East Indian state of Meghalaya, and are settled in smaller numbers in other states like Assam, Mizoram and Tripura, as well as across the national border in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. Like most tribes in India, the Khasis' identification by self and others as "tribes" is deeply embedded in colonial discourse and technologies of colonial administration, both of which contributed to the construction of "tribe" as a distinct ethnic and legal category[12]. As Cohn (1996) has argued, "investigative modalities" aiding colonial governance like the survey and the census were crucial platforms for the formation of ethnic distinctions, alongside geographical ones in India. One of the main guiding points of difference between tribes and non-tribes for colonial administrator-anthropologists in India was the absence of the caste system in groups identified as tribes, who were also generally seen as less stratified and more homogeneous (Roy Burman, 1994; Xaxa, 2008). Although this argument was less clear in the context of 'tribals' in mainland India because some bear varying indications of Hinduisation (Ghurye, 1963), for tribes in the North-Eastern frontier of British India like the Khasis and Garos, it was relatively more evident.

Despite the lack of a specific colonial definition for "tribe", there was nevertheless a specific discourse surrounding tribes in the North-Eastern frontier, one that revolved around notions of racial, geographical and temporal difference. Tribes in

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[11] The only difference that I could conjecture from being there, particularly during the annual spring festival, was Niam Sohtrai's resistance of representation. During the three-day festival which included a variety of ceremonies, traditional dances and feasts, no one was allowed to photograph or record the events in any form. There were "No Photography" warning signs everywhere, quite different from other Seng Khasi festivals that I have been to, many of them being open to tourists as well.

[12] However, Béteille (1986) and Xaxa (1999) have pointed out that despite the push for a systematic regime of classification, the colonial usage of the word "tribe" was vague and unstable and not backed by a clear and consistent definition. Instead, much of the classification process consisted of the practices of identification and listing of various communities under the rubric "tribe", thus clubbing together diverse ethnic groups from different regions, with distinct languages, kinship structures, livelihoods, cultural lives and beliefs.

the region were seen as altogether falling outside the Dravidian and Indo-Aryan ethnological framing, and were identified instead as either belonging to the Indo-Chinese or Tibeto-Burman groupings (Dalton, 1872; Gurdon, 1907). Such classificatory assumptions which hinted at past migrations from "the east" pushed the idea of distance alongside difference among tribes in the region. Largely called "hill tribes of the frontier" of Bengal and/or Assam, they were conceptualised as hill and highland people who were not only spatially and topographically different but also evolutionarily behind the communities in plains and valleys. Hill tribes (including the Nagas, Khasis, Lushais, and the Kukis to name a few) were consistently described in terms of primitivity and savagery, characteristics that were also applied to the landscapes which they inhabited. The wild jungles and treacherous mountains contained wild and treacherous people, both of which needed to be examined, controlled and tamed. Thus, colonial constructions of the hill tribe equated people and landscape – tribe and hill - or at least insisted on their inextricability from each other (Cederlöf, 2013; Ray, 2023). Further, the notion of spatio-temporal difference among hill tribes was based on the absence of perceived markers of civilisation in the hills but present in the plains like centralised political authority, tax and revenue paying subjects and settled agriculture.

Here, we might recall James Scott's (2009) hypothesis that instead of seeing state and civilisation as desirable and ultimate aspirations for all societies, we should acknowledge that for certain communities, particularly hill people, the aim is to escape the state and civilisation, and that remaining in "shatter zones" outside states was a matter of choice; a choice that could be changed over time. Indeed, Scott's Zomia (a term coined by van Schendel (2002)), which he describes as "the largest remaining nonstate spaces" in South-east Asia, consisting of vast expansive highlands, includes the hills of North-East India as it stretches to Cambodia. However, as we learn in Chapter One, the distinct spaces of hills and plains in the North-East Frontier region in general, and in the Southern Khasi Hills in particular, were intimately connected and enmeshed in the same socio-cultural and economic world of the colonial frontier.

Such points of comparison discussed above were consistently used to distinguish the Khasis from the Bengalis of Sylhet, and despite the fact that, in the interstices of the southern Khasi Hills and the Sylhet plains, there was much fluidity in the way people

used and imagined space, binary oppositional constructions such as hill tribe and non-tribe were treated as useful formulations through which colonial control operated. For instance, a community in this particular region called "Bengal Khasias" who Ludden (2003, 6) describes as an ethnic community which emerged out of an alliance between mountain Khasias and lowland Bengalis, and who moved among high and low lands, was primarily undermined and ignored in the colonial record precisely because it defied the rigid framework that colonial ethnography sought to present. Indeed, practices of differentiation were integral instruments of imperial strategy which aimed to enforce a sense of order and certainty, particularly in the frontier where colonial comprehension over people and landscape was wanting.

Further, the solidification of the Khasis' identity as hill tribes was intimately connected with the government's frontier policy in which tribes like the Khasis were seen as "non-British subjects" and their territories as under a Non-Regulated System (Regulation X of 1822) where British Law was suspended. In this way, the Khasi Hills were never actually a part of British India. Non-regulation enabled tribal leaders like the Khasi chiefs to retain their limited sovereignty, so long as they were not obstacles to colonial authority and colonial expansion, particularly in the arena of trade and access to resources. However, as Ray (2023) convincingly argues, the absence of direct colonial control in these spaces meant that colonial law was contingent and ambiguous, and therefore violently applied whenever tribal chiefs became rebellious[13]. Therefore, it is also within this landscape of administrative exceptionalism afforded to tribals that the category of the hill tribe was formulated, one which paved the way for another tribe-based classification in the post-Independence period – the Scheduled Tribe.

"Scheduled Tribe" is a legal and administrative classificatory term used for minority ethnic and tribal groups in India, one through which the Indian Constitution enshrines the political intent of protecting and promoting their interests[14]. Being one of the most

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[13] Ray (2023, 34) also argues that it was precisely this policy of "non-regulation" initiated by the Political Agent David Scott, followed by decrees and agreements with local chiefs, that brought the frontier hills within the legal-judicial framework of the British.

[14] There are seven-hundred and five distinct communities classed as STs in the country, all of whom make up 8.6% of the total Indian population (Census of India, 2011), and in North-East India, there are over two hundred. However, not all tribal groups in the region are recognised as ST; while the three most populous tribes in Meghalaya – the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias – are identified as STs, smaller tribal

socio-economically disadvantaged groups in the country, STs are provided with various instruments of empowerment, including affirmative action through reservation[15], government subsidies, and special protection of their rights to self-governance and rights to land. This thesis will pay particular attention to tribal rights over land in the Khasi Hills context, for although 'Scheduled Tribe' has its roots in colonial history and is an externally imposed identity, ST communities in India have strategically appropriated the term, especially as they negotiate their relationship with the state. However, as Herzmark (2021, 36) points out, despite its acceptance as both a political and social category, the Scheduled Tribe identity continues to be an ambivalent terminology which is sometimes exploited to cast derogatory ideas of "backwardness" and "primitivity" against so-called tribes in India.

Alongside Scheduled Tribe, other labels like "Adivasi" and "indigenous" have emerged as even more potent positionalities for tribal people in the context of rights, representation, and self-determination within the Indian state. "Adivasi" is a Hindi term which describes indigenous communities in India, particularly in the mainland. It was adopted in the 1930s after a political movement which called for the recognition of a distinct identity among indigenous people. "Adivasi" is meant to capture the idea of "original dweller"; "adi" means of earliest times and "vasi" means inhabitant. However, the Adivasi identity is more strongly articulated by tribes in central, western, and southern India than in the North-East (Karlsson & Subba, 2006; Xaxa, 2008). Xaxa (ibid, 39), explains this an outcome of there being relatively more land security for tribals in North-East India by virtue of the Sixth Schedule, a section of the Indian Constitution that details special rights over land for certain tribal communities. Although Xaxa is right in underlining the absence of the Adivasi rhetoric in the articulation of tribal identity in North-East India and indeed the relative experience of land security among tribes in the region, his argument appears inadequate when one considers people's avid acceptance of the word "indigenous," a terminology that directly invokes a relationship with land. I would add that language difference also

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groups like the Bodo-Kachari, Hajong, Koch, Mann, and Rabha are not, despite their long history of settlement in the areas they occupy.

[15] In India, reservation policies include the allocation of a specified percentage of *reserved quotas* in higher education admissions, public sector employment, and political representation to socially and economically communities. Scheduled Tribes (STs) are among such a demographic and 7.5% of quotas are reserved for them.

contributes to the non-adoption of "Adivasi" by tribals in the North-East who as non-native Hindi speakers may feel alienated from the Hindi term and its invocations. Perhaps what this case crucially highlights is the fact that tribal identity in India is not homogeneous and that although tribal communities share certain histories of marginalisation and oppression under colonialism and the Indian state, processes of identity formation and political trajectories among tribes are often varied and diverse.

The term "indigenous" however is increasingly being used by tribes in the North-eastern region, including the Khasis, to represent themselves in the world. Karlsson & Subba (2006, 8) explain this gesture as people's attempt to access the wide range of rights and safeguards attached to the Indigenous People (IP) status at the international stage[16]. This is particularly relevant in the Indian context where the government does not recognise the term "indigenous," and argues that Scheduled Tribes are not Indigenous People (IPs) because India is a "melting pot" where all Indians are considered indigenous (Karlsson, 2003, 407). Therefore, indigenous identity here is a form of self-identification which Li (2000) calls "positioning," that which is not "natural" but also not invented or imposed. Positioning "draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle" (Li, 2000, 151). Positioning is also the cultural and political work and agency of tribal people reimagining and realigning themselves contingently vis-à-vis governments and the state, and also vis-à-vis themselves.

The thrust of the indigenous positioning in North-East India revolves around the right to self-determination, an important element in the UN's conceptualisation of indigenous rights, but also a contentious subject in the Indian context where secessionist movements, particularly in the North-East, made an early appearance immediately after Indian Independence. In Meghalaya, the idea of self-determination manifested through various movements and organisations and to varying degrees. In the initial decades after 1947, the call for autonomy among Khasis largely addressed their subjugation under the administration of the Assam Government, movements against which led to the formation of Meghalaya as a state in 1972. It was only in the

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[16] Indeed, members of the Naga and Bodo communities had participated in conversations of the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) since the 1990s (Karlsson, 2003).

1990s when secessionist groups (both Khasi and Garo) started emerging while demanding separation from India; however, most of these struggles had dissipated by the 2000s. Among the tribes in the region, the Naga community has been the most consistent in reiterating the call for self-determination. According to Longkumer (2017; 2020), self-determination among Nagas is conceived through the coexisting parameters of indigenous and Christian identities, and against that of Indianness. However, self-determination is not always strictly that of an independent Naga nation[17]; Longkumer (ibid, 165) argues that the territorial representation of indigenous sovereign land is now predominantly articulated through the notion of "Nagaland for Christ," understood more as "a moral geography" providing "a sense of belonging."

Outside the realm of political movements, indigeneity is widely and almost mundanely invoked by Khasi people today, from social and cultural organisations to artists, people in the entertainment industry, academics and even government ministers. For almost a decade now, the Meghalaya Government, aided by international organisations, has been hosting events like the Monolith Festival and the Mei-Ramew (or Terra Madre) Festival where indigenous food, art and various cultural items are displayed and sold, and where indigenous artists perform. In 2015, representatives of indigenous communities from fifty-two countries participated in the Mei-Ramew Festival, as the event became a unique platform for building relationships with others from elsewhere who also identify as indigenous. Thus, despite the Indian Government not formally recognising tribes as indigenous people, at the level of the state, i.e. the Meghalaya Government, the indigenous narrative is very much embraced.

However, I should point out that these articulations are not uniform within the Khasi community, in that the word "indigenous" is not deliberately used by everyone. It would be wrong to deny that the vocabulary itself is somewhat restricted to certain sections of the community like people in Shillong city or among those who have had a

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[17] However, paying attention to the changes in these conceptualisations over time, Longkumer (2017, 164) establishes that ideas of sovereignty are "complex, fluid and in the process of becoming" and also marked by "internal incongruities." For instance, the invocation of indigeneity is now often used in the context of human rights violations in the region and the ongoing peace process between Naga secessionist groups with the Indian Government (ibid, 160).

certain level of higher education. After all, it is not an emic word, and unlike "tribe" which has had a long history in the region and is therefore more familiar, "indigenous" has a relatively recent presence. People in my field site in the Southern Khasi Hills have not cited the word in conversations with me so far but this is not to say that they are not "indigenous" or that they do not desire to position themselves as such. As an ethnographer, and a fellow Khasi, I am taking the liberty to describe the people I write about as both "tribal" and "indigenous" primarily because I view their experiences and ways of being in the world as articulations of indigeneity, particularly in the context of their relationship with land and landscape. Before I explore this relationship through the premise of place-making later in the Introduction, I first address the question of place in anthropology and why it continues to bear much significance in our understanding of people's lives today.

Why Place and Landscape Matters

"As we sail in the Lagoon, following the intricate passages between the shallows, and as we approach the main island, the thick, tangled matting of the low jungle breaks here and there over a beach, and we can see into a palm grove, like an interior, supported by pillars. This indicates the site of a village." – Bronislaw Malinowski, from Argonauts of the Western Pacific.

Landscape, and place in general, have long been considered important components of ethnographic writing, integral to anthropological understanding of human societies. The above quote from Malinowski [2014, 55 (1922)] is a small example of how the landscape of the Trobriand Islands is a huge presence in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* not as mere background but as an element that also analytically informs. Indeed, Malinowski directly addresses the reader and invites them to sail, walk and view this seemingly self-contained landscape with him. However, by the end of the twentieth century, writings like that of Malinowski's were increasingly seen as guilty of the uncritical and uncontested representation and conceptualisation of people, place and landscape, and of depicting the relationship between the two as inherently connected. Appadurai (1988) questions the essentialising and exoticising tendency in the representation of field work places and, using the idea of "incarceration", emphasises the forceful construction of "natives" as people who are timelessly locked in the field site.

Beyond the critique of the patterns of representation is the argument against the conceptualisation of place and people as static, fixed and internally coherent entities which are innately bound together. Places where anthropological fieldwork is carried out have been shattered, dismantled, reshaped and reproduced by colonialism (Asad 1973), the "ruins" (Stoler, 2013) and "rubble" (Gordillo, 2014) of which continue live on in the landscape and in people. To Gupta & Ferguson (1992), a well-defined place with a well-defined, purely localised culture cannot exist in a world of global relations. Processes like colonialisation and globalisation have disrupted the supposed boundedness, homogeneity and stability of communities and places. Olwig and Hastrup (1997) also interrogate the place-culture conjunction and argue that amidst transnational mobilities, it is impossible to limit the generation of culture to people relatively rooted to particular landscapes because the potential for moving populations like immigrants, refugees and diasporic communities to create, sustain and share socio-cultural meaning in new places is equally real and valuable.

While the arguments presented above were crucial interventions in the anthropological approach to place, anthropologists like Marcus (1989) and Rodman (1992) defended the position of *place* in anthropology, introducing readers to approaches like multilocality and multivocality – where places are viewed as fragmented, and as constructions and perceptions of multiple agents – as essential to ethnographic practice. The reality was and is that people continue to build and maintain relationships with specific landscapes and places, and that they remain important elements of our varied ethnographic worlds (Lawrence & Low, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Munn, 1990; Hirsch, 1995; Basso, 1996). To ignore or deny this fact is unthinkable; acknowledging the relationships between places and people is not to view them as *a priori* or intrinsic conditions. The relationships are, in fact, outcomes of various practices and forms of engagement that unfold in time, a process that is called place-making. Place-making emphasises the notion that places and landscapes come into being with people's experiences and imaginations, in other words with praxis and through narratives (Rodman, 1992, 642).

Low (2009, 29) underlines the role of embodiment in the process of place-making and argues that people's embodied entanglement with places and landscapes is a fundamental part of being human. According to her, the person is a "mobile spatial

field" and "a spatiotemporal unit" whose experience and consciousness takes material and spatial forms. Corsín Jiménez (2003, 148) takes a similar position and says that because "social relationships are inherently spatial," the role of people's relationships with each other and their collective actions contribute to the making of place. Drawing from his ethnography in Amazonia, Raffles (1999) identifies nature as a vibrant actor in the politics of place-making, alongside people. Landscapes and places are therefore constituted by people's relationships with them. Further, place-making operates at a variety of scales in that it unfolds with an individual and/or a community and is therefore a personal and/or collective force (Sen & Silverman, 2014; Wieczorek, 2019). As this thesis addresses the relationship between tribal and indigenous Khasis and their landscapes and places, place-making is viewed as a primarily collective project, focusing on community praxis and engagement, and individual experiences and narratives are seen as parts of the collective process. More importantly, place-making here is understood in the realm of tribal and indigenous places, lands and landscapes.

Indigenous Landscapes and Place-making

In the articulation of indigenous identity, the attachment to land, landscape and territory among tribal and indigenous people is one of the central points of assertion (Muehlebach, 2001; Karlsson, 2003; de la Cadena & Starn, 2007; Munshi, 2013). This is because land is understood as the source of indigenous identity and the axis around which that identity revolves; thus, the movements around indigenous identity are always entwined with debates about land and vice versa (Muehlebach, 2001, 424). In this framing, the relationship between land and indigenous people is understood as indivisible and immutable. Such a view is often linked to the idea that indigenous peoples have a unique symbiotic, spiritual, moral and, to use a term from ontology, *relational* connection to land and landscape, that which distinguishes them from non-indigenous others (Basso, 1996; Descola, 2013; Myers, 2016; Escobar, 2016). This perceived special relationship between indigenous communities and land is articulated as a marker of cultural, and even ontological, difference, and used to convey a certain notion of "indigenous morality" (Muehlebach, 2001). The mobilisation of indigenous morality has occurred at varying scales - locally, nationally and

internationally - and in diverse situations, including in contexts of anti-colonial struggles, agitations against corporate and state appropriation of land, and among environmental and climate change movements (ibid, 2001; Xaxa, 2008). James Clifford (2001, 481) establishes that for indigenous and tribal people, the "grounding" in land "...offers a sense of depth and continuity running through all the ruptures and attachments, the effects of religious conversion, state control, new technologies, commodities, schooling, tourism, and so on" and that it is a form of articulation which states, "...we were here before all that; we are still here; we will make a future here" (ibid, 482).

This thesis seeks to contribute to these conversations about tribal and indigenous communities' relationship with land, place and landscape. An attention to this relationship does not mean that we view it in terms of what Turner (1980) calls "higher level processes," in which the connection between indigenous people and place is something supernaturally ordained. In other words, the relationship is not governed by esoteric reasoning, nor is it an objectified embeddedness shaped by fetishised notions of indigeneity and tribalism. Instead, we see the relationship between tribal and indigenous communities and their places and landscapes as a product of social and cultural practice, and an expression of social relations mediated through land over time; in other words, it is a product of indigenous place-making. Here, I want to combine Ingold's (1993) notion of "dwelling" mentioned earlier, in which acts of living, working and dying on the land are ways of embedding, and Myers' (2002) interpretation of place and landscape as media on and through which indigenous social actions (like rituals and other articulations of symbolic place-making) and social relations are negotiated and formulated. From a tribal and indigenous point of view, places become meaningful and valuable because of people's everyday forms of engagement with them and also because of various modes of symbolic and ritual activities that structure social life and at the same time inform ideas of sameness and difference. Thus, to turn to my field site, it is not simply a matter of perceiving the Khasi Hills as a blank slate where a certain "Khasi culture" is imprinted, or only as the place which Khasis happen to inhabit, even if both are true. The relationship that Khasis have with their landscapes is to be understood in terms of their everyday acts of dwelling – residing, moving, working and using – the land as well as through the

ways in which land mediates symbolic engagements like myth-making and rituals, and kinship and other practices of social reproduction. Thus, it is within these processes that place-bound identity formation among indigenous and tribal communities unfolds.

Dirlik's (1999) notion of "place-consciousness" is useful in thinking about this. Place-consciousness is a way of approaching place through the idea of "groundedness", where instead of complete fixity or fluidity, and instead of total boundedness or a total eradication of boundaries, place is conceptualised as rooted but possessive of porous boundaries through which internal and external elements travel. Place-consciousness is thus a way of recognising the significance of being located to certain geographical, and therefore social and cultural, environments distinct from others, while also acknowledging connection and relatedness with other environments[18]. As Dirlik (1999, 155) explains, an understanding of place through groundedness "... calls for a definition of what is to be included in the place from within the place — some control over the conduct and organization of everyday life, in other words — rather than from above, from those placeless abstractions such as capital, the nation-state, and their discursive expressions in the realm of theory."

In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, where colonial impact manifested in the reconfiguration of geo-political space, the disruption of historical social and economic relations, and the exploitation of natural resources on the landscape (not to mention the general subjugation of tribal people and the disempowerment of tribal political authorities), an attention to the unique circumstances of place and its conceptualisation as indigenous and tribal land is critical. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills as a colonial space was reduced to an abstraction and seen purely as part of a colonial frontier useful for the development of colonial networks, and for the extraction of resources like timber, coal, and limestone. In the postcolonial era, the question of sovereignty over land was addressed through the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which makes room for tribal governance, something which we shall discuss in detail later. While the Sixth Schedule is an important formal

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[18] The emphasis on the existence of boundaries (even if porous) is important to mark awareness of the risk of places being fully incorporated into the national or global, which could result in the complete erasure of grounded particularities.

acknowledgement of people's relationship with place, land and landscape, there is yet an ever-present threat to this arrangement lingering on the horizon because the eminent domain[19] trumps the special protections available to tribals in India.

The combined *development* aspirations of the Central Government and the State Government articulated through the building of roads and railways, what James Scott (2009) calls "distance-demolishing technologies" of the state, are matters of regular public discussion precisely because of the uncertainty of established tribal rights over land vis-à-vis the eminent domain. After all, the majority of land acquisition cases in Meghalaya so far are for road construction projects[20]. One of the possible effects of place-based culture and place-based consciousness according to Dirlik (1999, 166) is to disrupt and obstruct "developmentalist universalism" which functions through an imposition of universal development standards. In Meghalaya, we see that manifested in the place-based customary land tenure of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos protected by the Sixth Schedule, which the state repeatedly blames for the dearth and lag of infrastructural development in the region.

However, what makes the question of land and landscape even more complicated in the Khasi Hills is not simply the relationships of power that people have with the state (whether it is the Meghalayan or Indian government) but also the fact that the conceptualisation of "tribal land" does not preclude its exploitation as a resource by the Khasi people themselves. Mineral extraction – iron, coal, sand, and limestone – is an important thread in the story of indigenous landscapes in the Khasi Hills. Although the chapters in this thesis do not directly look at extraction, I provide a brief account of this in the following section since I consider it essential to the larger understanding of land and landscape in the region. Rather than mining, I do intimately examine the use of land as a resource for tourism in Chapter Five, an industry which, to an extent, parallels mining in the way it restructures landscapes and communities in

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[19] The eminent domain is the power of the State to seize private land and property for public use. In India, the eminent domain is enforced through the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.
[20] The other major case of land dispossession in Meghalaya's history is for the New Shillong Township Project initiated by the state government, which claimed about sixteen villages and displaced over two thousand households (Jonah, 2016). Further, there are other pending cases of land acquisition which have not gone through because of widespread opposition from local residents. The Umngot Hydroelectric Project and Sonapani Mini Hydel Project are two examples of this.

my field site. By outlining the different ways in which people's relationship with land is articulated, this thesis aims to underscore the fact that the Khasis do maintain a deeply meaningful relationship with land but that this relationship is multifarious, temporal and complicated, and that it cannot be understood in stereotypical terms where, by virtue of being tribals, the Khasis are expected to have a timelessly harmonious relationship with nature and landscape. Indeed, drawing from her fieldwork in Jharkhand, Alpa Shah (2007, 1825) also criticised such constructions of "the nature loving-worshipping indigenous" and argues that tribals have a "complex relationship with and ideas of their environment." My point here is not to undermine the symbolic and spiritual aspects of people's attachments to land, those which continue to have much potency, but to show that my informants' entanglements with their land and landscape are rich and unpredictable.

Place-making in Khasi Landscapes

Symbolic and Animated Landscape: Ri Hynñiewtrep

The lands and landscapes which the Khasis occupy are parts of the cosmological space called "Ri Hynñiew Trep" or "Country of the Seven Huts." The idea of *Ri Hynñiew Trep* has its roots in a creation myth which tells the story of how the seven sub-tribes under the Khasi rubric - Khasi, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and Diko - came to live on Earth and in this particular part of the world. According to the myth, there were once sixteen original families in the unearthly realm above, now often narrativised as "Heaven", and since the Earth was not yet populated and inhabited, God, the creator or *U Blei nongbuh nongthaw* sent seven of the sixteen families down to earth to cultivate the land, care for it and rule over it. God planted a tree[21] on U Lum Sohpetbneng, a hill in the north Khasi Hills, close to the river Umiam. The tree was meant to be a passageway, so that the seven families could traverse between heaven and earth as they pleased, so long as they were respectful to God and others (*tip briew tip blei*), particularly to their own clan and their father's clan (*tip kur tip kha*). However, greed and ill will took over the seven families and this displeased God so much that he made the tree bridging heaven and Earth vanish, banning the

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[21] Some use the image of a golden ladder to describe the tree connecting heaven and earth.

seven families from Heaven forever. U Hynñiew Trep (or "seven huts") are the seven families left behind who are believed to represent the seven sub-tribes of the Khasis, and present-day Khasis believe them to be their ancestors.

The above is one of the most significant creation myths among the Khasis which explains their presence on Earth and specifically, in that part of the world. It is an example of how landscape in the Khasi Hills is cosmological and symbolic, where cultural and religious meaning is anchored in the landscape. Set in a real place, that is, Lum Sohpetbneng, the tallest hill in the northern Khasi Hills, the myth provides a sense of legitimacy to the Khasis' situatedness in the Khasi Hills and also symbolically cements their relationship with the land. In other words, the myth as a cultural form and as narrative shows how the Khasis constitute the landscape and how it constitutes them. The potency of the myth has been sustained over time through acts of retelling (and reproduction on print and visual media) and also through the performance of ritual action that happens every February when followers of Ka Niam Khasi (Khasi faith) take a pilgrimage to the top of the hill to respectfully mark the site as the point of origin of the community.

In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso (1996, 7) argues that place-making is a method of historical construction, where places in the landscape become symbols of past events. Physical elements like the hill of U Lum Sohpetbneng (which explains how the Khasis came to live in this world) and the rock structure of U Khoh Ramhah mentioned in the introductory vignette (which explains the origin of limestone in the Khasi Hills), perform such a task where they embody the history of the places they embed. Thus, in the absence of written histories for tribal people like the Khasis, landscapes become vital processes, in that various acts of dwelling and presence on and with them have been forms of historical construction and historical place-making and a form of cultural activity through which social traditions and practices could be gauged and interpreted. In a similar way, Kahn (1996) writing about the Wamira people in Papua New Guinea, explains how myths mapped on the landscape, (particularly that of Tamodukorokoro, a monster ogre the Wamirans believe to be responsible for their fates) inform people about the nature of social relations and the importance of feeding and caring for each other. Thus, as much as attention to landscapes teach us about local conceptions of material environments, they also help us understand people's social

worlds and social actions. Indeed, as explored in this thesis, the symbolically rich tribal landscape of the Khasis is historically illuminating, socially instructive, and continues to be the site on and through which past humans connect with the living. I explore this closely in Chapter Four, where I discuss the mythic site of Mawlong Syiem in Mawkliar, a hill whose spiritual association survives today in people's recognition of it as a *lawkyntang* or a sacred forest, a place of sanctity where one should not harm or deface anything. The belief in the sacredness of the hill and the forest on it serves as a social instruction about the importance of the protection and preservation of forests in the local landscape.

In its existence as a moral landscape, Mawlong Syiem is also perceived as a sentient being, possessing consciousness and agency, and capable of delivering punitive acts to humans which work within its frame of morality. The agency of the forest is primarily expressed through the perceived existence of *u Ryngkew u Basa*, the tutelary deity of forest and land, an entity that people in Mawkliar maintain relationships with. The Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* tells us something about the Khasi understanding of land as "spirited," and of the coexistence of the spiritual and human realms in everyday life. In Chapter Four, I situate my discussion of this aspect of the Khasi landscape - spiritual, mythic and animated - within the larger context of South and Southeast Asia, where the belief in the power of spirit beings is an enduring element of people's experience of the landscape and an important articulation of their relationship with it (Bird-David, 1999; Allerton, 2009a; 2013; Bovensiepen, 2020; High, 2022; Work, 2022; Baumman, 2022; Notermans, Nugteren & Sunny, 2016). Indeed, the *lawkyntang* is a manifestation of Khasi place-making, where certain forests on the landscape are attributed with special meaning and immense power, ones which people keep alive through their daily negotiations with the landscape as a whole. Lastly, in paying attention to the *lawkyntang* and its powers, this thesis aims to underline the complexity of the Khasis' relationship with land, where spiritual landscapes exist alongside other forms, including exploitable and resourceful landscapes, those which I explore in other chapters.

Landscape of Movement and Memory

Another prominent aspect of the Khasi land and landscape in my field site is people's relationship with the land generated by the act of moving, walking and travelling. After all, walking is a form of communication with the landscape through the body (Tilley, 2012, 19). In fact, walking is a way in which the body becomes a part of the landscape. As Ingold (1993) asserts, movement is an act of dwelling on the landscape. The centrality of walking and movement to the tribal landscapes of my field site can be understood in the context of its location in the Southern Khasi Hills neighbouring the plains of Bangladesh, where the interconnectedness between the hills and plains, tribes and non-tribes, is historically an integral element of the landscape. This landscape is constituted by routes, trails and a colonial road that bridge the two geographically and culturally distinct zones, as well as various other meaningful locations in between. It is, all at once, a landscape of horticultural production, trade, exchange, colonial intrusion and occupation, and a landscape of kinship and memory. Since I explore these various dynamics and practices intimately in Chapters One and Two, I shall not elaborate on them here.

However, I want to emphasise that this "landscape of movement" (Snead, Erickson and Darling, 2009) is an important part of people's experiences and understanding of themselves. Indeed, routes, paths and trails here are viewed as places in their own right, those that become so through processes of place-making and people's temporal engagement with them. Walking and travelling, either individually or socially, are practices which give meaning to the route through the groundedness of the activity and in turn, the journey is made meaningful through the landscape of which the route is a part (Lee & Ingold, 2006; Snead, 2009). In my field site, travelling on pathways and routes is often a social activity, and is therefore another way of *being* with others and of sharing the landscape. Moreover, travelling and walking, specifically, as Tilley (2012, 23) reminds us, is a material and temporal gathering act that "draws together past, present and future, the ancestors and the living, taskscapes and cosmological powers in a place." Thus, people's emplacement in the landscape of movement, in which they walk on old trails and pathways used by ancestors, is a formation of continuity, and simultaneously, an engagement with new possibilities. In Chapter One, I examine how the old colonial Scott Road and trade route embedded in

the Sohtrai landscape is reimagined and repurposed in various ways. In Chapter Two, I look at the *mot shongthait* or resting places built by families in memory of their deceased loved ones, which are strewn along pathways leading to *bri* farms and *haats*. The *mot shongthait* is an important *infrastructure* along trade routes whilst also being a meaningful mnemonic manifestation of kinship attachments on the landscape. In the landscape of movement, all these elements work together to give people a sense of place and a historical relationship with the land and with each other.

Land as an Exploitable Resource

While land is cosmological and an embodiment of kinship, it is also a resource which Khasis have historically appropriated. First, land is an agricultural resource which supports 81% of Meghalaya's population (Census of India, 2011)[22]. In much of the state, people are subsistence farmers who practice swidden cultivation and terrace bun agriculture, growing a variety of vegetables and fruits, with rice and maize being the most important staples[23]. However, in the particular villages in my field site located in the southern Khasi Hills, the utilisation of land as an agricultural resource is different. In Mawkliar where the hilly landscape is mostly grassland, agriculture is not practiced, although it may have been in the distant past; presently, land there exists as a resource for tourism as I argue in Chapter Five. In Sohtrai and Laitrum people grow horticultural crops in individual farms called *bri*. Because they are fixed and bound individual holdings which produce mostly cash crops for trade, the *bri* farms are also socially and economically different from swidden fields that one finds in other parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, where people grow subsistence crops and which are usually created by the clearing of community forests. However, despite being recognised as *ri kynti* or private property, *bri* land of families and clans in Sohtrai are usually not transferable to people outside the village. In other words, private ownership and commercial exchange of *bris* are still dictated by village regulations which prevent land from being transferred to outside parties. I shall elaborate on this later.

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[22] Despite the large number of people being involved in agriculture, Meghalaya is dependent on imported food crops, especially imported rice, because of the general "low yielding" productivity of the sector.

[23] In the rice-growing regions of the northern Khasi Hills, the centrality of rice and paddy to the communities is also manifested in the presence of paddy rituals; in the Bhoi area, people perform annual ceremonies for the paddy deity Ka Lukhmi (Kharmawphlang ,2005), in which we see a conflation of the ideas of land as symbolic and as a resource.

While the Khasis' use of land as an agricultural resource aligns with the classic narrative of indigenous people having a symbiotic relationship with land and landscape, their heavy involvement in various extractive industries is not. Coal and limestone mining are largely in the hands of the local Khasi and Jaintia population in Meghalaya, owing to the unique land tenure system in the state provided by the Sixth Schedule[24] where much of the land is owned by individuals and communities and not the state. To put this into perspective, the government owns about 5% of the land in the entire state. Thus, unlike some examples of tribal people in India who are exploited by governments, private companies and corporations by way of dispossession and/or displacement to enable or expand extraction (Banerjee, 2006; Padel & Das, 2010; Jeyaraj, 2024; Samal, 2025), here is a situation where the indigenous people are themselves deeply invested in economies of extraction.

In this thesis, specifically in Chapters Three and Five, the use of land as an exploitable resource is explored through the lenses of tourism, specifically by examining the mobilisation of community tribal land towards the building of a tourism economy. However, in this section, I want to provide more context for the notion of land as an exploitable resource by sharing a brief account of limestone mining in my field site, particularly in Sohtrai village. The reason that mining is not a primary ethnographic subject examined in my chapters is because the fieldwork that I conducted in Sohtrai was during the Covid-19 pandemic (as I explain later in the Introduction) in which time it was not possible to obtain permission from the Elaka administration to explore the mines and the intricacies of the industry in the village. However, it remained a haunting element in the background and I take the liberty of bringing it into the discussion here because it presents another form of engagement with land through an extractive industry among the Khasis, some of whose effects parallel those of tourism's which we explore in detail later in the thesis. While coal mining in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills started as a colonial endeavour, limestone mining in Sohtrai (and other foothill villages) predates the colonial period[25] and was exclusively in the hands of the Khasi inhabitants. This continued until after the colonial

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[24] I shall discuss the Sixth Schedule later in the Introduction.
[25] Famously, Robert Lindsay, Collector of Sylhet for the East India Company, visited the Khasi Hills in the 1780s with the aim of getting personally involved in the limestone trade by obtaining leases from Khasi chiefs.

occupation of the village in 1829 when, through a treaty of submission, the East India Company claimed 50% of the royalty from the stone trade with merchants in Chhatak, Sunamganj and Calcutta (Aitchison, 1931). After Independence, mining operations continued, involving local Sohtrai landowners, the Sohtrai Durbar (village council) and Komorrah Limestone Mining Co Ltd. (KLMC), a company now co-owned by the Meghalaya Government and the Singapore-based Misha PTE, but was actually started in 1940 as a public-sector undertaking (PSU) by the Provincial Government of Assam and the Assam Bengal Cement Company Ltd.

Limestone mining and trading in Sohtrai and the neighbouring regions have been carried out for more than 240 years, if not more. As it is excavated from the lower hills of the southern Khasi Hills, it travels to neighbouring Sylhet and other parts of Bangladesh, previously to be used for quicklime and now to feed cement factories. The long history of limestone mining in this area is the reason why some people in the village speak of the abundance of the stone, of the reserves being endless and that perhaps it is alright to continue mining because the point of scarcity has not arrived. Despite the devastating impact it has on the land and landscape, to people who own mines and those who are involved in different capacities in the limestone trade, the mineral is imagined as a constant presence that will survive in the future. Indeed, the stories of U Khoh Ramhah and Ka Rakot, examples of Khasi symbolic place-making shared in the opening vignette, are mythic explanations and perhaps justifications for people's engagement in the mining of limestone. As these myths are used to create an indigenous sense of place and to emphasise people's relationship with the land and landscape, they are also used to make claims over the use and exploitation of the same for their own benefit.

The use of indigeneity as an argument for the right of extraction prominently features in the context of challenging central government bans on mining in Meghalaya. For instance, the 1996 Supreme Court ban on timber logging (applied to North-East India, Jammu and Kashmir, and Tamil Nadu) was seen by many in Meghalaya as the government's violation of the Sixth Schedule provisions to indigenous people in the state. Sociologist Tiplut Nongbri (2001) cites the question of livelihood, arguing that tribal households in Meghalaya are also dependent on forest-based resources to supplement income needs not met by agriculture, and that this

predominantly affected women. Similar responses emerged when the 2014 National Green Tribunal (NGT) ban on rat-hole mining of coal was imposed. Apart from individual voices speaking out against the ban, a group called Movement for Indigenous People's Rights and Livelihood-Meghalaya (MIPRL-M) organised protests and strikes to stand against the blanket nature of the ban, as well as the government's inability to provide viable alternative livelihood for people who suddenly lost work opportunities[26]. In my field site, the invocation of indigeneity has been used in the context of limestone mining, where Sohtrai underlined its sovereignty over the limestone in the Elaka as a legal argument to claim royalties from the activities of the Komorrah Limestone Mining Co Ltd. (KLMC) in its territory. Since the royalties are currently split between the Meghalaya Government and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC)[27], the Sohtrai Durbar is positioning itself against both governing bodies, and in this process, limestone-filled land becomes a highly contested entity. Thus, as Karlsson (2011) argues, the politics of resources in North-East India does not follow the same story as in other tribal areas in India.

Similar processes are at work in Nagaland where customary land tenure is protected by Article 371A of the Constitution. As Naga anthropologist Dolly Kikon (2019) asserts, tribal identity is entangled with the economy of coal mining in Nagaland. She explains that coal mining only escalated in the region after the 1997 ceasefire between the insurgent group National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Muivah) and the Government of India, and that the notion of indigeneity and self-determination is used to claim ownership over the coal. Kikon (ibid, 126) says that in the specific area where the coal exists, i.e., in Naga villages in the foothills between Assam and Nagaland, people lease their lands to coal traders from Assam with the hope of accessing a better life. Families who manage to insert themselves in these networks end up accumulating wealth while those who do not are left out. These processes, according to Kikon (ibid), prove that tribal societies are not always egalitarian and that class difference emerges in the context of extraction.

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[26] However, it would be wrong to assume that responses to the bans were completely homogeneous; while the voices against the bans were certainly louder, there were many people who welcomed the bans and were even relieved to finally see them implemented, even if imperfectly (Karlsson, 2011).
[27] Please refer to the description of the District Councils in page 27.

In my field site too, families who have historically engaged in limestone mining accumulate significant wealth over others. In Sohtrai, the impact of the Partition of India and the imposition of the international border is one main contributor to these developments. The Partition decimated the historical trade relations the people of the region had with Sylhet, as discussed in Chapter One. Prior to the Partition, although mining was carried out, *bri* cultivation was the main source of livelihood for Sohtrai households, as they sold their cash crops in the foothill *haats.* With the closing of these *haats* after the border was made, many of the farmers who could not make commercial connections with traders in the uplands like Cherrapunji and Shillong, suddenly found themselves without a market. For a few families I met, this was the story of their engagement with mining; if the *bri* land that they owned was not useful for farming, they saw more sense in mining it in order to sustain their livelihoods. It is also within this landscape that relationships of inequality were exacerbated in the village because the economic returns of limestone mining are far greater than *bri* farming. This is not to say that wealth was not an element of social differentiation previously because there are families who established themselves as influential merchants in the *haats*. However, because the scale and speed of profit from mining is vast, it is increasingly rearranging the distribution of wealth and well-being in the village in a stark way. In Chapters Five and Six in this thesis, we explore the emergence of similar socio-economic hierarchies in the context of Mawkliar, where, instead of mining, tourism forms the premise of new inequalities in the village.

Since this thesis is not an ethnography of mining, my objective here is not to look at the political economy of mining as such; however, my point in summarising these discussions is to present the larger picture and underline that indigenous and tribal people's engagement in extractive industries like mining is increasingly widespread, and often a necessity amidst the dearth of alternative livelihood opportunities, especially in the context of the growing global demand for minerals. However, as I elaborate in Chapter One, there are stories from the field site which show a different imagination of the landscape's future.

The Sixth Schedule and Land Administration in the Khasi Hills

As much as the relationship between Khasis and their lands is cosmological, it is also legally and politically sanctioned. This sanction appears in the Sixth[28] Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Article 244 and 275). Under the Sixth Schedule, tribal areas are divided into Autonomous Districts (or Autonomous Regions), each administered by a governing body called the Autonomous District Council[29] (or Autonomous Regional Council) whose members are from the local tribal community[30]. The Autonomous District Council has its own Executive, Legislature and Judiciary and it legislates on various subjects ranging from land, forests, agriculture to inheritance, appointment of chiefs/ headpersons in traditional institutions and the codification of customs. It also has the power to assess and collect land revenue. Within this structure, the customary land tenures of various Khasi and Jaintia villages are preserved. Thus, in the Scheduled areas, there exists a unique decentralised arrangement where there are multiple levels of governance working together; the District Council functions parallel to and in conjunction with both the state government and tribal political institutions. To briefly explain, in the Khasi Hills, the Meghalaya Government is the supreme governing authority, but the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council as a tribal body has extensive legislative rights, and exclusive legislative powers over certain subjects. Equally, the traditional Khasi states called Himas[31] and local administrative units called Elakas along with their *Durbars* (councils; see below) continue to be legally recognised. In fact, as an indigenous institution, the Durbar still has a critical place in Khasi political life today, particularly in rural settings. In my field site is a combination of two Elakas – Elaka Sohtrai and Elaka Mawkliar – and in both, the *Durbar* Elaka,

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[28] The Sixth Schedule is specific to tribal areas in the North-Eastern states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. Although Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur are North-Eastern states with significant tribal populations, they do not have Scheduled Areas. The Fifth Schedule applies to tribal areas in states located in the Indian mainland – Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan.

[29] In Meghalaya, there are three District Councils – the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC), the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC).

[30] The total number of members can be no more than thirty, four of whom are nominated by the Governor of the state, with the rest democratically elected on the basis of adult suffrage.

[31] In the precolonial period, *Himas* used to be independent sovereign states that were headed by political heads called *Syiems*, *Sirdars* or *Wahadadars*, depending on the region where the *Hima* was located.

headed by the elected Sirdar, is the central institution of power which possesses political and legal authority over land within its jurisdiction.

As much as this multi-layered administrative system paves way for a more democratic and representative form of governance, it often generates confusion and conflict between the three levels of administration. Scholars have largely attributed this to the Constitution's failure to give clarity and detail over the relationships between the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), the state government and the Himas/Elakas. There is no provision for the coordination in their functioning nor an explicit explanation about their hierarchies (Datta & Sen, 2020), resulting in what Rahman et al. (2017, p. 825) call "inter-institutional gaps" or what Soreide (2020) has further explained as "governance gaps". To give an example from Meghalaya, despite the legislative powers of the ADCs, if the state government also makes laws on the same subject, the former's will be superseded. Roy Burman (1997) and Xaxa (2008) have also drawn our attention to the debilitating dependency of the ADCs on the state government for funds and certain sources of revenue[32]. The other level of conflict exists in the relationship between the ADCs and traditional institutions like the Himas and the Elakas. Although the latter have survived the colonial process and the change of power with Indian Independence, they are now substantially disempowered bodies of governance, and the adoption of the Sixth Schedule has contributed to that. For instance, the Constitutionality of the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act, 1959 placed traditional chiefs of Khasi states like Syiems, Sirdars and Wahadadars under the control and supervision of the District Council.

Indeed, conflict among the three tiers of governance in my field site manifested in the fight over the limestone in Sohtrai, where the Elaka legally challenged both the Government of Meghalaya and the KHADC over royalties from the operation of the Komorrah Limestone Mining Co Ltd. (KLMC). Further, as I discuss in Chapters Three

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[32] There have even been several instances of state governments blocking grants to the ADCs. The autonomy of the ADCs is also limited by the Sixth Schedule rule that the any law it passes needs the assent of the Governor of the state. Further, the Governor also acts on the advice of the Council of Ministers of the state government, which again questions the essence of self-governance embodied by the ADCs.

and Five, the tourism landscape in Mawkliar also emerges as a site of contestation where the Elaka Mawkliar Durbar is consistently asserting its own autonomy on the landscape by building its own tourism infrastructure and strategically rejecting or accepting help from the state. Therefore, although the Sixth Schedule's provisions of a decentralised governance render the Constitution of India one of the most progressive in the world, especially in terms of its accommodation of tribal rights and autonomy, the lack of detailed guidelines on the relations between institutions at the three levels of governance and the absence of rules against their infringement of powers and jurisdictions, has historically resulted in conflictual and ambiguous scenarios of administration.

Apart from the Sixth Schedule, another piece of legislation that makes land governance unique in Meghalaya is the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971. This law, introduced soon after Meghalaya obtained statehood, makes it illegal for land within the state to be transferred (whether in the form of a gift, sale, exchange mortgage, lease, or surrender) from a tribal to a non-tribal person and from a non-tribal to another non-tribal person. Together with the Sixth Schedule provisions, this law strengthens the protection of tribal ownership of land in the state. It is worthy to note that because of these systems in place, the Central or State Governments own and have direct control over only about 5% of the land in Meghalaya.

The Durbar

At the level of the Elaka, the Durbar Elaka is the main administrative body in the village, making key decisions on various subjects including land and land use. Since I explore this in detail in Chapter Five, here I simply outline the basic structure of the Durbar so as to understand how the process of decision-making works within the community. The Durbar is composed of all the adult male residents of the Elaka who have equal voting rights. All members of the Durbar vote for representatives of the Executive Committee; however, the Sirdar[33] who heads the Executive Committee, is voted by all residents of the Elaka, not just the Durbar members. The Sirdar is assisted

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[33] The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act, 1959.

by the Secretary and together with the Rangbah Shnong (headmen) from all *kyntoit/shnong* (localities) in the Elaka. The Sirdar is an Executive head with a limited tenure and he alone does not have legislative powers; as such, political power rests with the Durbar collective (Bareh, 1961; F. Lyngdoh, 2016; A. Lyngdoh, 2021). The identity of the Durbar is therefore that of a collective enacting the will of all residents, even if there are positions of authority with specific functions within it. This was something I witnessed even in my field site where Durbar meetings were routinely used to question and check decisions of the Sirdar. Thus, there is an element of democratic rigour that is intrinsic to the functioning of the Durbar.

However, what is considered a significant shortcoming in the Durbar as a body is its exclusion of female membership. Although women are members of certain committees, they are not considered proper members of the Durbar since they are not allowed to vote. This also means that women can never be representatives at the Durbar, particularly as headpersons in villages and indeed as Sirdars of Himas and Elakas. Durbars are therefore seen as "male bastions" (Kharshiing, 2024) where women completely lack a voice and have no say in decision-making processes (Roy, 2018). Renowned Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri (1998, 2000, 2003) has consistently argued over the years that the few conditions of empowerment created by matriliny are in fact undercut by the deprivation of political rights among Khasi women[34]. The issue of women's participation in local governance remains a contested topic within the community but despite criticisms of the rule being outdated and patriarchal by certain groups and individuals, legislative change appears to be a distant reality. However, more relevant to the discussions in this thesis is the fact that the absence of women in the Durbar means that women lack access to processes of decision-making vis-à-vis land and land use. Therefore, despite the fact that the Durbar is said to represent the will of the collective, the exclusion of women calls into question the extent of its representativeness.

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[34] Writer Fabian Lyngdoh (2016) does not see a contradiction between matriliny and women's exclusion from the Durbar because traditionally, Khasi women were strictly seen in their reproductive roles and not as participants of public affairs. Further, they are said to be represented by their brothers and uncles at the Durbar, as men represent their clans and matrilineal (not their matrimonial) families. However, with increasing nuclearisation of Khasi families, the question remains as to who men individually represent at the Durbar today.

Customary Land Tenure

According to the customary land tenure in the Khasi Hills, land is of two main categories – *ri raid* (community land) and *ri kynti* (private/individual holdings). *Ri raid* is undivided common land which does not have a boundary marker and which people of a particular Hima/Elaka (Khasi State) or shnong (Khasi village) have the right to use either by occupation, cultivation, grazing or by accessing forest produce. On the other hand, *ri kynti* is land owned by a private individual, a family or clan who have the absolute authority to sell, lease, mortgage or dispose of it. The owner in case of the latter has complete heritable and transferable rights. It is important to point out that portions of *ri raid* distributed to families are also heritable properties but they are seldom transferable, especially without the permission of the Durbar authorities. Ri Kynti is also distinguished by the presence of "u pud u sam" or a demarcation usually in the form of stones called "maw pud" or "maw bri." The recent Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Act, 2021 lists as many as eighteen types of *ri raid*[35] and twenty types of *ri kynti*[36] that are known to exist across the Khasi Hills today. Although *ri raid* and *ri kynti* are the broad types of land found across the Khasi Hills as recognised by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), it is often the case that Himas or Elakas would have their distinct ways of distributing and classifying the land within their jurisdiction. I have learned through my work in Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar that traditions of land tenure are varied among Himas and Elakas, even if they are located in the same region, and in the case of my field site, within a mere 12-kilometre radius. Therefore, rules and frameworks of land administration according to customary law remains deeply variegated on the ground.

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[35] Ri Shnong, Ri Shnat, Ri Kuna, Ri Bam Syiem, Ri Law-Kyntang, Ri Law Lyngdoh, Ri Niam, Ri Law-a-dong, Ri Law Sang, Ri Law Sumar, Ri Bam Lang, Ri Lynter, Ri Leh Mokotduma, Ri Aiti Mon Sngewbha, Riphlang, Ribamduh, Ridiengsai-diengjin and Ri Samia.

[36] Ri Kur, Ri Nongtymmen, Ri Maw, Ri Seng, Ri Khain, Ri Duwat, Ri Khurid, Ri Bitor, Ri Dakhol, Ri Shyieng, Ri Phniang, Ri Iapduh, Ri Lynter, Ri Spah, Ri Longdung, Ri Pud, Ri Kut and Ri Lyngdoh, Ri Syiem and Ri Khain Raibuh.

However, as many have pointed out, in various parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the privatisation of community or *ri raid* land is an alarming reality resulting in a growing number of landless families (Dutta & Dutta, 1987; Nongkynrih, 2002; Nongbri, 2003; Karlsson, 2011). This is particularly true in areas closer to Shillong, where the expansion of the city is supporting the growth of privatisation and the development of a booming land market. Nongbri (2003, 127) and Karlsson (2011, 170) attribute the disappearance of *ri raid* in many regions of the Khasi Hills to the combined effects of colonisation and the hierarchical nature of Khasi society which has the *syiem* (chief) on top, followed by the founding clans and ordinary people below. While Khasi chiefs were not traditionally seen as territorial and land-owning authorities, British administration redefined the *syiem's* position and associated their power with land possession. Further, in what came to be called "British Areas" in Shillong and Cherrapunji, locations where the colonial administration was stationed, land was either seized or made into a commodity as the colonial government bought plots from *syiems* and clans. In former British Areas, the customary land tenure has been significantly eroded. In my field site, some of these patterns manifest in distinctive ways.

My field site villages of Sohtrai and Laitrum share the same land tenure system as they belong to the same Elaka, i.e., Elaka Sohtrai, that which is different from the one followed in Elaka Mawkliar. Within Sohtrai Elaka, a huge percentage of the land is identified as *ri kynti* (or *nong kynti* as they call it in Sohtrai) owned by an individual or family who have transferable and heritable rights. Apart from plots in village areas where people have built houses, the *nong kynti* or private holdings in Sohtrai consist of the plantation farmlands called "bri" which constitute most of the land area of the Elaka. The plantation plots are typically demarcated by stones or, more recently, by short cemented pillars. There appears to be common knowledge about who owns which plot, despite the frequent absence of written evidence of this at the site. During fieldwork, informants were able to point out who the plantation we were walking through belonged to and where the boundary ended with much certainty and ease. The existence of *ri kynti* or private holdings in Sohtrai and other villages at the same elevation can be understood in the context of the tradition of *bri* cultivation or the specialised farming where cash crops like oranges and betel nut are grown. This type

of farming required the clearing of forested land, an activity which was and is interpreted as a permanent claim over the land. As we discuss in Chapter Five, this process resonates with Tania Li's (2014) findings in the Sulawesi Highlands where tribal communities gradually converted community land into private land through the clearing of forests and the planting of cash crops. It is worth noting that the existence of privately owned *ri kynti* in Sohtrai is one of the reasons why mining has seen a huge expansion in the past decades since people do not require permission from the Durbar to convert *bri* land into land used for mining. However, certain types of *ri raid* exist as there are smaller areas of *bri* land that are collectively owned and under the supervision of the Durbar, and there are also community forests called *law adong* in the upper hills of the Elaka.

In Mawkliar Elaka, all the land within its jurisdiction is considered *ri raid* or communal land where the Elaka and its people are the absolute owners. The Durbar has authority over land use and distribution, and as explained to me by a few Durbar representatives, the "trai shnong[37]" or people who can trace their clan ancestry to the village have the right to be given *ri raid* land without a cost. Land allocated to individuals/families could be used for residential or economic purposes, but not all *ri raid* land could be distributed among people as some of it is preserved with its forest cover while some is diverted towards public use to accommodate cemeteries, cremation grounds, footpaths, roads, football grounds, etc. (Nongkynrih, 2002, 106). The land given to the "trai shnong" family or individual is said to be permanently theirs if it is continuously and successively occupied and used, and not left abandoned for a period of three years or more; if abandoned, the plot reverts back to the Elaka. However, as we explore in Chapter Five, the practice and observation of land as *ri raid* in Mawkliar is more complicated than it appears, and that gestures of privatisation are indeed discernible, particularly in the context of tourism and the what I call the "tourism landscape".

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[37] Although "trai shnong" is a generic term used to describe so-called original settlers of a Hima, Elaka or village, the terms of qualification to become a *trai shnong* is different in different areas. Usually, the "trai shnong" are people who have ancestral roots in a place but the decision about how far back these associations could go is dependent on the particular village.

Khasi Matriliny

Along with the Garos, the Khasis are the only tribes in North-East India following matrilineal descent, in which lineage is traced through the mother and her matrilineal family. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the intricacies of Khasi matriliny, I shall briefly outline a few attributes that will be relevant to my discussion later. In Khasi matriliny, individuals are automatically placed within a matrilineal structure, which consists of the mother's immediate matrilineal family called "shi iing," the mother's extended matrilineal family called "shi kpoh" and finally, the mother's clan called "kur," and they typically have no clan affiliations with their father's side of the family. Members of each clan are united by the fact that they trace their lineage to one common ancestress called *Ka Iawbei Tynrai*. The matrilineal clan-name holds social significance in situations such as when one is accessing clan land in ancestral villages, and more importantly in the realm of marriage. Here, the clan-name becomes a point of association or disassociation because Khasi clans are strictly exogamous and intra-clan marriage is considered a very grave taboo. Matriliny is also the common denominator among all the Khasi sub-tribes who have intermarried and therefore, maintained the lineage system for centuries.

A fundamental distinguishing feature of Khasi matriliny is the fact that it is the youngest daughter or *ka khadduh* who inherits the ancestral properties (which could include land, house and jewellery), a custom that is now protected as customary law under provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Traditionally, the premise of this practice is the Khasi religion in which the ancestral house or the *iing seng* is perceived as the primary sacred place where rites for ancestors are performed. Further, it is *ka khadduh*, as the family priestess, who performs and complete these rituals. Thus, there is great significance in *ka khadduh* inheriting the ancestral property. Although much of the Khasi matrilineal rules of inheritance are rooted in religious beliefs and practices which have been abandoned by most Khasis, the custom

is firmly and widely observed today, proving wrong the prediction of colonial anthropologists that once Christianity spreads, matriliny would gradually disappear[38].

However, it should be pointed out that in Ri War, of which Sohtrai and Laitrum are a part, *ka khadduh* usually only inherits the ancestral home, as the other children, including sons, have equal rights to ancestral properties. These frequently exist in the form of *bri* or farm lands, and not property attached to the house. But despite what people might call a more just system of inheritance among the War people, it remains the case that the sons' right to inheritance does not transfer to their children; the ancestral property returns to his mother or sisters after he passes because, unlike self-acquired property, ancestral property is fundamentally matrilineal, in that it belongs to the specific clan of the son, of which his children could never belong. However, it must be mentioned that as Cantlie (2008) has commented, in reality, *ka khadduh* is a "limited heir" since she is traditionally only the custodian of family property, and she would ordinarily need to consult her maternal uncles and brothers before doing anything she pleases with the property. In Chapter Two, we shall explore how matriliny operates not only in the inheritance of ancestral houses but also in the caring of memorial monuments built for and by matrilineal kin in the Sohtrai and Laitrum landscapes.

Fieldwork Methods and Questions of Positionality

The fieldwork for this thesis was spread over sixteen months in the years 2021 and 2022. However, I returned to the field unofficially and for a short month-long period in 2023 when I was visiting my family in Shillong city. My fieldwork period coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic which caused several disruptions, first, by preventing me from leaving for the field in 2020 as scheduled, and second, by disturbing the on-going fieldwork experience in mid-2021 when another lockdown was imposed in Meghalaya as Covid-19 infections rose again in the state. Government-imposed social-distancing (which was duly followed by the individual village

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[38] However, it should be mentioned that in the past few decades, there have been sections in the Khasi community voicing against the "injustice" and negative repercussions of matriliny. Men's rights organisations such as Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) and the Maitshaphrang Movement have been leading these conversations.

administrations) created huge barriers to the flows of fieldwork sociality during those few weeks. However, when the lockdown ended, I was able to ease back quite swiftly. I should also mention here that because I was not able to travel to India and start fieldwork in 2020, I spent three months doing archival research at the British Library and this experience proved to be very helpful in the framing of some chapters in this thesis.

I divided my time in the field among three villages – Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar – all of which are in the same part of the Southern Khasi Hills. The decision to conduct a multi-sited fieldwork was driven by my initial plan of writing an ethnography exclusively about the Scott Road, which runs through these villages. However, it quickly became clear that the field was presenting me with many more elements and layers to explore ethnographically. Embedding myself in the three closely situated villages gave me a sense of the regional world and how there are grains of interconnectedness amidst distinctness. People in Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar see themselves as Khasis from the Cherrapunji area who have been through the same historical processes particular to the region, and who have similar relationships with the state government based in Shillong. Interconnectedness in the everyday manifested in the villages' reliance on the same markets (Haat Majai and Iew Sohra), schools (Ram Krishna Mission School, St John's Higher Secondary School and the Cherra Presbyterian Secondary School), hospitals (the Cherrapunji Community Health Centre) and sometimes, the same people providing various services. For instance, Bah Kal, the electrician, and Bah Medon, the meat seller (who sold pork and chicken in a van) divided their time among the Sohtrai, Laitrum, Mawkliar and a few other villages in the area; again, I encountered them at different points in all three villages. However, as explained earlier, proximity does not always mean uniformity in identity as well as in how people live their lives; distinctness in dialect, religion, and livelihoods among residents of different villages is either emphasised or undermined as per situation.

Before I proceed further, I would like to briefly reflect on my position as a Khasi person doing ethnography in the Khasi Hills, a place where I grew up and maintain connections with every day through relationships with family, kin and friends. Some may categorise it as an example of "ethnography at home" (Jackson, 1987). The main criticism of ethnography at home is the possible lack or dearth of critical distance of

the ethnographer from the world they seek to study. It is assumed that ethnographers alien to the research community are better at identifying the latter's "unconscious grammar" etched in behaviour than insider ethnographers who are too familiar with the same and therefore would not consider them as remarkable (O'Reilly, 2009, 5). While these are noteworthy concerns, I would argue that the particular circumstances surrounding my position in the field helped me evade some of these risks. Although my informants and I share the same ethnicity, language, and in some instances, the same religion, there were also markers of difference that shaped our relationship, making me occupy an awkward, or perhaps strategic, location as an insider-outsider. I was an outsider in that I was not from a different rural part of Meghalaya but instead someone from the city or a "nongsor", one who now lives in the United Kingdom. I was also an outsider because I was perceived to be middle class; even though my informants did not specifically use the term "middle class", they recognised my access to the English language and higher education, and my parents' roles as central government employees, things that are seen as middle class in Meghalaya. Indeed, I was deeply conscious of these aspects of my background that marked me as different and underlined my position of relative privilege.

Coming back to the point about critical distance in ethnography, my position as an outsider who knew very little about the villages in my field site, and who did not have prior connections with people from the area before the commencement of fieldwork, made my ethnographic experience less "at home". In other words, despite doing fieldwork among my own ethnic community, I was not a part of the specific kin and friendship networks in the field site. Further, although I have lived my life as a Khasi in Shillong – speaking Khasi, eating Khasi food, maintaining Khasi kin relationships and responsibilities, etc. – the Khasiness articulated through the closeness of village community and through deep ties with the land and landscape in my field site was relatively alien to my lived experience. This was because the structures of urbanity in Shillong leave little room for those elements to flourish. However, it cannot be denied that my general identity as a Khasi was a strong factor in determining the ease of acceptance into the community in all three villages. In this sense, I was an "insider" and there were several indicators of this position as well. For instance, it was not difficult for me to procure permission from the Sirdar and the

Durbar to conduct the fieldwork and live in the community. This is important because inhabitants in these villages are strictly Khasi. Further, it only took a visit or two for me to develop connections with people before they felt comfortable and trusted me enough to assist me with finding a place to stay, and help me with settling in.

Although my initial plan was to live with families, I soon realised that sharing space and resources was not something many people in the villages could afford. For instance, the supply of water and electricity was routinely interrupted, and for many of my informants, space in the house was tightly shared among family members. However, living separately did not preclude participant observation as a practice since the village was an intimate environment, marked by the almost daily exchange of visits between me and my neighbours and friends. Intimacy was also represented in the gesture of keeping the front door of houses open so as to always accept visitors, something which I started doing as well. Acts of reciprocity were also daily features; apart from the formal reciprocity of sharing general information about me and my research with people who became key informants, reciprocity manifested in quotidian activities like eating together, sharing cooking ingredients, splitting taxi fares and helping each other with various chores. On occasions when I travelled to Shillong to see my parents, friends from the village would give me bags of betel nut or a few jackfruits to take with me; in return, I would buy them things not available in the village which included clothes, medicines and certain types of food.

To intensify the practice of observation as part of the participant observation experience, I spent a considerable amount of time hanging out in social spaces in the villages such as tea shops and tourist spots (in Mawkliar). Tea shops were particularly important since locals from the village gathered there several times a day. In all three villages, I managed to befriend the owners of tea shops and developed a routine of helping them with cooking or serving food, which ultimately gave me the chance to meet people and observe the everyday rhythms of the community. I also attended various social and ritual events which included football matches, election campaign debates, birthday and baptism celebrations, funerals and, in Sohtrai, the three-day annual ritual festival called Ka Phur. On each of these occasions, I was invited by people I had befriended, not merely as a guest but as a participant who took part in preparatory tasks like betel nut-cutting, vegetable-chopping and tea-making,

particularly in celebrations and funerals. These were very useful social platforms which not only gave me great insights into the intricacies of social relations within the community but also provided me with opportunities to connect with people I had not otherwise met. However, I have to mention that in these occasions, I was also in turn being observed by people in the village, many of whom made a range of assumptions. For example, I was asked if I was someone's relative from Shillong, a government worker newly posted in the village, or someone's new wife who has recently moved. Questions about my clan identity, age, marital status, religion and family were regularly posed, and some were particularly interested in why, as a thirty-something woman, I do not yet have children. As intrusive as they may seem, such curiosities are representative of the intimate nature of participant observation and ethnography in general, while also being characteristic of Khasi social life.

Within this context of reciprocity, rapport was concomitantly established without much effort on my part. Certain people in the community were particularly interested in my research and while some made verbal declarations of wanting to help by sharing their local and "inside" perspectives, others simply did so without observing the need to underline their positions. Interestingly, this was largely a gendered phenomenon because the former category exclusively consisted of men and the latter of women. Perhaps this was because it was easier and more socially acceptable for women to interact with me in any context whatsoever, but less so for men; thus, the need for men to formalise their relationship with me and to emphasise my role as a researcher and them as informants was felt more urgently. A few weeks into settling in each village, I started identifying the people I wanted to get to know better and frame as key informants. With this group of people, interviews were mainly unstructured and informal as they unfolded amidst everyday conversations and as we spent time together at each other's houses or during foot journeys where I would be shown places considered significant in the surrounding landscape. However, I did hold formal and largely structured interviews with representatives of the Durbar who held positions in various committees.

My position as an insider-outsider ethnographer allowed me the strategic flexibility to gain easy access into the communities in the field, while also maintaining the objective distance that is crucial for the recognition of ethnographic material

among the overwhelming landscape of the field site. However, it would be dishonest of me to claim that such a dual identity was not without its complications. Without giving away too much detail, there was an incident of conflict in the field that happened precisely because of a confusion over my status. While some considered me a close member of the community, certain individuals did not feel the same and in fact saw me as a "nongwi" or an outsider, who did not have the right to do certain things in the village. My role as a researcher coming from abroad was suddenly highlighted on this occasion. Apart from leaving me a bit dejected, such an episode made clear that with certain people like me who are not "trai shnong" and without ancestral connections to the villages, our identity as insiders by virtue of being Khasi was not enough. Moreover, I realised that the status of the ethnographer can never be assumed to be stable and fixed, regardless of positionality and identity. Overall, this incident taught me the messiness and fragility of fieldwork, and how distinctly human the entanglements in the field are.

Thesis Plan

Chapter One – Landscape of Routes: The Scott Road

In this chapter, I explore the landscape of the Southern Khasi Hills through a study of the David Scott Road, a colonial road that cuts across the Khasi Hills connecting Sylhet and Assam. Although it was constructed to further colonial domination and expansion of the East India Company, once it appeared, the Scott Road was integrated into the network of trade routes in the region and became a part of what I call the "landscape of routes," and soon was appropriated by local Khasis in various ways. While it became a site for the assertion of tribal sovereignty by some Khasi chiefs, it was also woven into the lives of ordinary people who used it to travel to *haats* and their *bri* farms. I gather narratives about the road from informants in my field site, and in this way study the life of the road outside the parameters of colonial infrastructure. I then turn to the present-day existence of the road, as it survives in ruins in the Khasi Hills landscape. I specifically look at how people in Sohtrai village aspire to use the road as a tourist site, recasting the ruin as a valuable piece of colonial heritage through which their village would be known in the tourism world.

Chapter Two – *Kynmaw*: Remembering through Infrastructure in Ri War

This chapter explores the War tradition of building the *Mot Shongthait* or memorial monuments which are simultaneously resting places that spread across the region's landscape. Although these monuments are found in other villages in the foothills, the chapter focuses on Sohtrai and Laitrum where the author conducted fieldwork. The monuments are built in memory of deceased kin and while they embody a family's private sense of grief and loss, they also serve a public purpose by providing spaces for travellers to rest and congregate during foot journeys as they navigate hilly terrain. This chapter looks at how these monuments are material expressions of clan and family belonging on the landscape and also how they function as infrastructure in the villages.

Chapter Three – Fitting into the Lens: Tourism Landscapes in Mawkliar Village and the Khasi Hills

This chapter examines the symbolic representation of landscape in Mawkliar, and the Khasi Hills in general, by exploring depictions in colonial writing and tourism media. It pays attention to the "colonial gaze" that frames nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial narratives and traces its contemporary reincarnation in the "tourist gaze" found in tourism media today. Concomitantly, the chapter also pays attention to the physical aspect of the tourism landscape where the Mawkliar environment Is increasingly being shaped and modelled for tourism, possessing a particular kind of frontier and hill tourism aesthetic.

Chapter Four – Lawkyntang Conjurings in the Khasi Landscape

In this chapter, I turn to the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* (sacred forest) in Mawkliar, known to be home to a spirit called *u Ryngkew u Basa*. The *lawkyntang* is believed to be a place of sacredness and power, and despite the abandonment of ritual performances at the site, its potency is felt by people in the village who find themselves negotiating with the presence of the *u Ryngkew u Basa* as they interact with the landscape day to day. The *lawkyntang* can thus be understood as an enduring form of Khasi place-making, one which firmly sits amidst various transformations of the landscape.

Chapter Five – Tourism Landscape and Customary Land Tenure in Mawkliar

This chapter examines the intricacies of the customary land tenure of Mawkliar and how it interacts with the tourism industry in the Elaka. It looks at how land is assembled as a resource for tourism in a context where land is collectively owned. It closely pays attention to the ways the allocation of land by the Durbar (village council) in the past decade has led to an uneven distribution of economic wellbeing in the village. Even though most people in the village are dependent on tourism for their livelihoods, families with easier access to capital benefit from tourism more than those without. The chapter also looks at a singular case of land dispossession in Mawkliar from over thirty years ago in conjunction with the Meghalaya government's current approach towards tourism which is heavily based on the adoption of the PPP model as a way to manoeuvre the private sector's entry into the tourism arena in the state.

Chapter Six – Menshohnoh Suspicions: Witchcraft on the Khasi Landscape

  In this chapter, I look at the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* belief that exists in the Khasi Hills, and particularly in the three villages which make up my field site. U Thlen is a serpentine evil spirit believed to be kept and nurtured by certain Khasi households called *menshohnoh* in exchange for wealth and well-being. The *menshohnoh* households are said to nurture *u thlen* by feeding the spirit human blood, a substance they procure through acts of murder. Since a few families and households in my field site are suspected of being *menshohnoh*, I examine the people's articulations of *menshohnoh* presences among them and within the intimate structure of the village. I also explore how suspicion itself is manifested, while situating this phenomenon in the realm of the changing landscape of social relations and economic lives within the community, keeping in mind the belief that wealth accumulation is the *menshohnoh*'s motivation in nurturing *u thlen.*

Landscape of Routes: The Scott Road

In this opening chapter, I explore the frontier landscape of the Southern Khasi Hills — one marked by historical practices of travel, trade and mobility — focussing on the Scott Road, a colonial road embedded within that landscape. Built in the nineteenth century to meet imperial aims by connecting Sylhet and Assam across the Khasi Hills, the Scott Road soon merged with the existing network of trade routes that link the interiors of the hills to the foothill markets called *haats*. This meant that although the road was a colonial infrastructural entity, it was quickly given to local use by Khasi travellers, and as we shall see in this chapter, it remains a part of people's experiences even today. As the Scott Road started being used as a trade route and a pathway to *bri*[39] farms, it became a part of the region's "landscape of movement" (Snead, Erickson & Darling, 2009), a context where people's movement itself constitutes the landscape. Since journeys on trade routes primarily involved shared experiences of walking, the process of engagement with the landscape through those journeys became enriched with personal and social meaning. In this way, alongside its purpose as a tool of imperial expansion, the Scott Road was also generative of non-imperial possibilities rooted in the lives of people on the land it traverses. At present, the Scott Road, as I encountered it during fieldwork, is largely a colonial ruin, one surviving in its varied states of entwinement with communities who live along it. While I agree with Ann Stoler's (2016, 5) conceptualisation of "imperial debris and ruination" as colonial material and immaterial presences that continue to cast enduring ruinous effects in the world, I am keen to underline their complexity in certain contexts where they can also be appropriated and productive and therefore, not entirely destructive.

Although the Scott Road runs through many Khasi villages, in this thesis, I focus on its existence in Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar — the three villages that make my field site. In the first part of this chapter, I elaborate on the Scott Road's history as an imperial tool of subjugation and expansion, but also highlight how the road itself

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[39] A *bri* is forested farm particular to the Southern Khasi and Jaintia Hills otherwise called Ri War, where betel nut and bay leaf trees are grown among other non-cash crop trees. *Bri* farms are usually located in the lowlands, closer to the foothills and the plains.

became a site of anti-colonial resistance. This exploration of the road's past life is important not only in providing an element of background for the ethnography in this chapter, but also because colonialism is a quiet lingering force in the landscape. I then pay attention to narratives of past *haat* journeys on the Scott Road to trace the change in the culture of trade and travel over the years since border security became more rigid, but more importantly to understand people's attachment to these travels on the road itself. Indeed, the Partition of British India was a colonially manufactured event with immense ruinous repercussions. In the last section of the chapter, I look at contemporary experiences of the Scott Road: how people have lived and are living among its disintegrated and ruined material presence, and what generative effects that coexistence bears. By focusing the discussion in the chapter on the Scott Road, I am able to move between different temporal realms – the past, the present and the future – and engage with a multitude of occurrences, processes and practices on the landscape that have historically contributed to the lives of people in my field site today.

The Colonial Life of the Scott Road

When I made my first visit to Sohtrai in January 2021, I did not know whether I was going to find any trace of the Scott Road. Like most people in Shillong, I was only familiar with what people called the David Scott Trail, a trekking route from Mawphlang to Sohrarim, which has been a tourist attraction for decades. Encountering the spectre of the road in the archive of the British Library, I learned that this 4-hour hike trail, popular among adventurous tourists and locals from Shillong city, was a small stretch of a historically significant colonial "high-road." I was immediately convinced of its existence, albeit in states of ruination, in villages where the road originally passed. In that first visit, less than a mile away from the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border, I met Bah Bor for the first time at a location in the lowlands of Sohtrai village. A man in his late-thirties, Bah Bor was the Secretary for the Sohtrai Durbar and also an entrepreneur keen on exploring tourism in his village. We parked our vehicle on a dirt track which paralleled a dry river-bed and across us was what seemed like an entrance to a stony pathway. About 2 meters wide, the path ran along eastwards and soon disappeared into the surrounding *bri* forest. Weathered rectangular limestone and sandstone blocks lay together to make its body which has

long been covered with patches of moss and foliage. Almost 200 years ago, this stony pathway was classified as a "road" in the colonial record and ran from Sylhet in present-day Bangladesh to Assam in India, through the Khasi Hills in between. It was called the "Sylhet-Assam Road" or the "Scott Road" after David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General on the North-East Frontier of Bengal (1823-1831), who first envisioned it.

Figure 3. Scott Road in Sohtrai (Source: Photo by author)   Figure 4. Scott Road in Laitrum (Source: Photo by author)

Today, the Scott Road exists in bits and pieces scattered all along its old route on the Khasi landscape. This was how Sohtrai, Laitrum and Mawkliar became the three villages constituting my fieldwork site. As the Scott Road climbs the southern Khasi Hills from Sylhet, it cuts through all of them, surviving in varying degrees and forms at each location. At present though, the road has taken on new functions and meanings, and embodies different temporalities. In Sohtrai, where it bypasses the village on the west, the road is sequestered and left to irregular usage by people travelling to the *bri* farmlands downhill. In Mawkliar too, what remains of the road stretches on the eastern edges and is only frequented by foragers, fire-wood collectors and sometimes by men who clandestinely venture to purchase locally-brewed alcohol from a neighbouring village. In Laitrum, however, a huge part of the road runs straight through the village, with houses on either side where it is still a part of people's everyday lives. However, in all these geographies, the road exists as a ruin and survives in different states of disrepair and deterioration.

It is important to mention here that although I use the word "ruin", I do not see it as an apolitical aesthetic concept that purely glamorises the ruined object and detaches it from the political and exploitative reality it is a part of — a critique famously associated with Gordillo[40] (2014) who instead uses "rubble" as a terminology to describe material leftovers of colonialism. Like Stoler (2016), I do not see the word "ruin" as wanting of the critical import because ruins, especially colonial ruins, are always active agents coherent with the destructive forces they embody through which humans, non-humans and landscapes are reconfigured. However, while this chapter shows that the Scott Road is not abstracted from its colonial history, it will also reveal how the road is not strictly condemned to its existence as a colonial tool but gets incorporated into people's lives. Emplaced in the Khasi Hills landscape, the ruined road even today offers new possibilities.

People in my field site call the Scott Road *ka surok kulai* (horse road) even though there is not a single horse that one sees in the vicinity today. The term is a reference to what the road was in the colonial period: a bridle road for foot journeys and horseback travel between hills and plains. However, the local term "surok kulai" is also revelatory of the material and ideological constitution of the road, as it differs from other trade routes in the southern Khasi Hills. The use of the word "surok" a derivation from "sarak" which is an Urdu word for "avenue" or "road" — emphasises the modern and alien embodiment of the road as that built by the colonial state. Making a distinction between trails and roads, Tomothy Earle (2009, 257) asserts that roads are more associated with states since their construction involves a huge investment of labour and capital, that which will support engineering structures like bridges, culverts, causeways, and pavements. The Roman arch bridges consistently present along the Scott Road are marks of colonial engineering but as we shall learn in this section, in this context, labour and capital were procured from colonial acts of coercion and manipulation. Apart from the arch bridges and certain wider sections of the Scott Road, there are not too many obvious material elements that distinguish the Scott Road from other trade routes. The older Khasi trade routes in my field site are

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[40] To Gordillo (2014), "rubble" conceptualises the destructive processes (like colonialism) that produce the rubble and captures the presentness of the decay. Rubble refuses to be 'tamed as "heritage,"' he argues (Gordillo, 2014, 14).

referred to as "lynti Khasi" or "pathways of the Khasis" and the word "surok" is not used to identify them at all. Similar to the Scott Road, these routes are paved with slabs of stone seemingly of the same kind and weathered in a similar fashion as they are draped in moss and painted with dead lichen. As one walks on the Scott Road even today, its embeddedness in a network of pathways that spread across this liminal terrain between hills and plains is strongly visible; these "lynti Khasi" intersect the Scott Road at various points.

Figure 5. Arch bridge on the Scott Road in Sohtrai (Source: Photo by author)

The old and decrepit Scott Road before us was once an important line of communication that extended and cemented British dominance over the Khasi Hills in the early nineteenth century. Along with the eastern road that runs through the Jaintia Hills, it was the earliest major colonial infrastructural intrusion into the hills; smaller roads reaching coal and limestone mines had appeared earlier in the late eighteenth century, when the Company had just integrated itself into the limestone trade of the foothills. It was built by the East India Company under the suggestion of Political Agent David Scott, who saw the need to create a shorter and quicker transport link between the British territories Sylhet and Assam through the Khasi Hills, still unoccupied by the Company at the time. Additionally, Scott wanted to secure the frontier hills immediately after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), when the King of Ava had just relinquished his hold of Assam, north of the Khasi Hills. The Scott Road was therefore the Company's response to the urgency of improving communications in the region, caused by numerous factors.

The road was thought to provide speedy transport of troops, a swift movement of intelligence, and access to trade and markets across the region. As Andrew May (2012, 82) points out, cutting a road through the mountains reduces travel time massively; instead of the 400-mile route between Sylhet and Assam through the Brahmaputra, the road through the Khasi Hills would make a shorter journey of only about 125 miles. No doubt this was an early attempt at "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1990) by the East India Company to fuel its political, military and capitalist ambitions in the frontier. The hope was also that the possibility of swift flow of military power through the road would open up and enhance the circulation of commodities and resources in the largely untouched highlands. However, what was needed first was the subjugation of the Khasi states occupying the hills, and soon, an opportunity arrived.

In 1826, Scott's dream of building the road through the Khasi Hills started to bear fruit when a treaty was signed between him and Tirot Sing, the *Syiem*[41] of *Hima*[42] Nongkhlaw. In exchange for the freedom to rent land in Assam which the British now controlled, Tirot Sing and his ministers consented to the Scott Road passing through their country. They also agreed to provide the materials for the road's construction for a price and to maintain its up-keep in the future. Soon, the regions were surveyed for the road, prisoners of the Company were recruited as labourers for the project, and British troops were allowed to pass through Nongkhlaw freely. However, the acquiescent response to the growing colonial authority of the Company in Nongkhlaw was short-lived. In 1829 occurred what the colonial archive terms the "Nongkhlaw massacre" in which two British officers, Lieutenant Bedingfield and Captain Burlton of the Bengal Artillery, along with many labourers working on the road, were killed by Khasis in Nongkhlaw. This episode resulted in a ruthless, aggressive response from the Company where military operations in the region were expanded and intensified. At the same time, a succession of rebellions across the Khasi Hills erupted where many Khasi states, Mawkliar, Mawsynram and Sohtrai to name a few, joined Hima Nongkhlaw in the fight against the colonial threat. Even though the rebellions lasted for four years at various fronts, the Company's deployment of a combination of tactics

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[41] Chief
[42] *Hima* is an independent Khasi state.

— brutal violence, political and legal intimidation and paternalistic manipulation[43] of representatives of certain Khasi states — led to the steady and firm establishment of British authority in the hills. Tirot Sing was captured and imprisoned in Dhaka in 1833 and Khasi states signed treaties with the Company conveying varying degrees of submission, depending on the nature of their involvement in the rebellions[44].

In a period when British knowledge and control of the frontier hills was miniscule and uncertain, the Scott Road emerged as a significant infrastructural symbol of colonial expansion. May (2012) compares it to the Grand Trunk Road which aided British domination of northern India. He points out that in a similar fashion, the Scott Road in the Khasi Hills, "… made British imperial power overt, transportable and extensible…" (May, 2012, 81). As it snaked across various Khasi villages, the road became an intimidating announcement of colonial authority and its consolidation. It had started operating as an instrument of oppression even before its completion and while in the process of its making. After the Nongkhlaw incident, some of the Khasi states were legally obligated through the treaties they signed with the Company to assist in the road-building process by providing labour and raw materials, oftentimes for free. Unsurprisingly, Tirot Sing's successor, Rujjum Sing of Hima Nongkhlaw, was forced to sign such a treaty in 1834 and had to hugely contribute to the construction of the Scott Road. In Hima Mawkliar, where the *Syiem* was removed after British conquest in 1829 and the people were made British subjects, regular repair of the portion of the road that passed through the territory was demanded in lieu of tax. In the following decades, the Company and later the British Government, adopted road-building assistance as a component of many treaties with Khasi states. Hima Jirang (1841), Hima Nongstoin (1862), Hima Myriaw (1865), Hima Mawiong (1869), Hima Mawsynram (1875), and Hima Bhawal (1877) were some of the states subjected to this duty of building and repairing roads. The mobilisation of local assistance in the form of funding and labour provision through the assertion of colonial might was seen elsewhere in the frontier, particularly in the Naga Hills where, as Dzuvichu (2013) explains, the British created positions like the "goanburras" (village headmen) and the "dobhashis" (interpreters) for labour recruitment to work on roads.

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[43] See Ray, *Placing the Frontier* (2023)
[44] See Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties* (1892).

Simultaneous to the Scott Road's construction, or perhaps aided by it, other types of structures were planted on the Khasi hills, from bridges to barracks to bungalows, all of which, according to Major Adam White of the Assam Light Infantry, "...promised a permanent stay" (1832, 39). Very soon after 1829, apart from the bungalows at Nongkhlaw, a sanatorium was built for recuperating soldiers and Company workers in Cherrapunji, another location through which the Scott Road passes. In Chapter Three, we shall further learn about the construction of Cherrapunji as a colonial hill station. The Scott Road therefore became a part of a constellation of material elements which physically and symbolically colonised new frontier spaces like the Khasi Hills. Constituting what Christopher Gray (2002) calls "modern territoriality", they together communicated and consolidated colonial power through their tangible existence.

In Sohtrai, where I met Bah Bor, the Scott Road was built soon after 1829, when Hima Sohtrai[45] (or Sohtraipunji according to colonial records) succumbed to British conquest. Originating in Sylhet, the road ran from Pandua (now called Companiganj) to Terriaghat (now called Tharia) at the Sohtrai foothills, and ascended towards Cherrapunji, and later Nongkhlaw and finally Assam. Hima Sohtrai was one of the Khasi states which joined Hima Nongkhlaw in the rebellion against the East India Company after the Nongkhlaw incident. Following the defeat, the three Sirdars (representatives) - U Mit, U Hon and U Dur - were coerced into signing a treaty[46] declaring Sohtrai a British possession.[47] Once local authority in Sohtrai was heavily subdued, road-building could swiftly continue. However, a pledge of "submission" to the Company did not preclude regular acts of defiance against it. The Scott Road was the site on which rebellious gestures unfolded. For one, travellers using the road, particularly those representing the Company and its administration, were often

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[45] Hima Sohtrai was an independent Khasi state which was politically reduced to the administrative unit of "Elaka" after British conquest. Elaka Sohtrai is now an agglomeration of six villages, among which Sohtrai village is one.

[46] The other important agreement established by this treaty was that in exchange for the killings of subjects of the Company by its inhabitants, the Hima was to give the Company half of the limestone reserve available within its territories.

[47] Along with Mawkliar, Mawmluh, Byrong and the entire Jaintia Hills, Sohtrai was categorised under a list called "British Possessions". Khasi inhabitants in these areas were legally considered British subjects and the Company, and later the British Government, had the right to interfere in any matter whatsoever within their jurisdiction. Further, local representatives called Sirdars were allowed very limited judicial autonomy, whereby they could only decide over "petty" civil and criminal cases and not all.

robbed, harassed and attacked by people from Sohtrai. In 1833, two individuals travelling from Tharia to Cherrapunji were allegedly killed[48] by Sohtrai villagers and the colonial government responded by imposing an annual quitrent of Rs. 300 on the Hima, something which no other Khasi state was subjected to. Further, in 1858, Member of the Board of Revenue on Deputation to the Khasi Hills, W J Allen reported with much frustration that every year in the rainy season, the Sirdars of Sohtrai levied a tax on goods transported from the interior of the hills to the foothills[49]. Indeed, once it was built, the Scott Road also became one of the primary roads Khasis used to go trade at the *haats* in the foothills. Duties on goods were imposed on the Scott Road before they were sold in the *haats* or before being put on boats going to Sylhet. Offended by its outright dismissal of the government's authority, and fearful of the possibility of other Khasi chiefs resorting to a similar tactic elsewhere along the Scott Road, Allen urged for a complete prohibition of the tax.

The duties imposition established by the Sohtrai Sirdars on the Scott Road, was a small but important articulation of Khasi sovereignty. The tax represented the Sirdars' challenge and disregard for colonial power, and their assertion of territorial rights remained even after the entrenchment of British colonisation. However, in the eyes of the British Government, the road was colonial "property" - it was a government-built road and Sohtrai, unlike other villages through which the road ran, was deemed a British Possession. The Sirdars therefore had no legitimate authority to levy taxes on the road's goods traffic. As Allen's report emphasised, the Sirdars were merely "headmen" whose sovereign rights had been stripped off by the treaty signed with the Company at the time of the 1829 "conquest". Even though it was never replicated in other Khasi states and despite being enforced for only a few years, when it lasted, the Sohtrai road tax was nevertheless successful in temporarily unsettling and disrupting British authority, at a time when the colonial grip was tightening all over the Khasi Hills.

Trade and *Haats* in the Borderland

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[48] IOR/V/27/241/9: 1901
[49] IOR/V/27/241/8

While the Scott Road was a material realisation of colonial ambitions, in much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it also became a useful piece of transport infrastructure for people from the interior of the hills to travel to the markets at the foothills. One of the reasons behind the Scott Road's popularity was because, although networks of trade routes had existed long before the colonial era, the Scott Road was one of the first long, modern roads, stretching from the northern end to the southern end of the Khasi Hills, creating linkages for previously unconnected places. The Southern Khasi Hills are part of a larger frontier space where hills transition into plains; where tribes and non-tribes intermingle, exchange and coexist, and where there is a plurality of sovereign, legal, economic and social structures that have historically shaped and influenced the lives of people in these regions. One of the most fundamental distinguishing features of this frontier space is the flourishing of commercial and trade relationships among communities — particularly between people from the hills and those settled in the plains — fulfilled by the plethora of rotating markets called *haats* scattered along the foothills. For the landlocked people in the Khasi Hills, the *haats* on the southern foothills neighbouring Sylhet and the northern foothills neighbouring Assam, served as crucial points of trade and commodity exchange to obtain products not available in the hills and sell produce to people in the plains. As Umdor (2023) explains, since the Khasi Hills, and Ri War (where Sohtrai and Laitrum are located) in particular, was deficient in agricultural surplus, the people depended on the *haats* or markets in the foothills as well as the plains. It is worthy to note here that the historical engagement in trade among the Khasis aligns with Dove (2011) who, in echoing Netting (1993), argues that "smallholders" residing in hilly interiors are not isolated from larger networks of economic exchange. Speaking about the Kantu', a tribal group in Indonesian Borneo, Dove (2011, 5) asserts that although they are swidden cultivators, the Kantu's involvement in markets is "an integral part of their history and identity". The Kantu' engage in a "dual economy" whereby they cultivate rubber and pepper to sell as commodities in markets while they also grow subsistence crops like rice and tubers (Dove, 2011, 14). Elements of a dual economy system could be discerned among the people of Sohtrai who grow cash crops (historically, oranges but now mainly betel nut and peppers), alongside certain tubers like sweet potatoes and yam. However, rice has always been procured from the plains. In this geographical and socio-economic

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context, the trade route networks that spread across the Southern Khasi Hills were important pathways which link the interiors of the hills to the *haats.*

In order to understand the importance of the trade routes in the hills, including the Scott Road, it is essential that I briefly elaborate on the significance of the foothills *haats* and markets in general to the Khasi and Jaiñtia communities. First, I must clarify that there are two types of markets in the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills — the *haat* and the *ïew* — both of which are weekly markets, as they rotate from place to place in a particular region in that one week. While the *haat* is a borderland market at the northern and southern foothills of the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills, the *ïew* is a market located within the hills. Trade routes in the hills link villages to both *haat* and *iew* markets but because the foothills are the primary sites of export and import and overall exchange with various communities from elsewhere, historically, the *haats* were more important from a commerce point of view. It should be noted that because this chapter focuses on the Scott Road, a route that was primarily used by people in my field site to access *haats* at the foothills, the discussion will largely concern the *haat* market. However, the *iew* market is considered below as a model of comparison.

The *haat* is found in borderland places which are jurisdictionally fluid and where political authority is constantly contested and negotiated. On the other hand, authority over a specific *ïew* is relatively more defined because these markets in the interior of the hills are deeply associated with the particular *Hima* or Khasi state they are a part of. In fact, according to historian Hamlet Bareh (2016 [1961], 325), the establishment of the *ïew* market in each location was an important manifestation of the founding of Khasi polities in the precolonial period. The *ïew* markets are politically vital also because Khasi Chiefs, the Syiems and Sirdars, do not collect land revenue or tax their subjects and are therefore predominantly dependent on taxing markets for both personal and public revenue[50]. Indeed, the *ïew* is also an explicitly religious site where megaliths are erected and sacrificial rituals for the market deity *Blei Iew* are performed; as Ramirez (2014, 104) points out, the Khasi hills markets, particularly in

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[50] This market tax, collected even today by the various existing Khasi states, is called *ka khrong ka dan* and it is levied on sellers, and according to Bareh (2016 [1961]), fines were also imposed on people for anti-social behaviour. Although *ka khrong ka dan* now primarily takes the form of money, earlier, Khasi chiefs would accept animals and goods as well; goats and rice were two popular modes of payment (Ramirez, 2014; Bareh, 2016 [1961]).

pre-colonial times, were not just economic nodes but significant political and religious centres[51]. In this sense, the *ïew* bears some semblance of constancy, marked by the megaliths, if not by permanence of the market itself which, as mentioned before, is only held weekly.

Figure 6. Megaliths at Iew Laitlyngkot (Source: Photo by author)   Figure 7. Megaliths at the old market site in Mylliem
                                                                      (Source: Photo by author)

The *haats* at the foothills, however, are not seen as religious sites and sometimes lack permanent association with a particular Khasi state. This is largely because *haats* are located in the liminal borderland zones where, in the precolonial and colonial periods, sovereignty was often shifting and indeterminate (Ludden, 2003; Cederlof, 2013). Depending on specific contexts, foothills *haats* could be organised in the territory of either Khasi and Jaiñtia states or in non-Khasi and non-Jaiñtia jurisdictions, like that of the Ahom rulers of Assam in the north of the Khasi Hills and the Zamindar[52]-controlled regions of Sylhet, in the south of the Khasi Hills. This fluidity of territorial dominance in the Assam and Bengal borderlands meant that, historically, conflicts between hills and plains people were more to do with control over *haats* and trade rather than land per se (Ramirez, 2014, 114). Ludden (2003) explains that even in the early colonial period, i.e., the 1780s and 1790s, before the Scott Road was built, these foothills markets were regular sites of battles involving Khasi chiefs and merchants, Bengali merchants and zamindars, and the army of the East India Company. It is this element of fluidity that the British exploited as they made claims over the plain regions, closing down certain foothill *haats* previously controlled by Khasi chiefs or simply barring the hill Khasis from accessing them. Ray (2023) asserts that the

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[51] Although rituals in *ïew* markets have largely been abandoned, they are performed regularly in a number of places like Iewduh in Shillong and Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills.
[52] In the Mughal era, a Zamindar in Bengal was a tax collector who retained 10 percent of the revenue they collected, but in the late 18th century, the colonial government expanded the role of Zamindars making them landowners, and in the process created a landed aristocracy in Bengal.

closing of markets was a key strategy of oppression of the colonial administration, disempowering Khasi states by cutting access to trade supplies and to markets where Khasi goods and produce were channelled. We shall revisit the question of the disruptions of foothills *haats* by the colonial government later. For now, it suffices to say that *haats* have been crucial sites of exchange for people in the southern Khasi Hills for a very long time, and that political authority in these frontier geographies have historically manifested in the control of the *haats* and the overall trade. It is within this landscape of commerce and movement that trade routes became very important lines of connectivity, and as we shall see later, powerful social entities that became a part of people's lives.
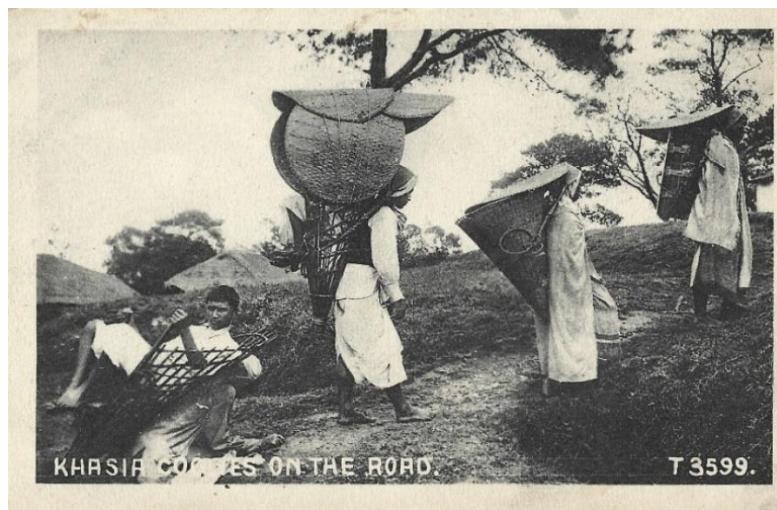
Figure 8. Postcard titled "Khasia Coolies on the Road" which captures Khasi travellers walking on a trade route up the hill with goods procured from the haat. (Source: Salesian Mission, undated. Physical copy is from the author's collections).

During fieldwork, my elderly informants emphatically spoke about how Ri War used to be completely dependent on the foothills *haats* for supplies. "Everything came from Shilot[53] when we were growing up. We didn't know Shillong at all. Shillong is far and it costed so much to go there; Shilot is right below us," said Kong Nisha, a seventy-four-year-old woman from Laitrum. People from Sohtrai and Laitrum explained that *bri* cultivators like themselves primarily traded oranges, betel nut, betel leaf, black pepper and bay leaf for items like rice, salt, fish, *ktung*[54] and *shira*[55] sold by Bengalis from Sylhet. It was not only people from Ri War who relied on the *haats*; Khasis from

[53] Khasi pronunciation of "Sylhet."
[54] Dry fish
[55] Flat rice flakes

various upland villages who did not have *bri* farms but instead practiced shifting cultivation brought down crops like potatoes, turmeric, cinnamon and garlic. However, it was iron ore and iron implements that were the main exports of the uplands as many villages in the region engaged in iron smelting[56]. Historian Cecile Mawlong's (2004) assertion that funerary pottery used by people in Cherrapunji were procured from Sylhet, not from the specific Khasi and Jaiñtia villages known for pottery, shows that even religiously significant objects were at times dependent on the trade with Sylhet. The *haats* were therefore critical points of trade connection where people not only sourced staple supplies, but even items of social and religious value; the example of the funerary urns suggests that the very items used to mark Khasi identity were sometimes procured from the plains and made by Bengali craftspeople. Further, as much as the *haats* were key sites of import, they were also crucial for the export of items manufactured and produced in the hills, and therefore extremely important for the economy of Khasi states.

Exchange in the *haats* took the form of barter, mixed with the use of cowry shells, thus being a part of what David Ludden (2003) calls "cowry country", the fluid commercial region in the Indian Ocean, from Africa to Southeast Asia — where cowry shells were used as currencies instead of coins. According to Umdor (2023, 30), with the introduction of the money economy in the late nineteenth century by the colonial administration, the barter trade was heavily disrupted and was eventually brought to an end. Indeed, this reciprocal relationship between hills and plains, spaces with differentiated agricultural, and therefore economic constitutions, is found across North-East India and in many parts of Southeast Asia. For instance, while the Kukis and the Lushais traded with Bengalis in Cachar, Garos also traded with Bengalis in Sylhet; the Nagas, Adis, Mishmis and Abors traded with plains communities in Assam. However, as both Ludden (2003) and Cederlof (2013) point out, hill communities in this frontier region did not trade only with plains people but also with merchants from distant places, even in the precolonial period. Cederlof (2013, 2) explains that: "For centuries, foreign merchants had been drawn to the areas bordering on Burma.

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[56] Iron smelting which had existed for centuries among the upland Khasi communities was severely disrupted in the colonial period. Archival sources from as far back as the late 1780s emphasised the importance of iron as a trade commodity (Lindsay, 1849; IOR/V/10/83: 1874-1876).

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Armenian, Afghan, Shan, and European merchants traded with Bengalis, Khasis, Cacharis, Manipuris, and others at the market places." Thus, the foothills markets and the routes connecting the hills and plains were not merely a part of a regional economic circuit but have long been significant parts of larger trade networks. Being built only in the nineteenth century, the Scott Road was a late addition to this economic universe, and it is important to point out that by this time, colonial authority has already imposed various forms of restrictions curtailing the organisation of weekly *haats*, the freedom of movement of people and therefore, changing the historical culture of trade in the region.

The biggest and most enduring disruption to this *haat* culture, and by extension, to the travels on the Scott Road[57] and other trade routes leading to the plains came with the Partition of India in 1947, when Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan. Once the physical borders appeared, several of these weekly markets at the foothills could no longer be held. Umdor (2023, 134) reveals that it was also the devaluation of the Indian currency, which led to an immediate collapse of the Ri War economy immediately after Partition. The second wave of disruption arrived with the intensification of security at the border during and after the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 which started when India joined the Bangladesh Liberation War, assisting predominantly-Bengali East Pakistan in its fight for liberation from "West Pakistan", in order to form the new nation, Bangladesh. This resulted in the ultimate closure of even more *haats*, including *Haat* Tharia which many of my informants from Sohtrai and Laitrum frequented. Today, a barbed-wire fence stubbornly stretches across the old market site where a few houses have gathered over the years, together making Tharia village. However, as mentioned earlier, the 1947 border was really an offspring of previous colonial boundary legislations dating to the late eighteenth century, all of

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[57] Other factors also contributed to the diminishing relevance of the Scott Road, particularly to the colonial government. First, the shift of the civil station of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District from Cherrapunji to Shillong in 1864 reconfigured transport and communication in the region, and since the Scott Road was responsible for linking Sylhet to the station at Cherrapunji, its importance to the colonial government quickly diminished. Second, the emergence of metalled roads in the late nineteenth century generally saw the decline of bridled paths as primary travel routes, particularly for government and military personnel. Around the villages of my field site, i.e., the Southern Khasi Hills region, the Cherra-Shillong Road was the first to be metalled in 1884 (IOR/V/10/88), absorbing parts of the Scott Road along its course. By this time, the official terminology used to describe the Scott Road had also changed; it was no longer "a high-road" but "a bridled path" in government documents.

which had since threatened the fluid cultural and commercial geographies of northern Sylhet. With the East India Company's interest in expanding its revenue regime in the 1780s and 1790s, a boundary policy which aimed to separate the hills from the plains was initiated. It was this legal instrument that introduced the heavy regulation of mobility in the region, severely disturbing the historical relationship between the mountains and lowlands, and the thriving culture of exchange and trade in the *haats* (Ludden, 2003; Cederlof, 2013). At the same time, Khasis were now confined to the hills and lost the right to own land in the Sylhet District, despite the fact that the jurisdiction of certain Khasi states like Sohtrai, Wahlong and Mawlong stretched into the plains. The spread of the erstwhile Hima Sohtrai to the lowlands is mentioned several times in the colonial record (IOR/V/27/241/8). In fact, several households in Sohtrai village which owned land in Sylhet were actually identified as "zamindars" as they leased their land to Bengali farmers for paddy cultivation. When I was in Sohtrai, one household had recently received legal correspondence in the post about a piece of land that they owned in Sylhet which still identified them as owners, even though they had not stepped foot in Sylhet for more than half a century. Thus, apart from affecting the *haat* culture, the Partition, as elsewhere in the Bengal frontier and in the North-Western frontier, resulted in widespread experiences of land dispossession.

In my field site area, the only surviving *haat* is Haat Majai, a foothills market located at the bottom of the Sohtrai hills and a few kilometres west of Sohtrai. However, despite its proximity to Sohtrai, Haat Majai falls outside the Elaka Sohtrai jurisdiction but is under that of the Sohra Syiemship (or the chief of Sohra) of the Cherrapunji region. This is a result of a complex web of agreements between the Sohra Chief with the East India Company in 1829, surrounding the events of the Anglo-Khasi War. To sum it up, the Chief of Sohra gave away a piece of land in his territory to the British for the construction of a sanatorium (which later grew into a hill station, as mentioned earlier in this chapter). In exchange, he was given land in the plains which included the Majai area, which at that time was under British control (*Rights of the Cherra Rajah in Bholaganje*, 1878). Negotiating with David Scott, the representative of the Company, the Sohra Chief also requested for permission to establish a market in the land he received in exchange; this market came to be Haat Majai. Indeed, these agreements coincided with other treaties concerning the construction of the Scott

Road through the Khasi Hills. This means that Haat Majai and the Scott Road are both products of the Anglo-Khasi colonial relationship, located in the same region and from the same period.

Landscape of Movement: Haat Journeys

The landscape of the southern Khasi Hills is a landscape of movement, in that it is historically characterised by the regular journeys of people, animals, crops and commodities on trade routes, pathways, and later roads, which connect the hills and the plains. Travel and mobility are fundamental to the organisation of life; apart from movement between villages and *haats*, there is an even more regular commute between villages and *bri* farms, where horticultural crops are grown before they are taken to be sold in the markets. Since the *bri* farms are usually located in the lowlands, as discussed in the Introduction, the trade routes joining villages in the hills and to the *haats* in the foothills are sometimes also used to access *bri* farms, if they lie along the same route. Otherwise, routes leading to *bri* farms and not connected to trade routes bear their own significance as they link villages to the *bri*, an important space of production, and also aid in the transport of crops and produce from the *bri* to the villages. Therefore, the various trails and routes, including the Scott Road, create spatial linkages that tie up these different spatial points — the village, the *bri* and the *haat* — and in doing so become lifelines embedded in the physical, social and economic landscape of the region. In this landscape of movement, trails, paths and roads cannot merely be understood as liminal spaces that connect places and destinations; they are *places* in their own right, layered with personal and collective meanings (Snead, 2009). This is true especially because movement through a landscape is a deep process of engagement, not only with the environment but with other people, beings and things encountered along the way. One way of understanding this process is by paying attention to how people experience journeys on trade routes and more specifically, the Scott Road which, although originally built as a colonial road, eventually was used as a trade route and became a part of people's lives. *Haat* journeys are important points of examination because they involve a variety of activities, experiences and interactions which contribute to the process of place-making.

Since the informants who contributed to this section are between the ages fifty-two and ninety-four, the period referred to largely spans between the 1940s and the 1980s[58], the last few decades which saw the *haat* flourishing as a market place. Thus, the experiences recounted here are of the past but are important considerations in our understanding of the role of the Scott Road in people's navigation and embodiment of the landscape. Nostalgic recollections about journeys on the Scott Road travelling to *haat* markets were a consistent feature in my fieldwork conversations. The *haat* journeys were often narrativised as eventful and exciting shared experiences involving long walks taken together from the villages down to the foothills. Seventy-nine-year-old Kong Nari from Laitrum painted an image of these scenes when she described how people from her village would walk down the *surok kulai*[59] (Scott Road) carrying baskets and bags full of produce on their backs. She would join in and make the procession-like journey, carrying a basket full of *kwai* (betel nut), the main crop she and her mother grew in their *bri*. She was ten-years-old when she made her first *haat* trip unaccompanied by an adult. "It was when my mother was ill. There was nothing to cook in the kitchen, not a grain of rice, so she sent me to the *haat*. I have no siblings, you see, so I had to go. At that point, I didn't know anything but mother told me to simply follow the people walking on the road, and so I did," Kong Nari said laughing. She continued, "Luckily, I befriended an elderly woman who, on noticing that I was alone, said that I should walk with her. She taught me how to do things at the *haat* — what to buy, how much and where to safely keep my money."

Kong Nisha also started going to the *haat* when she was a young girl, especially during the winter holidays when school was off. "That was all that we kids wanted to do in those days — to go to the *haat*. It was where everything happened. Once our parents approved, me and my friends would run *tham-tham* down the *surok-kulai* eager to reach. We'd meet so many people, friends from nearby villages as well, and all of us would gather to drink tea together in one of the make-shift *haat* shops. Our parents usually gave us some extra money for tea, apart from that meant for the goods they asked us to buy. *Ani* those days, what happiness, what innocence," Kong Nisha said

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[58] The 1980s and 1990s specifically were a part of a transitory period where some of these markets in this borderland were being contingently, and sometimes illicitly, organised at varying locations, as people in the region adapted to the new rigid international boundary between India and Bangladesh.
[59] As mentioned before, people in my field site referred to the Scott Road as *ka surok kulai*.

wistfully. Kong Hun, who runs a tea shop in Sohtrai village, also associated the *haat* journeys with the days of her youth. "Oh, when I was young, before I had children, me, my sisters and girlfriends travelled everywhere and visited all the *haats* — Haat Tharia, Haat Nongjri, Haat Majai, Haat Shella — where didn't we reach?" Kong Hun reflected. "We would leave early in the morning, around 6 AM, with our baskets full of *bri* produce and walk down the *surok kulai* together. Some friends would join along the way too." For Bah Sumar, a seventy-three-year-old man from Laitrum, memories of the *haat* journeys are tied to his memory of his Mama (maternal uncle) who, along with his grandmother, raised him after his mother died when he was just a baby. "Although I usually travelled to the *haat* with friends and people from the village, Mama was the first person to take me as a child. After we finished buying goods for the house, he usually bought us a piece of fish each, and on our way back, we'd sit by a stream near the *surok kulai*, smoke the fish and eat it. As a child, you really enjoyed those things," he said smiling.

The above are a few personal accounts of people's memories of *haat* journeys as they travelled on the Scott Road. Despite being temporally displaced, in that they are not located in the present, these narratives yet offer valuable insights into how the Scott Road was a spatial linkage between hills and plains, vital and meaningful to the communities in my field site. In this sense, the Scott Road and the *haats* are intimately connected elements which are a part of the same landscape of movement. One common theme in all the accounts shared was the centrality of sociality in *haat* journeys as people travelled on the Scott Road. The road was the locus of shared travel experiences, of community and support. As a young inexperienced ten-year-old, Kong Nari was befriended and helped by the elderly woman she encountered on the Scott Road, who taught her the practical skills of shopping at the *haat*, including the important knowledge of how to be responsible with money. The fact that her mother did not hesitate to send a child alone to a *haat* miles and miles away from the village, instead advising her to follow the many *haat* goers on the Scott Road tells us something about the social character of these journeys and the atmosphere on the road itself. As I learned from another elderly informant, Bah Raplang[60] of Laitrum, the sociality of these *haat* trips at times entailed a performative element: it was not

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[60] Bah Raplang passed away in October 2022.

uncommon for travelling groups to sometimes chant the *phawar*[61] as they made their way on the road. "When going to the *haat*, we would aim to walk together with groups who *phawar* because when you have a heavy load on your back, song helps to ease the walk as you climb up and down, and you reach you destination in no time at all," he said laughing[62]. Such a travel practice is not only a creative way of confronting the long-distance journey and the challenging hilly terrain but one which places the collective at the heart of the travel experience on the road. This is especially true because unlike ordinary singing, the *phawar* is a form of group poetic and melodic production.

For Kong Nisha and Kong Hun, *haat* journeys were about female companionship as well as ideas of autonomy and freedom. It was precisely the shared experience of travelling with other young women and exploring the *haat* market together that they highlighted as most meaningful. Similar to Kong Nari, for Kong Nisha, *haat* visits as a young girl were akin to initiation where she, along with friends, were allowed to venture out of the village, travel on the road unaccompanied and take part in the business of trade at the *haats*, albeit only as a consumer. For Kong Hun who, in the company of her sisters and other women, went to the *haats* to trade and sell *bri* produce*, haat* journeys were more about camaraderie and the shared mission of earning a living. In these examples, the *haat* and the colonial road were sites on which these intimate relationships manifested and flourished and, in the process, became immensely affective places pregnant with associations with loved ones and things of the past. This is also true of Bah Sumar who associates *haat* journeys and travels on the Scott Road with his late maternal uncle who raised him.

In its embeddedness in this landscape of movement and in its entanglements with the lives of people in the region, the Scott Road became more than a piece of colonial engineering meeting colonial needs; it became an important locus of sociality and social relations, and played a key role in people's life journeys from childhood to youth. Indeed, scholars of newly-built modern roads like Harvey and Knox (2013;

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[61] *Phawar* is a poetic verse form chanted usually by groups of people.
[62] What Bah Raplang described is similar to historian Hamlet Bareh's (2016, 471) account of *haat* journeys to Sylhet in the 1940s and 50s: "The party set-off long before dawn. Its members passed through with uproars of chantings [sic], singings, mixed with narrations of stories and citings [sic] of fables, in their hands bearing a torch of fire, the *dongmusa*."

2015) and Dalakoglou (2010) have argued that roads are not inert and empty "non-places" but vibrant places which produce relational dynamics and inspire affective experiences. Although the Scott Road is not a new road but an old and crumbling one, it has been a meaningful material presence enmeshed with people's social realities, ways of life and various kinds of place-making processes for a long time. From the accounts above, we learn that the Scott Road is an affective force to my informants, not because it represents a hopeful futurity like among Harvey and Knox's informants but because it embodies the wonder of the past — the lost haats, old friends and departed loved ones.

Figure 9. A printed sketch of Haat Tharia titled here "Tharia Ghat Bazaar" done by W L McNay who travelled to the Khasi Hills in 1889. This sketch was published under a collection called "A Trip to India" in the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News. (Source: Physical copy from author's collection)

People from Sohtrai and nearby villages continue to go to *Haat* Majai but seldom do they commute on foot via the Scott Road. The building of the Sohtrai-Tharia motorable road [built under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)[63] scheme] is the main reason for this change; now everyone opts for the swiftness and ease of car travel. During my time in Sohtrai, my informant Kong Lyn made sure I accompanied her to the *haat* at least every fortnight to buy supplies and occasionally,

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[63] The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana or Prime Minister's Village Road Scheme is a central government scheme launched in 2000 by the then Prime Minister Late Atal Bihari Vajpayee aimed at providing road connectivity to scarcely or previously unconnected places in rural India. Although it is under the Ministry of Rural Development, in the case of Meghalaya, PMGSY is also channelised in collaboration with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs

some fish brought from across the border. Like everyone else, Kong Lyn and I did not travel on the Scott Road but developed a fortnightly routine of hiring the taxi of a driver we both had befriended in the village. On our first trip, she showed me how big the *haat* used to be by taking me on a walk, going past the outer limits of the makeshift shops that presently constitute the market. "All this was a part of the *haat*," she said pointing to the area adjoining, which now has a few residential buildings. "Everybody, whether Khasi or Bengali, took their individual spots and laid whatever they were selling on the ground. Hundreds and hundreds of people. Now we don't have the same kind of crowd we used to," she remarked. Looking around, I thought the throng before me which not only filled the market area but made the motorable road impassable was intimidating enough. A few Tata Sumo taxis from near and far were parked obstinately in the middle of the road as drivers loaded up their passengers' market goods. To me, all this very much appeared like a *haat* at its height, although I knew it was not quite the case. Still, it would be false to say that the *haat* culture has completely died in Sohtrai and Laitrum, places where even certain days of the week are named after the *haats*. In the Sohtrai/Laitrum dialect, Tuesday is "Haat Majai", Wednesday is "Wan Haat" which translates to "Just returned from the *haat*" and Saturday is still called "Sngi Haat Tharia", even though the *haat* at Tharia has not existed for almost fifty years. Since Haat Tharia was in Sohtrai's jurisdiction, while it was still held, it was an important source of revenue to the Durbar which taxed the traders in the market.

Kinship-making on the Scott Road

Unlike in Sohtrai, where the Scott Road lies in the forested periphery of the village on the west, in Laitrum, a significant section of it runs along the middle of the older parts of the village where a number of houses are still located. At its northern and southern ends though, the road is enveloped by thick and luscious forest vegetation, rendering passage impossible in the monsoon season. The section within the village has been asphalted by the Public Works Department since the early 2000s and has been made motorable, but when viewed closely, the old stone road peeks through the broken edges of the new. In Laitrum, the Scott Road remains firmly stitched to people's everyday lives, even though it is no longer the busy route to the *haats* that it once was. The sights of neighbours standing and having conversations and

children playing on the road were parts of the everyday life in the village even when I was doing fieldwork. In fact, for many, the Scott Road occupies a significant place in their family histories and therefore contributes to the generation of kinship relations in the village.

Laitrum emerged as a place of habitation in the last decade of the nineteenth century when a number of families from Sohtrai village migrated there after the Great Assam Earthquake (locally called U Jumai Bah) hit the Khasi Hills and other parts of the Assam Province on 12th of June, 1897. Estimated at M_w 8.1, the earthquake is described in administrative reports from that year as "the most severe and disastrous of which there is any record in Assam, or indeed in India." The report also stated that the worst affected was the Cherrapunji region where hillsides collapsed and "carried villages with them or buried them in their ruins."[64] Situated on the southern hillside of the Cherrapunji Plateau, Sohtrai was one of the villages which suffered the most devastation, with many casualties and the surrounding topographies drastically impacted. When the first few families from Sohtrai moved to Laitrum, they settled on both sides of the Scott Road, gradually turning it into a village. Even now, certain families from the Shullai, Japang and Lyngskor clans trace their ancestry to Sohtrai, maintain kinship ties with fellow clan members there and continue to speak primarily in the Sohtrai dialect. Apart from the displaced families from Sohtrai, there were a few other families who migrated from other parts of the Khasi Hills to work in *bri* farms and engaged in the *haat* trade. Being midway between the foothills (where the *bri* and the *haats* were) and the Cherrapunji station and town, and having the Scott Road pass through it, Laitrum was considered an ideal place to settle. However, before this migration and the settlement, the area that now constitutes Laitrum village was primarily known for having a small Mahadev mandir, which, according to oral history, was first established by a Hindu ascetic from Bengal who had travelled to the hills and chosen Laitrum as his home[65]. The original temple is gone but a new one was built on the same site in 1990 by the Ramkrishna Mission Ashram of Cherrapunji, after the temple was left to its care. By the mid nineteenth century, when the Scott Road was

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[64] IOR/V/10/105

[65] Thus, Laitrum's old name was "Mahadek" (although people in Sohtrai use the term to this day) or "Mahadeo" in the colonial record, both of which are derivations of "Mahadev."

built through the area, Laitrum had a dak bungalow[66] and a colonial station for toll collection from goods transported on the Scott Road.

Figure 10. Beginning of the paved section of the Scott Road in the southern end of Laitrum village. (Source: Photo by author)

If one was to take a walk in Laitrum today, they would quickly notice that all the old houses, marked by their sprawling tin roofs and floors made of wide wooden planks, are situated along the Scott Road, while newer houses (mostly concrete constructions) are further back and line the relatively new Shella-Cherra highway in the west. The Scott Road acts like a spine holding the old houses together. Informants from the village explained that people in the early days, especially the ones who first built houses here, "chased after" the road; "Ki beh surok", they would say. Given the comfort of access, the Scott Road provided to many who regularly commuted to their *bri* farms and the *haats* downhill, it was only sensible for those early inhabitants to choose spots along the road for their new homes. For those whose ancestors were among the first to put down roots in Laitrum, the Scott Road is woven into family histories.

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[66] Remnants of the dak bungalow exist in the form of short stone foundations with nothing left of the building itself.

One of the earliest known inhabitants of Laitrum on record who arrived in 1893 before the earthquake was a Punjabi man, I call here Sing. He travelled up on the Scott Road from Sylhet, spent a week at the Mahadev temple, and decided to make Laitrum his home. Over a cup of tea at her house in Shillong in April 2022, Sing's granddaughter, Kong Pri told me that her grandfather started to work on a piece of land next to the Scott Road towards the southern end of the present village and claimed it by building a wall around the area. This was before the earthquake when the village was hardly inhabited. Sing later married a Khasi woman, Kong Aida, who migrated to the Laitrum region from the West Khasi Hills with the aim to get involved in the *bri* cultivation in Ri War. The two built a home and raised a family on the land he acquired, and together, they gradually built a lucrative business from their *bri* farms and trade at the *haats*. The house they built still stands today and is known to their descendants as the "iing kmie" or the ancestral home. Although some of the children and grandchildren of the couple have migrated to Shillong, there are yet at least four households within the village who trace their ancestry to Sing and Kong Aida.

Figure 11. The ancestral house now inhabited by Kong Rit, a descendant of Sing and Kong Aida, along with her husband and three children. (Source: Photo by author)

Bah Sumar, who we met earlier in the chapter, told me that his grandmother came to Laitrum after her family's house in Sohtrai got completely destroyed by the earthquake. "She survived only because she wasn't in Sohtrai at the time. She was in Mawphu collecting oranges from the orchards there when the earthquake struck," Bah Sumar explained and then described how his grandmother watched in horror the

violent collapse of the cliffs across, and the spread of fire that started soon after the tremor. Along with many families from Sohtrai, Bah Sumar's grandmother's family moved to Laitrum and it became the place where his grandmother started and raised a family, and where he was born in 1942, two years before his own mother died, leaving him and his sister orphans to be raised by his grandmother. Now at seventy-three, he still lives at Laitrum with his four children and several grandchildren.

For Kong Phila, a woman in her late forties and a single mother of five, the Scott Road which lies immediately outside her compound, has always been an important part of her life, not only as a site of play and adventure when she was a child but also because the road created the circumstances for her parents to meet. In 1971, Kong Phila's mother, Kong Mi was working in her own mother's make-shift tea shop serving travellers on the Scott Road. There she met Bhaskar, an Assamese man who was security personnel of the Border Security Force (BSF) posted at Laitrum during the Indo-Bangladesh War. Laitrum was a strategic location being at an elevated position on the hills and because of the access the Scott Road provided to the Bangladesh border at the foothills. "I never knew my father," Kong Phila said, "I guess he visited when I was a child, but I don't remember." After the War, Kong Phila's father was transferred elsewhere but would occasionally visit her mother, with whom he had three children, among whom she is the youngest. Despite being an absentee father who only paid visits and never settled with the family, Kong Phila said that her late mother was not embittered by the situation. "He always provided for us from afar, he sent money to my mother regularly; he didn't abandon us," explained Kong Phila who held her father's small diary in her hand. There, a few bank slips detailing his bank transfers to her mother from forty years ago were tucked.

While roads join places together, they also join people. Like paths, they "…form an essential medium for the routing of social relations…" (Tilley, 1994, 31) on the landscape. Although the Scott Road was built for connecting places (Assam and Bengal) in the interest of the colonial government, it also bridged people and communities and fostered a multitude of social relations, and in the case of Laitrum, generated longstanding kin relationships. A village which grew around the Scott Road as people gravitated towards the latter in the late nineteenth century, Laitrum was, to an extent, constituted by the road's material presence. As the above family accounts

show, the road is an important part of family history for many households in the village. The road was what brought people from different places together. It brought Sing, a Punjabi man to Laitrum where he built a house and married Kong Aida, a Khasi woman, who herself migrated from elsewhere in the Khasi Hills. It brought Bah Sumar's grandmother to the village, where she and her family were able to start afresh after the devastating experiences of the earthquake. The Scott Road was also what connected Kong Phila's parents; her father, an Assamese man working as border security personnel posted at Laitrum during the India-Bangladesh War met her mother who was working at her grandmother's tea shop by the side of the road.

Thus, the Scott Road was the site where people met, formed relationships and started families, and therefore where new branches of kin connections emerged. In being so, the road is deeply entangled with the story of people from different ethnicities, religions and places coming together in marriage and friendship. Thus, at Laitrum, the road exists in relation to the houses and people who live in them as much as the travellers and the various elements of movement associated with it. Indeed, it is movement and mobility that created the situations for these kin relationships to foster and grow. In this sense, the road as a route gives way to *rooting* and the establishment of a home-place through various "acts of dwelling" (Ingold, 1993) which includes the embedding and branching of kin relationships on the landscape. However, this is not to say that families did and do not leave, migrate and become uprooted — the vivid presence of a few abandoned ancestral houses along the road shows that some of the older families no longer have descendants in the village — but many have stayed on, with new generations emerging. Situated in a landscape of movement, the Scott Road in Laitrum survives in its enmeshment with people's rootedness and the ugly tarmac covering the centuries-old stones that make the road is strangely a symbol of its endurance and relevance to people who live along it and with it today.

Heritage, Tourism and the Scott Road

At the start of the chapter, I mentioned meeting Bah Bor, Secretary of the Sohtrai Durbar who, when I first visited, introduced the Scott Road to me. On that occasion, we started our walk from a section of the road at the foothills near the India-

Bangladesh border. Broken in parts, the road twists and turns and snakes into the forested hill. We walked until we reached Green Hill, a small farm which also served as a tourist establishment. It was started by Bah Bor whose dream of a green future for Sohtrai sits against the long history and yet widespread existence of limestone mining in the vicinity. Bah Bor's farm was situated inside a *bri* forest along the Scott Road; *kwai* (betel nut), *la tyrpad* (bay leaf) and *soh phaan* (jack fruit) trees predominantly constituted the surrounding vegetation like in most *bri* landscapes. Some of the trees in the farm area had pieces of paper stuck on them, each with a little quote themed around nature and the environment — "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed" by Mahatma Gandhi, and "Agriculture is the most healthful, most useful and most noble employment of man" by George Washington were among them. On that first visit, there were only a few indications of the place being a place for leisure; there were two bamboo huts with thatched roofs and an outdoor badminton court. Less than a kilometre away, hill sides were being blasted with dynamite and the sound of the explosions hung uncomfortably in the air.

Bah Bor told me that what he was trying to do was "eco-tourism" and that he was keen to explore heritage tourism as well. "When my parents first handed over this *bri* to me, I knew that I wanted to focus on things that don't hurt the environment. I wanted to start a farm which also works as a tourist spot so that we could continue growing betel nut and betel leaf, breed a few animals, and also get people to visit, trek on the David Scott Road and perhaps stay the night. After all, this road is a heritage attraction, don't you think?", Bah Bor asked, pointing to the road a few metres away. I was struck by his usage of the word "heritage" to describe colonial infrastructure; could people see the things built by colonisers, the things used to materialise their oppression as part of their own heritage? Bah Bor told me that the road itself is under the supervision of the Public Works Department (PWD) and that the representatives from the village had been in conversation with the Department before, but nothing came of it. "It's been years since the PWD sent people to repair and clean it. Further north from here, the walls of the road have collapsed and the stone blocks have severely disintegrated," Bah Bor said, "But we can't do much on our own." When I started living in Sohtrai, a few weeks after that visit, other people in the village, including the Sirdar, echoed the same view about understanding the Scott Road as a

potential heritage site but acknowledged that it desperately needed restoration work. "It is important that we preserve these *jingtei barim* (old structures), and let others know about them," he said. I also learned that the Sohtrai Durbar had plans to approach the Meghalaya government for help in that process of official recognition. One of the Durbar members said that the Durbar may appeal for funds from what are popularly called the MLA schemes[67], rural development schemes implemented by the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) of the constituency. Another said that they would again reach out to the PWD and also approach the state Tourism Department since once the repair work is done, the Scott Road would hopefully be a tourist attraction.

In Sohtrai, the memory of colonialism is embedded in the landscape. The Scott Road lies among other colonial remnants like the metal pieces left from the Cherra-Therriaghat Railway[68] line (opened in 1886) and the concrete pillars of the Cherra-Chhatak Ropeway[69] station (opened in 1929); together they make the "imperial debris" (Stoler, 2013) or imperial "rubble" (Gordillo, 2014) lingering on the Sohtrai landscape today. There are also several sites on the village geography known to be places of significance during the Anglo-Khasi War in 1829. I was shown a stream from where British soldiers routinely drank water, a waterfall where the Sohtrai fighters washed their bloody weapons, a trench where they took shelter, and a cliff from where Wanlanem, one of the fighters jumped to escape capture. Further, tied to the Scott Road specifically is the haunting figure of U Sahep Leo, said to have been a ruthless British soldier who routinely intimidated and attacked Khasis on the road; "They say people would run for their lives the moment they heard the sound of his horse on the road," one elderly informant told me. In the village centre, a tall monument which commemorates this battle and celebrates the bravery of the Sohtrai Sirdars and

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[67] The "MLA scheme" in Meghalaya typically refers to funds and development programs that Members of the Legislative Assembly can use for local development. The most prominent such initiative is part of the Special Rural Works Programme (SRWP), more specifically the Chief Minister's Special Rural Development Fund (CMSRDF).
[68] The Cherra-Therriaghat Railway, also known as the Cherrapunji Mountain Railway was a government-owned railway service that launched in 1886. It was constructed primarily for the purpose of transporting limestone and coal from the Cherrapunji region to Sylhet, but there was also provision for "third class" passengers to travel on it (IOR V 10 92).
[69] The Cherra-Chhatak Ropeway was a cable car transport service established by a private company under the same name in 1929. The managing agents were Kilburn, Brown and Co., London, and the main item of transport was coal from the Cherrapunji region.

"warriors" proudly stands. In other words, the Scott Road ruins are a part of a larger mnemonic landscape where imprints of the colonial experience exist in various forms. There is clearly a strong awareness of the village's colonial history, and the monument represents a dedicated effort made by the Sohtrai Durbar to document and publicly acknowledge the colonial experience, articulating it as part of the village's narrative even today.

Figure 12. Monument commemorating the 1829 War with the East India Company. (Source: Photo by author)

How can we make sense of the village's pursuit of heritage tourism centred on the Scott Road, an infrastructure planted in the region under the exploitative conditions that colonialism provided? The unfolding of colonial heritage tourism as an industry is not something that has escaped controversy and criticism. It is argued that colonial heritage in former colonies reintroduces and reinforces colonial relationships of power and also recasts the idea that European modernity is a boon to "backward" regions and people (Ravi, 2008; Cheer & Reeves, 2015). Colonial heritage is also an engagement with colonial nostalgia (Bissell, 2005) which platforms the virtues of empire, while erasing or diminishing the weight of colonial exploitation and violence that places carry. Moreover, it reignites the trauma of exclusionary and discriminatory

policies and apartheidism embodied in buildings as much as specific sections of towns and cities (White, 2005; Cheer & Reeves 2015). However, there is also argument for a more nuanced view. For example, Henderson (2001) and Jørgensen (2019)[70] point out that there is a need to slightly decentre colonial histories in the approach to colonial heritage tourism because postcolonial identities and memories are complex and ambiguous and do not have a simple one-way relationship with the colonial past. To what extent do these arguments apply in Sohtrai?

The first point to consider is that the call for heritage tourism stems from the community and is voiced by a number of representatives of the village. It is not an externally stimulated project, financed by international or national organisations or the government (state or central). Unlike examples from Bissell's (2005) ethnography in Zanzibar and Waters' (2006) in Port Royal, Jamaica where colonial heritage tourism has received financial and planning support from organisations like UNESCO, the Aga Khan Trust and local governments, in Sohtrai, there are no outside forces to consider, both in terms of influence in the material manifestation of the project or the curation of the narrative surrounding it. Of course, attempts have been made to appeal for state funds which could bear tangible results in the future, but as of now, the interest in heritage tourism is only expressed locally.

Moreover, these expressions need to be understood in the context of Meghalaya's expanding tourism industry (a topic explored in Chapter Three). For people in Sohtrai, casting the Scott Road as piece of heritage worthy of tourist attention, and that of the state, is also a strategic way of inserting themselves into the bourgeoning tourism world. This is especially true because the stretch of the Scott Road between Mawphlang and Sohrarim is a well-known tourist site which has attracted walkers and trekkers for a long time. Thus, pushing for the recognition of the road in Laitrum and Sohtrai is an attempt to draw attention to the same road present in their landscape and put Sohtrai on the tourism map of the region. Further, much of the discussion focuses on questions of the economic benefits, specifically the provision of livelihood opportunities to people in the village. Many say that such an initiative

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[70] Writing about tourism in former French colony Puducherry, India, Jørgensen, (2019, 122) establishes that the appeal of Puducherry is not purely the colonial association but its in-betweenness where it is "...different enough to be interesting as a tourism destination, yet recognisable enough not to appear threatening."

would address the scarcity of regular work in the village where many people rely on daily wage jobs. Bah Bor explained that getting support to promote the road would particularly benefit the youth, many of whom have completed school and some even university but remain unemployed. "They could work as local guides, maybe sell things, tea and food. Otherwise, there's not much to do here; *bri* farming isn't as lucrative as it used to be because *bri* land is no longer as fertile. And there has to be an alternative to mining," Bah Bor lamented. Thus, tourism is also meant to provide a safer alternative to the various livelihood options that limestone mining has generated in the region[71].

The second point to emphasise is that the vision of heritage tourism here is not about the glorification of colonialism. As mentioned earlier, there is deep awareness about the exploitative colonial past in Sohtrai. The memorial monument that celebrates the Sohtrai men who fought against the East India Company, clearly does not underestimate colonial violence, and in fact overturns the narrative and identifies the Sohtrai men involved as "warriors." Further, in a recent communication, the Sohtrai Sirdar shared that once the Scott Road is established as a heritage site, the history of colonialism attached to the road will be incorporated into the narrative presented to visitors. Thus, although my informants in Sohtrai do not directly use the word, there is evidence of a *decolonial* impulse that drives the call for heritage tourism of the ruined road emplaced in their geographies. The framing of the road as "heritage" is not about colonial nostalgia or the valorisation of colonial technology; as the Sirdar explained earlier, it is more about it being a *jingtei barim*, a structure of the past, a relic, if you will. This valuing of things from the past is not however sentimentality for colonial materials and objects specifically. Perhaps one way of understanding this is by considering the element of orality among the Khasis, where the past is processed through oral and material culture, including stones and stone structures. Since this is a topic discussed thoroughly in the next chapter, I shall only mention here that even if the Scott Road is not an indigenous structure like the megaliths and the *mot shongthait* (resting memorial stones) built to embody ways of remembering, it is a material entity

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[71] Apart from working at quarry sites, people also establish themselves in the informal export trade networks at the border, which often places them in situations of precarity and danger, and throw them in awkward encounters with the law.

in the Sohtrai landscape that people have developed affective connections with, and one which is also at the heart of the village's history of colonisation. Thus, even as a piece of colonial infrastructure, the Scott Road has come to represent a specific aspect of the history of the village and its people.

What once was a vital line of connection, bustling and vibrant, the Scott Road now sits quietly in the forested Sohtrai hills crumbling in parts and for much of the year, is overcome by nature. Although it is still used by some to travel to their *bri* farms, it no longer holds the same significance it used to. The Scott Road in Sohtrai is now a hidden ruin that most people not from the region seldom know about. For people in Sohtrai, tourism, heritage tourism in particular, is a new way of engaging with the ruined road, one that exists in their very "place-worlds" (Basso, 1996). At one level, it is a method of saving the road from further processes of ruination, or rather, deferring them through acts of repair and restoration[72]. And as Robert Ginsberg (2004, 298) argues, repair, restoration and other gestures of preservation are choices that communities make, caring about the harmony of their past and their future. To repair (structures on your landscape) is to work towards a kind of continuity, while also accepting the essence of temporality. To repair is also to reclaim and, in this context, reclamation through repairment works both against the road as a colonial possession, and the loss through ruination that happens in time. The desire for heritage tourism for the Scott Road in Sohtrai is a way of using things of the past, of their past, to create new prospects and choices for the future. Thus, although I agree with Stoler (2016, 372) that ruins and ruination spill over in time and space, evidence from my field site shows that with regards to the Scott Road, the "enduring accrued damage" of the ruin can be reimagined and be the substance of hope for the future.

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[72] After all, are incomplete because the destruction continues – "Wind and rain, heat and cold, birds and plants work away" (Ginsberg, 2004, 305).

Kynmaw: Remembering through Infrastructure in Ri War

In the southern Khasi Hills, especially in the Ri War[73] region, people memorialise their deceased kin and loved ones by erecting monuments on the landscape, particularly along travel routes. In this thesis, I call these monuments "ki[74] mot shongthait," even though the term that my informants use is simply "ki mot." I use the term *mot shongthait* in order to clarify to readers that the structures I am referring to are architecturally a combination of Khasi resting places called *ki kor shongthait* and monuments called *ki mot*. Not all *ki kor shongthait* have monuments and not all monuments have *ki kor shongthait.* In fact, because *ki kor shongthait* are older structures, we could identify *ki mot shongthait* as modified newer versions of *ki kor shongthait.* We shall further elaborate on the uniqueness of *ki mot shongthait* later in the chapter. Each *mot shongthait* is dedicated to the memory of a specific kin and typically is built a few years after their death. The *mot shongthait* structure has a written plaque fixed to it, engraved with details such as the name of the deceased, the date of death and the name of the kin who sponsored the construction of the monument[75]. As much as they embody personal loss of and mourning over kins, the *mot shongthait* are also public (infra)structures in the region's landscape of routes. Emplaced in public places like trade routes and trails outside or inside the village, they are purposefully built for public use, specifically as resting arenas for foot travellers. In other words, the *mot shongthait* are both emotive expressions of kinship in material form, and examples of travel infrastructure specific to the region and built for the "public good".

In this chapter, I aim to further address the question of the Khasi land and landscape through a study of the tradition of building these memorial monuments in the villages of Sohtrai and Laitrum. I ask why people in these places build *ki mot shongthait* and what is the relationship they share with them over time? What do these objects say about kinship and people's relationship with the dead? What do these monument-enactments say about how people understand their relationship with the

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[73] *Ri War* or the War region is situated in the southern slopes overlooking Bangladesh.
[74] "Ki" is a gender-neutral article used with plural nouns.
[75] On the other hand, the *kor shongthait* does not have any inscription and the knowledge about the associated clan or family is often forgotten and becomes untraceable.

landscape they inhabit? Can we see *ki mot shongthait* as part of the Khasi megalithic culture? Further, what is *ki mot shongthait's* role in the culture of travel in the region, and has that changed in the past few decades?

Remembering in Stone

Before delving into the main discussion of the chapter revolving around the *mot shongthait*, it is necessary to briefly explain the larger context of stone memorialisation among the Khasis, executed on the landscape. *Kynmaw*, the Khasi word for remembering, translates to "make-stone." To *kynmaw*, or to remember something, is to put it in stone. With a written tradition only as old as the region's colonial encounter, the Khasis have used stones to mark and sanctify various occasions, situations, relationships and people in the community. The most obvious example of this is the megalithic tradition which has a visible presence in many parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills landscape, and which anthropologists Queeniebala Marak and Jangkhomang (2012) identify as a "living tradition" among the Khasis not least because of the continued religious and social significance of old megaliths but also because new megaliths are still being erected for various occasions today. Further, it is also worth mentioning that even in areas where people no longer have active ritualistic relationships with megaliths, the stones are respected objects to the extent that they are seldom removed or destroyed; for example, in Mawkliar one notices how houses and pathways in the village are constructed in a way that does not entail the removal of the stones.
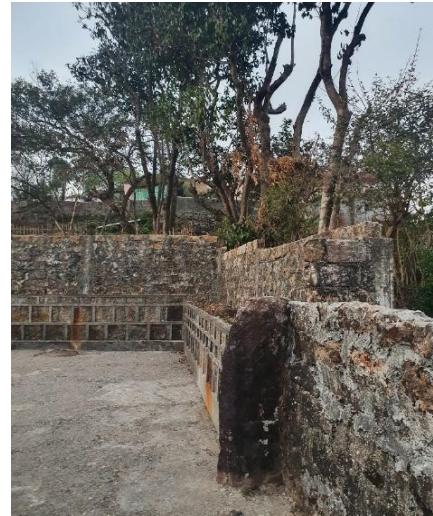
Figure 13. Cemented village pathway in Mawkliar built without the removal of the dolmen (mawshieng). (Source: Photo by author)
Figure 14. A monolith in Mawkliar merges with the walls built around it. (Source: Photo by author)

Khasi megaliths largely include menhirs (*mawshynrang*[76]), dolmens (*mawkynthei*[77]), ossuaries (*mawshieng* and *mawbah*), and religious stones called *maw niam* found in ritual spaces. Menhirs and dolmens are usually parts of the same set-up in a particular space and they are collectively called *ki mawbynna* (see Figure 2.1); it is *ki mawbynna* which perform memorialising and semiotic functions in various moments and places of religious, spiritual, political and social significance. *Ki mawbynna* therefore embody a temporal and spatial unity in their very material presence. According to archaeologist Naphibahun Lyngdoh (2022, 939), since *ki mawbynna* are multidimensional, their distinct purpose can be interpreted based on the spatial contexts in which they exist. For example, those found inside markets sanctify the space as the home of the market deity *Ka Blei Iew* (as discussed in the previous chapter) and thus identify the area as a market belonging to a particular Khasi State. *Ki mawbynna* emplaced along routes and avenues are usually there to guide clan members towards ossuaries where they deposit bones of the deceased and, occasionally, feed ancestors; they also serve as places of rest for them on these ritual journeys (Marak & Jangkhomang, 2012, 74)[78].

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[76] "Mawshynrang" translates to "masculine stone".
[77] "Mawkynthei" translates to "feminine stone".
[78] It is important to point out that the *mawbynna* of particular clans used for resting are different from the *kor shongthait* and *mot shongthait* because the latter are public while the former are meant to be used only by people whose clans erected the *mawbynna.* Further, they are structurally different.
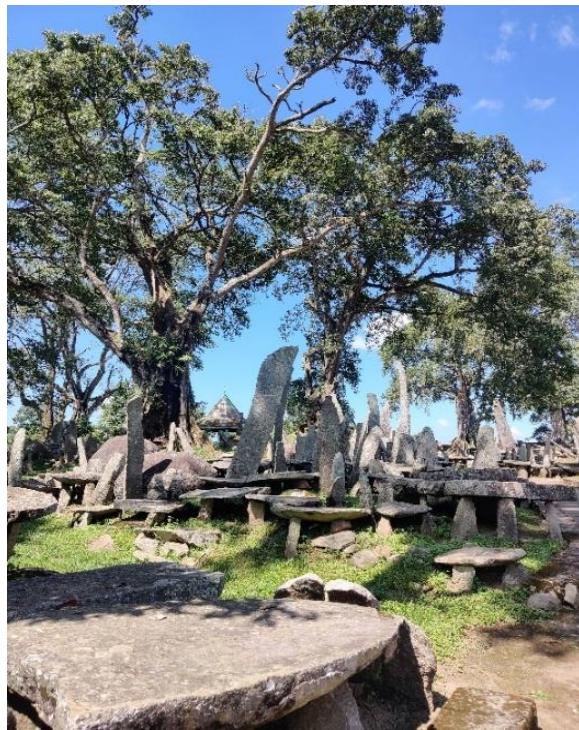
Figure 15. Megalithic complex in Nartiang village, which is also a market site. (Source: Photo by author)

H. Lyngdoh (1995) proposes another method of understanding Khasi megaliths by looking specifically at their relationship to religion; he broadly classifies megaliths into two types – *ki mawniam* (religious stones) and *ki mawnam* (commemoration stones). Examples of *ki mawniam* are megaliths installed inside sacred forests (*lawkyntang*), whose presence indicates the consecration and establishment of a particular forest as sacred[79]. The megaliths inside sacred forests are a combination of *ki mawbynna* and other types of *ki mawniam*. Megaliths found in market places are also examples of *ki mawniam* since they are ritual objects associated with the territorial rituals of the Khasi Syiemships (Khasi States). Ossuaries and cists like the *mawbah* and *mawshieng* are also among the *mawniam* category because they fundamental to funerary rites and clan-based ancestral rituals. On the other hand, *ki mawnam* are usually secular and serve as memorial structures, commemorating various events or people. *Ki mawnam* are almost exclusively constituted by *ki mawbynna*. Certain *ki mawnam* are erected to commemorate matrilineal ancestors, like the female ancestress and maternal uncles of the matrilineal clan, while some commemorate the

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[79] We shall revisit the topic of the *lawkyntang* in Chapter Four.

founding of a village or a settlement. The collection of *ki mawnam* in the village centre at Mawkliar are examples of the latter.
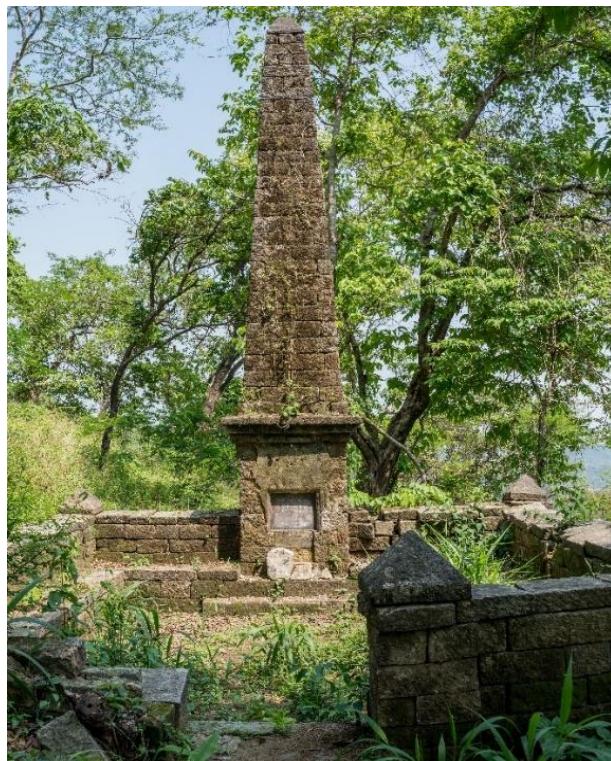
Figure 16. A *mot shongthait* located along the Scott Road to Tharia. (Source: Photo by author)

In the Ri War region of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the process of commemorating in stone on the landscape assumes a different form; the relationship between stones and memory is not manifested in *ki mawbynna*, but in *ki mot shongthait*. Although *ki mot shongthait* share with *ki mawbynna* the symbolic function of memorialisation, they also differ from each other in numerous ways. The first most conspicuous difference is in terms of their physical structure; while *mawbynna* are single, colossal tall or flat stones cut from a single boulder, *ki mot shongthait* are constructed structures made of stone blocks or, in the case of the newer ones, bricks and cement. *Ki mot shongthait* are composed of partially enclosed rectangular seated platforms which have an inscribed memorial monument fixed either on one of the walls or in the centre. Second, while most *mawbynna* are erected in the memory of distant matrilineal clan ancestors, *ki mot shongthait* are predominantly constructed to commemorate recently deceased kin and loved ones, and they are sponsored by the close matrilineal family members of the deceased. However, there are exceptional

examples of both *ki mawbynna* and *ki mot shongthait* where stones, in the case of the former, and monuments, in the case of the latter, are erected in memory of non-matrilineal kin like fathers and spouses, i.e. people who are not members of one's clan.

Third, unlike megaliths which are elements of an oral practice, the *mot shongthait* always has a written plaque enumerating details of the deceased individual and the kin who contributed to the monument's construction. Of the monuments in Sohtrai and Laitrum, all of them are written in Khasi using Roman alphabets, while one also uses the Bengali script alongside. Given that the textualization of the Khasi language only started in the mid nineteenth century with the work of Welsh missionaries, the incorporation of text in the *mot shongthait* indicates that it is a much more recent physical form of memorialisation. The oldest in my field site are one from the early decades of the twentieth century. Finally, another key difference between *ki mawbynna* and *ki mot shongthait* relates to their location; while the former could be found in a variety of places across the landscape, the latter are found only along pathways and travel routes, especially among hilly terrains. In this way, *ki mot shongthait* are similar to their precursors *ki kor shongthait* by serving as resting spaces for travellers who commute up and down hills.

Further, it is also imperative to underline that although *ki mot shongthait* symbolise the living's relationship with the dead, they are not ritual objects in ritual spaces like burial grounds and ossuary sites. There are no ceremonies collectively observed and repeated over time in people's acts of remembering or celebrating the dead at and via *ki mot shongthait*. Instead of rituals, people perform other gestures of intimacy and respect, specifically by regularly taking care of the monument – cleaning, repairing and painting them. Moreover, *ki mot shongthait* are perceived to be secular and devoid of "spiritual" attachments and forms of potency. Despite being affective spaces where sentimentality and emotionality are invoked and externalised, these are not communicated in the language and context of religion or spirits. In this regard, *ki mot shongthait* are similar to memorial benches dedicated to deceased loved ones in the United Kingdom. They are both placed in public places and offer resting opportunities to walkers, while serving as objects of memorialisation.

Sah tang ka jingkynmaw: Remembering as Kin

As you enter Sohtrai from the west, you immediately descend down steps which take you to the small bridge over the seasonal Sohkhylleng river. You continue on the footpath and then climb down more steps that lead to the heart of the village. To your right is the sweeping and uninterrupted view of Bangladesh, a sight one could see from most locations in Sohtrai. A few meters ahead of the bridge, there stands a *mot shongthait* made of concrete, grey and unpainted, which has a black marble plaque with the words:

(Ka jingkynmaw ieid ia u Eli	In loving memory of Eli
Ngai[80] ba la iap	Ngai, who died on
DT 19.03.59	DT 19.03.59
la 20 snem ka rta	at the age of 20.
U khun ka Hon Ngai ba la iap	He was the son of Hon Ngai who died on
DT 07.04.63	DT 07.04.63.
La tei nam da ka J Ngai	Built in memory by J Ngai.
DT 19.09.66.)	DT 19.09.66
	(Translated into English by author)

Commemorating the short life of Eli Ngai who died in 1959, four years before his own mother Hon Ngai, this particular *mot shongthait* was built by Kong J Ngai, his maternal aunt. I sat down with Kong J's grand-daughter Kong L Ngai in her house in April 2021, a few weeks after we had been casually introduced in a village shop by an informant's mother. Kong L lived with her children and young grandchildren in an old two storey four-room house. She was in her early fifties and being her parents' *khadduh* or youngest daughter, became the sole custodian and inheritor of this ancestral house[81], following matrilineal rules of inheritance as explained in the Introduction. Covered by a much-weathered tin roof, and floored by timber planks more than a foot wide, the house embodied age and stories; "Where will you get trees this thick these days?" Kong L joked referring to the size of the planks when I first

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[80] Disclaimer: All names imprinted on the memorial plaques have also been anonymised.
[81] Following the Khasi matrilineal inheritance custom (codified in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997).

visited. Along with the house and a few *bri* (farm) plots that were passed down to her by her mother, Kong L was also left with the responsibility of taking care of Eli's *mot shongthait* at Sohkhylleng. "That *mot shongthait* was built by my *meiieid* (maternal grandmother) for her *khun ruit* (nephew). You see, he was her sister's only child who died young and was unmarried. Her sister was suffering from a long-term illness and also died a few years after her son," Kong L said to me. I asked if she knew anything more about Eli, not being sure of how old she was at that point. "Sadly, I don't know much. I was not yet born when he died and although my *meiieid* routinely shared with us stories about the family, I seldom listened. I was young and ignorant, you see Kong," Kong L sighed regretfully. "I should have listened better and written down all the things she would tell us. All I know is that my *meiied* wanted to *buhnam* (keep the memory of) her *khunruit* and that as the *khun khadduh* (youngest daughter), I have to look after the *mot shongthait* now."

In the interior of the village, there stands another *mot shongthait* right next to the *lympung Niam Sohtrai* (dancing ground of the Sohtrai religion), one that belongs to the Khar clan. Designed after the Taj Mahal, this monument's frame is similar to a miniature Mughul tomb, with two pillars on either side and a dome roof on top. It is coloured in red and silver and has two concrete benches. Built in 1967, this *mot shongthait* was built by Kong S Khar and was dedicated to her grandmother, mother and two grandfathers. Kong S died a few decades ago and it is Kong E Khar, her great-niece, who now takes care of the monument. The Khar family have two other *mot shongthait*, I later learned, also built by Kong S, both of which are located along *lynti bri* (footpaths to *bri* farms) towards the western edge of Sohtrai village. Of these, the first is a memorial for Kong S's mother named Ka Wes and the second for her grandmother Ka San. These monuments are structurally almost identical; made of stone blocks, they have seating platforms which face each other and which line the pathways from each side. The plaques are on one wall and made of stone, not marble like most of the monuments in the village.

Figure 17. Kong S's *mot shongthait* along the *lynti bri* in Sohtrai. (Source: Photo by author)

Kong E is in her mid-sixties and lives with her husband, her youngest daughter, her youngest son and a few grandchildren. She was her mother's only daughter and therefore, takes care of three family monuments, all built by her great aunt, Kong S. Since Kong S did not have children of her own, she adopted Kong E's mother, her *khunruit* (niece). That was how Kong E came to inherit the ancestral house and the responsibility to care for the *mot shongthait*. A few weeks before I left Sohtrai, Kong E and I were sitting on the floor of her living room, as we usually did, chewing on countless *kyntien* (portions) of betel nut, between equally countless cups of sweet black tea. She was finally going to share with me the story of her family's *mot shongthait*. "My great-aunt Kong S lived here with us and provided for us. She was ninety when she passed. According to my mother, she wanted to keep the memory of her grandparents and her mother alive through these monuments. She wanted my mother's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know who the elders of their family were. That was important to her," Kong E said. "And since I am the only daughter, and only child, it became my duty to look after the monuments. We painted this one recently." Kong E pointed to the Taj Mahal replica which was next to the house, and also drew my attention to a small fork-like lightning protection rod installed at the top of the dome.

In both Kong L's and Kong E's cases, it is clear that a shared matrilineal lineage exists between them and the people whose deaths the *mot shongthait* memorialise. Eli would have been Kong L's maternal uncle and Ka Wet and Ka Siar was Kong E's great-grandmother and great-great grandmother respectively. Crucially though, Kong L and Kong E never even met or knew their deceased kin in whose name the monuments were built. They never had a personal relationship with them and therefore, had never really mourned their deaths. However, in my conversations with them, both expressed a strong sense of duty towards the *mot shongthait*. Kong L proudly declared that they clean Bah E's monument at least twice a year and Kong E said that Ka Wet's *mot shongthait* was painted only a few months ago, and asked if I had noticed it. The two women's intended emphasis on their delivery of care for the monuments seemed to suggest that the *mot shongthait*'s upkeep was important, not purely for the maintenance of their aesthetic value but that somehow, their condition was a comment on their successful fulfilment of their roles as the youngest daughters. Before speaking to Kong L and Kong E, I had not realised that the matrilineal tradition of passing on custodianship to the youngest daughter applied to the monuments as well. However, it was clear that their dedication towards the *mot shongthait* did not stem from a personal experience of grief or loss; the consistent care that they provided was not a bereavement ritual or a "memory practice" (Ash, 1996) performed in order to counter a feeling of loss.

Kong L's and Kong E's care for the monument is an inherited one, and the continuity of their care-giving reaffirms their position over time as youngest daughters; therefore, along with the inheritance of ancestral land comes duty. Assuming my personal understanding of matrilineal expectations not only because I am a Khasi but also because I am the only daughter in my family (something Kong L learned in our previous conversations), she said assuredly, "*Kane baroh ka dei kamram jong kynthei hi* (All this is the duty of women)." A few weeks later, Kong E uttered as similar sentence, almost like a refrain to Kong Lily's: "Ka dei shisha ka kamram jong nga (It is really my duty)."

But does caring for the *mot shongthait* only happen when the lineage between the carer and the memorialised deceased is absolutely traceable? When more people in Sohtrai learned about my interest in the monuments, a number of them pointed me

to Bah K Menñiang. "He looks after those *mot shongthait* along the *surok kulai* (Scott Road) to Tharia," a few said to me. Tharia is a village at the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border and whenever I travelled there on foot with friends from Sohtrai, I had always noticed the *motshongthait* along the way, never knowing who the people they memorialised were. That was partly because my friends did not recognise the names recorded on the monuments and also because all the names mentioned were not accompanied by a clan name but the name of the village instead.

Figure 18. Bah Menñiang's clan ancestors' *mot shongthait* on the Scott Road. (Source: Photo by author)

I visited Bah K Menñiang at his house in the Pdengshnong *kyntoit* (locality) of the village. He was in his late seventies and lived with his daughter and her small child in a two-storey house which had a small veranda from where the Bangladesh view held itself like a painting in the near distance. "Yes, I take care and clean those *mot shongthait* on the road to Tharia. But I really don't know much about them," Bah K said. "Do you know who built them or who those people mentioned were? Are you related to them?" I asked, remembering the important detail that the names on the monuments were not accompanied by a clan name at all. In both, the name of the village where they were from, that is, "Sohtrai" is used instead as a term of signification. "No, I don't know exactly who they were but I know that they were

people of our clan – Menñiang. My *kñi* (maternal uncle) told me that when he was alive. He said that they were not of the same *kpoh* (womb)[82] as us but they were from our clan," Bah K replied. "And people in the village say it too, that those *mot shongthait* are ours, the Menñiang's. That's why I've been cleaning them."

Like Kong L and Kong E, Bah K never knew Ka Bat, Ka Tem and U Saton, the three individuals in whose names the *mot shongthait* along the Tharia road were built. And like them, he did not personally go through a process of grieving their deaths, something that is often attached to memorial stones. However, unlike Kong L and Kong E who are consanguineally related to the memorialised deceased, Bah K is deprived of a clear indication of his relation to them. His act of care towards the monuments springs from his belief that the people who are memorialised were members of his own clan, even if not from the same *kpoh* (womb). Further, unlike Kong L and Kong E whose past relationships with the builders and sponsors of the *mot shongthait* (Kong L with her grandmother and Kong E with her great-aunt), may have contributed to their dedication towards their monuments, Bah K did not know the builders and sponsors of the Menñiang monuments at all. The clan connection was all that inspired a sense of duty in him, causing him to put aside time and labour for the care of the *mot shongthait*.

Despite the strong correlation between matriliny and the *mot shongthait* tradition, memorialisation is also performed for non-matrilineal kin, like one's spouse, father or grandfather, the latter two being "in-marrying affine[s]" (Schneider, 1961, 8) and therefore not members of the same clans as their wives and children. In the first example that I describe below, *mot shongthait* were built to mark and honour the death of a deceased wife and also one's own. Towards the foot of Sohtrai village are two identical monuments painted in bright blue that stand side by side and surrounded by the seating platform. Before I visited the site of these *mot shongthait*, I had heard from many that the monuments were built by a grieving man for his deceased wife. That was enough to trigger my curiosity because until then, I had not heard of these monuments being built to commemorate a spouse and thereby commemorating a different type of relationship – a romantic and marital one. Kong M

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[82] *Kpoh* or womb is a unit of a Khasi family traced from the same great-grandmother.

Krud is the youngest daughter of the late couple concerned, and now lives in her parents' house next to the monuments. Visually impaired, she runs a grocery shop, which occupies the front room of her house. Kong M told me that it was her father, Bah Ko, who built the two *mot shongthait*, one for his deceased wife, Rita Krud who died in 1983, and one for himself. "They loved each other," Kong M said. "It was so difficult for my father when my mother died. He would say that she left him with us, the children. I think he was very lost, but at least we were there." Bah Ko lived for almost another twenty years before he died in 2012.
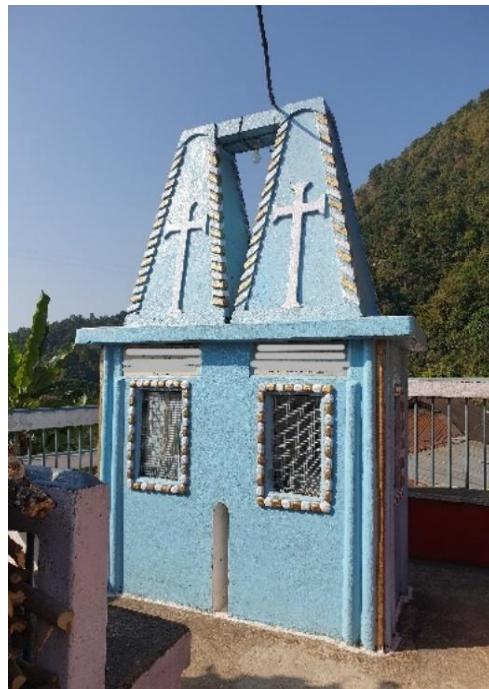
Figure 19. Bah Ko's and Kong Rita's *mot shongthait*. (Source: Photo by author)

Kong M's parents' monuments are unique in several ways. They are memorial structures which are also physical manifestations of a marital bond, something that is not commonly seen in other *mot shongthait*. The monuments are conjoined and bear an identical appearance, in design and colour, which reveals the intended projection of their connectedness and union of the memorialised in death. What is more remarkable is the fact that Bah Ko, the husband and father, not only built the memorial for his wife but pre-emptively for himself, more than fifteen years before he died. While the monument built for his wife was a vehicle of remembrance, a medium through which his wife (a person located in the past) was remembered, the premature construction of his own monument joined with hers was an attempt to recreate their coexistence and their marriage in another material form. In this way, Bah Ko's and Kong Rita's *mot*

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shongthait temporally displace the imposition of death and the separation that comes with it, installing in its place affective objects of continuity that not only connected him to his wife, but after he died, him and Rita to their children and grandchildren. Another element that makes this example different is the fact that the monuments are located within the compound of the family house, making them appear more intimate and private, and therefore relatively less accessible to regular pedestrians in the village. However, in the few times I visited the family house, I noticed how the *mot shongthait* was yet used as a hang-out spot by neighbourhood children.

The other example of a *mot shongthait* dedicated to one's spouse and the father of one's children is at Laitrum. This monument was built by Kong Aida for her husband Sing, a Punjabi man who had made Laitrum his home in the 1890s. The monument stands at the southern periphery of the village along the Scott Road. This *mot shongthait* was the biggest and the most intact one I had seen; made of stone, it had the tall monument in the centre surrounded by the seating platform and a marble plaque with an inscription in Khasi and Bengali. Although the fact that this monument was built by a wife for her deceased spouse is important, the greater significance resides in the fact that it is the only *mot shongthait* in the area built for a person who is not Khasi. At first glance this particular example underscores the dynamic potential of Khasi kinship and the possibility of negotiation when one marries outside the community; considering the thrust of Khasi matrilineal kinship in the *mot shongthait* tradition. However, when we examine the inscription closely, we will quickly notice that, unlike other *mot shongthait* which specify and outline the relationship between the deceased and the builder, and the deceased and the descendants, this monument does not mention that information, barring the details about the deceased's life. There is no clear statement on the monument about what Sing was to anyone in Laitrum. I personally came to know about Sing's connection with the family from people in the village; even though I was already much acquainted with one of his great-great grandsons, Bah Hep, the latter never mentioned this particular kin-relation to me. However, Kong Aida's and Sing's eldest great-granddaughter Kong Bi (who is now in her late sixties and lives in Shillong) said to me in an interview that her great-grandfather "had become just like a Khasi." She said he was "a hard-worker" and that

he *leit bylla* (laboured) in the village and in people's *bri* (farm lands); "He worked like the Khasi men around him," Kong Bi firmly stated.

Like other types of memorials, the *mot shongthait* is a way of "remembering through" (Casey, 2000, 218), in which the subject of commemoration, i.e., the deceased loved one, is recalled in memory among those who knew them (or is made known among those who did not), through the physical manifestation, constitution and character of the monument. As a commemoration *through* the materiality of stones and bricks, the *mot shongthait* tradition is also a pursuit of permanence in the context of life's fleetingness and fragility, fuelled by the bonds of family and kinship. In all the cases considered in my field site, the monument is constructed after people's deaths (except for Bah Ko's which was built pre-emptively to accompany his wife's *mot shongthait*), and thereby becomes a symbolic replacement of the lost loved ones. Indeed, as commemorative forms, *ki mot shongthait* are similar to megaliths and perhaps even tombstones, through whose commemorative material, a "bi-presence" (Casey, 2000, 253) is realised, that of the past and present. As *ki mot shongthait* are reminders of the past or persons in and from the past, they are experienced in the present by people who sense them in various ways.

However, unlike megaliths, they also include text and writing, elements which, according to Casey (2000, 218), intensify the remembering process by spelling out certain details of the deceased. Hallam and Hockey (2001) also emphasise the role of what they call "death writing" (which includes texts inscribed on memorial stones/tombstones) in the tradition of memorialisation. Inscriptions on *ki mot shongthait* record the person's name, the clan identity, the home-village, the birth and death dates and the relation to the person or people who built the monument. Carrying these details, inscriptions serve to mark the deceased's identity and personhood as well as to underline their kin relations and relationship to place. As discussed earlier, the writing on the *mot shongthait* of Bah Eli Ngai situates him within the Ngai clan and the particular family of his mother, Hon Ngai and his aunt, J Ngai, the person who also sponsored the construction of the monument. Indeed, it reflects the matrilineal lineage whereby he is of his mother's clan and the closeness of his relationship with his mother's family; J Ngai is of course his mother's sister, someone often treated as a second mother in many matrilineal families.

Equally, in their representation of the deceased's identity, inscriptions could also obfuscate the whole truth. Here, I refer to Sing's *mot shongthait*, which although it contains details about his name, birth date and birth place, does not specify his kinship connection to anyone in the Laitrum village where his monument is. Since his is the only *mot shongthait* in my field site made for a non-Khasi person and one which lacks that crucial detail, it is fair to assume that there is a correlation between the two. There seemed to be an attempt to not mark the relationship between Sing and Kong Aida and their descendants in stone; but this is not met with a non-recognition of Sing's role as a father, grandfather and great-grandfather. In fact, his descendants like Kong Bi spoke about him with much love and respect. Perhaps much of the omission of his relation to the family has more to do with the publicness of the monument and the complexity of publicly declaring a marital union with someone outside the tribe. However, there is also an argument to be made for the existence of the *mot shongthait* itself; the monument could have not been built but it was, and that alone might be affirmation of the kin relationship between Sing and Kong Aida and their descendants than the written plaque.

An examination of the *mot shongthait* in Laitrum and Sohtrai not only gives us an insight into a way in which people commemorate loved ones, but as a post-death gesture of respect and love, it also tells us a bit about the various kinds of kin relationships valued. While matriliny seems to play a role in the practice of memorialisation, not only in terms of people commemorating their matrilineal kin but also in the arena of inheritance (of the object and the duty of care), the wider picture is more complex. Other kin connections are also deeply regarded, for instance marital relationships and relationships between children and their father, who, whether Khasi or not, does not share a matrilineal or clan connection with them. Unlike megaliths like the *mawbynna*, *mawbah* or *mawshieng* which are often inextricably linked with clans (the latter two being burial stones where remains of deceased clan members are deposited together), the *mot shongthait* allows space for a more expansive interpretation of kin connections, and recognise the affective value of non-matrilineal kin bonds.

Political Economy of Care

What does care for the *mot shongthait* actually mean? How does it unfold as an act of labour? What is its cost and what does that say about the future of the monuments? Speaking to all of my informants about how the care for the *mot shongthait* materialises, the one common response was that care meant cleaning and making sure that there is no desecration of the *mot* or misuse of the space. However, I soon realised that cleaning did not mean the same for everyone. For Bah K, because the monuments are old, built almost a century ago and located along the Scott Road now only used by a few *bri* goers, cleaning is limited to the removal of weeds and clearing small amounts of waste that foot travellers leave behind. His engagement does not involve repair or the adding of materials that might result in expenses.

For Kong L, whose family's *mot shongthait* is inside the village, along a route to the outskirts, cleaning entails sweeping, clearing of waste and the repair of damaged parts of the monument. In my time in Sohtrai, I witnessed Kong L's family's monument being used for various things – it was a hang-out spot for young men in the village, it was a storage space for building materials and a resting place for people commuting up and down the village. However, according to Kong L, it is the storage of building materials that sometimes harms the body of the monument, making repair, and therefore expenditure thereof, an unavoidable task. "It becomes costly for us who don't have much," Kong Lily said. "In some years we have to get the *mot shongthait* covered with another layer of cement." Kong L proceeded to tell me that in order to be able to continue caring for the monument, her family had kept one of their *bri kwai* (betel nut farms) exclusively for funding the maintenance of the monument. Like most families in Sohtrai, betel nut, betel leaf and bay leaf cultivation is the main source of livelihood for Kong L's family. Therefore, the existence of the family *mot shongthait* and her inherited responsibility to look after it, creates a situation where money needs to be carved out from the livelihood source to support a kinship tradition that relies on her family's practice for continuity.

Figure 20. *Mot shongthait* of Eli Ngai filled with gravel and iron rods. (Source: Photo by author)

A few days before I left Sohtrai, Kong E confessed to me that she and her husband initially thought I was a donor (or representing one) and read my curiosity about the *mot shongthait* as an indication of my interest in funding for their maintenance. While I was overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness, I was also made acutely aware of how the inherited duty of care for the *mot shongthait* was also a considerable burden for families. She explained to me that while she was able to paint the *mot shongthait* in the village next to her house, she could not afford to do the same with the others. When I shared that I noticed paint on the monument towards the western edge of the village, she quickly pointed out that what I saw was distemper and not "real" paint, underlining the former as an inferior and cheaper option that they could afford.

The *mot shongthait* are important material expressions of kinship attachment and relations for some families and clans in Sohtrai. However, as seen with some of my informants, the continued participation in the tradition of care for the monuments could be a significant economic burden that descendants have to bear. The financial cost of care which is understood to be an annual or a biennial expense is often not easily secured, causing families to take pragmatic measures and reorganise the collective income accordingly. As mentioned earlier, Kong L's family reserve and sacrifice the earnings from one of their farms exclusively for the maintenance of the monument. For Kong E, a woman with a disabled husband and five orphaned grandchildren to look after, the additional expense of the three *mot shongthait* means a huge compromise on the family disposable income on years they repair or paint the monuments. Therefore, alongside sentiments of duty towards the *mot shongthait* are

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worries about the ability to perform these tangible acts of care. As much as the monuments embody kinship continuity and kin relatedness across time and generations, they are also sources of anxiety in certain families which are already struggling to maintain financial stability.

Ki mot shongthait facilitate relationships between the living and the dead; they not only enable a connection between the memorialised kin and the kin who build the monuments but also between the kin who takes care of them in the future, and in a distant way, between the deceased and people who use *ki mot shongthait* as resting or hang-out places. The long-term inheritable responsibility of care that exists within the families and clans casts the *mot shongthait* as an important object in this network of kin relations across time. It becomes a material participant in the relational world that kin members share with the deceased loved ones, family and clan elders, many of whom they did not even know. In all these cases that I've mentioned above, the embodied attention given to the *mot shongthait* by surviving kin is a form of dedicated practice for the purpose of kinship continuity. Since the *mot shongthait* bears the identity of the collective[83], i.e., the clan's or the family's (*ka kur* or *ka iing*), people's active engagement in the caring process is them observing their positions as members of the families and clans, and it is through this very act that their identity as members is perpetuated. However, such efforts, that are put into care and maintenance of the monument in honour of the clan and family, demand difficult financial decisions and sacrifices within the family.

In the cases of Kong L and Kong E, the responsibility of care and overall inheritance is based on matriliny. In these situations, the monuments are a part of the matrilineal tradition of inheritance, and the labour and cost of care and maintenance of the *mot shongthait* are also borne by the *khadduh* or youngest daughter. However, in cases where monuments are erected for non-matrilineal kin (husbands, fathers and grandfathers), the responsibility of care falls on the immediate family, particularly the children and grandchildren. However, what is important to note is that even in these instances, the duty of care still excludes the husbands' or the fathers' clan and family

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[83] In their conversations with me, Kong L, Kong E and Bah K referred to the *mot shongthait* by the collective expression "*jong ngi*" (ours) as opposed to "*jong nga*" (mine). People in the village also refer to the various *mot shongthait* by the family's clan name.

entirely, and that the responsibility falls on the marital couple's children and descendants thereafter, who are by default matrilineal clan subjects. For instance, Bah Ko's *mot shongthait* is not being looked after by his clan members but by his children, who are of their mother's clan. As objects which embody the memory of deceased kin, *ki mot shongthait* also generate inheritable kin responsibilities that need to be negotiated in the present. While the continued practice of care is in itself a gesture of care for one's kin and ancestors, it could also be accompanied by complex emotions surrounding that very responsibility. And the fact that the *mot shongthait* has the unique existence of being a private entity constructed for public use makes the carers' responses even more complicated as we shall explore in the following section.

Mot Shongthait as Infrastructure

It was the last week of April in 2021 and the combined scent of the sun-beaten soil and plants permeated the air. Kong Mem and her youngest daughter Rit were just ahead of me, as we followed the path of a trade route that runs through forested *bri* land connecting Sohtrai and Tharia, a village at the border. Kong Mem's son Medon, and husband Bah Heh, led the way clearing overgrown foliage from the pathway with a *wait* (local machete). Kong Mem and Bah Heh both shared stories about how they travelled along these paths as they accompanied elders to *haat* Tharia when they were children. We had been walking in a single file for an hour and had finally reached the site of the *mot shongthait* just as we were beginning to feel the heat and humidity of the lowlands. We gathered around the stony structures whose inside walls had been made into seating platforms. There we sat replenishing ourselves with water and *kwai* (betel nut), performing a centuries old travel ritual against the sound of distant birdsong.

Larkin (2013, 328) defines infrastructures as "…built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space." Although primarily memorial monuments, the *mot shongthait* and its variant, the *kor shongthait*, have historically been crucial to the culture of foot travel in Ri War consisting of commutes to *bri* farms and *haats*; they provided travellers and porters carrying goods,

produce, commodities and even people[84] with specially constructed spaces to rest and break their journeys. Thus, as an enabler of the flow, circulation and mobility of people, produce and commodities, the *mot shongthait* is an infrastructure. The *mot shongthait's* significance as infrastructure needs to be understood in light of the history of people's social and economic lives in the region which revolved around *bri* farming and trade, as explained in the previous chapter. Foot journeys were made several times a week uphill and downhill, and necessarily entailed the manual lifting and transporting of load to and from *bri* farms and markets. In such a "landscape of movement" (Snead, Erickson & Darling, 2009), the *mot shongthait* emerged as an extremely important piece of infrastructure because although it was the routes and tracts that produce and commodities moved over and through, the *mot shongthait* strewn at various points throughout the distance were essential material features that guarantee the success of the "flow." The breaks that people took on the *mot shongthait* were indispensable to the long-distance journeys along these pathways.

With Partition and the subsequent decline of the *haat* markets, trade routes fell into disuse and along with them the *mot shongthait's* centrality to the trade culture. Today, *ki mot shongthait* along trade routes are used by *bri* goers, particularly during harvest season when crops are collected in sacks and baskets and brought to villages and distribution points from where the produce is sent to dealers or merchants in various markets in Meghalaya. However, it should be mentioned that the increasingly expansive reach of motorable roads now is also affecting the usage of *bri* tracts and simultaneously the *mot shongthait* located along these routes. Thus, it cannot be denied that the changes in the culture of travel over time, and indeed the development of new transport infrastructure, have to a degree transformed the *mot shongthait* from the vibrant resting places occupied by foot travellers to the solitary silent memorial monuments. The same is not true of the *mot shongthait* built inside the villages, particularly in Sohtrai, as the following paragraphs will show.

Resting on a hill of about 500 metres elevation, Sohtrai is ensconced between two adjacent ridges and overlooks paddy fields and small towns on Bangladesh's northern border with India. The village is on a sloping incline and its entire expanse is

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[84] In Chapter One, Figure 8 depicts a photographic image of people being shipped by porters as they sat in baskets locally called "khoh-kit-briew" which translates to "people-carrying baskets".

connected by a network of footpaths and steps that run through its five *kyntoit* (localities). There are no motorable roads in the interior of the village, and walking is the only mode of mobility. There are several arguments against roads in Sohtrai; many joke that it is the Durbar's way of warding off laziness among the people. However, Bah Bor, the Durbar Secretary, told me the decision to leave the village roadless and "intact" was to ensure that portering survives as a livelihood option for people. Since the road to get to Sohtrai ends in a cul-de-sac at Sohkhylleng *kyntoit* in the western edge, freshly bought goods and building materials would have to be carried by village boys and men to people's houses for a price. He also added that being a highland settlement, road-building inside Sohtrai would have entailed the levelling of the incline and the unthinkable destruction of a large number of houses, many of which have survived for more than a century. It is in this topographical situation, where journeying up and down is a part of the everyday culture of mobility in the village, that the *mot shongthait* assumes continued significance.

Figure 21. Sohtrai Village. (Source: Photo by author)

Ki mot shongthait in Sohtrai are built at varying elevations across the hill and along the network of footpaths and steps sprawling across the village. Although the *mot shongthait* are built individually and not as a system like most infrastructures, the unintended multiplicity of the monuments in various spots in the village and along the

tracts and routes, cumulatively make them "infrastructural zones" (Barry, 2006). During my time there, I observed how the various monuments, far from being abandoned, were regularly occupied by both humans and things. Things, in the form of building materials like gravel, cement and rods, are often stored in these structures before they are manually transported to the project site in the village. Because of the absence of roads, no trucks or transporter vans could drop off the materials in the village interiors, making some of the *mot shongthait* useful storage spaces. However, the most common sight was of people using the monuments and their seated enclosure as a hangout space. The ones at higher elevations would be particularly crowded in the evening when people gather hoping to catch a mobile signal from a tower standing on an adjacent hill. Unsurprisingly, I was one of those people who rushed to one of these *mot shongthait* in the evenings because despite my best attempt to hold on to multiple sim cards, no signal reached the house where I stayed. One also frequently sees people using the monuments as waiting areas and resting spots, especially after the uphill climb from the lower parts of the village. Like other types of infrastructures, the *mot shongthait* "generate effects and structure social relations" (Harvey, Jensen & Morita, 2016, 8). The existence of the *mot shongthait* as socially thriving spaces, where people meet, eat, smoke and rest together speaks to this phenomenon. Indeed, the embeddedness of these monuments in the substance of kinship relations is a demonstration of this. Historically, the role of the *mot shongthait* in facilitating trade, and therefore trade relations between Khasis and people from other communities in the *haats*, is another significant point to note in the context of their socially and culturally generative potential.

Recent works on the anthropology of infrastructure reiterate the notion of infrastructures as objects of the "public good" (Harvey & Knox, 2015; Anand, Gupta & Appel, 2018). In this view, infrastructures are built for the benefits of all members of society and are therefore not excludable, and access to them is also relatively free and equal. Predominantly, this idea of infrastructure is associated with the modern state which builds roads, water supply systems, electrical networks and the like. The *mot shongthait*, however, are not state-sponsored infrastructural constructions; in fact, they are not even built by Elaka Sohtrai or the erstwhile Sohtrai State, but by specific families. Nevertheless, the *mot shongthait* as explained in this chapter, are built to be

used by the public and everyone in the village and thus, deliver a service towards the public good. At a granular level, the public good here is manifested in terms of the availability of resting places for travellers and walkers as they navigate the hilly terrain of the region, often with loads of commodities and produce. Overall, the public good is conceived as the contribution of the *mot shongthait* as a transport infrastructure to the social and economic lives of people in the landscape of routes, where foot travel has historically been an important everyday engagement. As we discuss the role of the *mot shongthait* as a public good, I should also mention that in recent years, with the increasing disuse of the *mot shongthait,* memorialisation has assumed other infrastructural forms. In Sohtrai, the Shullai family constructed a water tank in memory of their matrilineal grandmother, and in Laitrum, the Marbañiang family built a bus shed, also in memory of their matrilineal grandmother. Both memorials were the families' contributions towards the village and hence embody the idea of the public good the same way *ki mot shongthait* do.

In trying to understand the *mot shongthait* and these other memorial forms as objects of public good, there is one fundamental question to pose, that of the relationship between the families who build these (infra)structures and status. As we discussed before, public infrastructure is deeply associated with the authority of the state. Is the building of *ki mot shongthait* a gesture of power or wealth in the region? Indeed, the notion that publicly visible built landscapes, particularly in the form of stone monuments, are "blunt messages of hierarchy" (Earle, 2004, 113) has been articulated by many scholars of material culture, including Fleming (1973) and Shennan (1983). Wealth and power are both necessary to organise and procure materials for monuments and to summon or pay for the labour required for such large-scale projects. When we consider the material structure and composition of the *mot shongthait*, it is quite obvious that its construction requires an investment of wealth and labour, perhaps in a way that megaliths do not. *Ki mot shongthait* are "built" structures made of bricks or stone, unlike the uncut or roughly shaped stones of the *mawbynna. Ki mot shongthait* also bear evidence of design and engineering, with the seats and the memorial monument itself sometimes having intricate carvings. And fundamentally, it is the existence of the marble plaques with engraved writing that bears the strongest indication of monetary investment. A careful examination of some

of the plaques reveal that they were made by engravers from as far as Calcutta (Kolkata) in West Bengal and Chunar in Uttar Pradesh, underlining further that some of these families were financially able to fund the procurement of these materials from distant places. Thus, paying attention to the materiality of the *mot shongthait*, we could assume that wealth, if not status, contributed to the construction of these monuments. However, in order to understand this further, we have to consider the historical context of the *mot shongthait.*

As I have mentioned previously, the earliest monuments in my field site are from the first decade of the twentieth century. This was a period in the colonial era when the *haat* culture of the region was still thriving, and according to historians of the Khasi Hills, the Ri War economy, based on the combination of *bri* cultivation and trade at the *haats*, was among the strongest. Most, if not all families in Sohtrai and Laitrum were deeply integrated to this economic regime and reaped varying degrees of benefits from it. However, it is true that some families were more successful than others. Kong E's great-aunt Kong S who built the two *mot shongthait* for her own parents and grandparents is known to have been a skilful and thriving business woman at the *haats*, maintaining relationships with traders from various parts of Sylhet. Kong Aida, who constructed the monument for her Punjabi husband Sing, also built a substantial business from her and her husband's shared engagement in trade. Although Kong J Ngai, who built the *mot shongthait* for her nephew Eli, is not talked about in the village today as someone who was remarkably wealthy, her family owned numerous *bri* farms.

Therefore, it would not be completely incorrect to state that there is a correlation between the *mot shongthait* and relative wealthiness, but I should clarify that apart from the actual existence of the monuments, both as memorials and public infrastructure, there is no evidence of the intention of prestige or status projection through them. Further, I should also point out that not all wealthy families in the region construct *ki mot shongthait*. Quite a few of the more well-to-do households in Sohtrai and Laitrum do not and have not participated in this tradition. Further, it is also important to remember the discussion about the financial difficulty of maintaining and caring for these monuments as experienced by some of the descendants today. Indeed, those experiences are telling of the transient nature of family wealth in certain cases, particularly when hit by the devastating socio-economic circumstances

surrounding Partition and the closing of *haats*. Many people in Sohtrai and Laitrum openly spoke about the great loss of wealth and possessions like paddy fields and orchards in Sylhet overnight. Thus, although wealth appears to be a factor in the practice of *ki mot shongthait* construction, it is not always a defining and available element in the contexts of their existence today.

Conclusion

From the discussions in this chapter, we can conclude that the *mot shongthait* is an important element of the Sohtrai and Laitrum landscape, and of the larger landscape of routes and movement in Ri War. It represents people's attachment to *place* and thus, whether in the forms of a memorial monument and/or infrastructure, it is significant to the process of place-making. Like megaliths and other monuments, the *mot shongthait* is grounded and fixed to a particular landscape, indeed, a particular place in the landscape. Its fixedness to these various points on the landscape creates them as places, giving them meaning through their presences (Casey, 2000). As a memorial and an object of kinship, it draws memory, place and people together, and along with megaliths and ossuaries, make up what Fontein (2011) calls "materialities of belonging." In memorialising deceased kin, the *mot shongthait* not only represents kinship relations but becomes an active agent which helps perpetuate and maintain these relations in its need of care in the future. At the same time, its emplacement on the landscape marks the individual families' connection with land and place; this way the *mot shongthait* becomes the physical medium through which the relationship between land, landscape and lineage concretises. While megalithic structures like the *mawbynna*, *mawshieng* and *mawbah* embody and articulate the attachment of matrilineal clans to specific places on the landscape (especially since the latter two literally hold matrilineal ancestral remains within them), *ki mot shongthait* embody the attachment to place by also recognising non-matrilineal kin relationships.

In its role as infrastructure, the *mot shongthait's* very presence along various travel routes across the landscape is a place-making enactment; being a resting place where people pause, relax, interact and form relationships, it contributes to the creation of *places* out of spaces on the landscape. The structure's unique constitution –

as monument with seated platforms – has become symbolic of the history of Ri War's *haat* culture and continues to be representative of the centrality of *bri* cultivation in the region. Further, as it also caters to the particular needs of foot travellers in the surrounding highland terrain, providing them with the opportunity to take respite, the *mot shongthait* is, in a way, a product of the landscape itself. Located along inclines, either midway or on hilltops, these structures emerge out of the intimate interaction between the walking and climbing human bodies and the undulating steep landscape. Thus, while *ki mot shongthait* and Khasi megaliths share many attributes as material embodiments and expressions of people's identities and ways of life, they also exceed each other in various ways and the *mot shongthait*'s role as infrastructure is one prominent distinguishing element. Nevertheless, they are all a part of the same constellation of meaningful objects on the Khasi landscape; indeed, they constitute it in their entangled co-presences.

Fitting into the Lens: Tourism Landscapes in Mawkliar Village and the Khasi Hills

Like many anthropologists who have written about tourism, my encounter with it was more serendipitous than planned. At the start of my fieldwork, I was based in Sohtrai and routinely travelled north to get supplies from the nearest market in Cherrapunji. On these trips, where I was transported along with six or seven others in a tiny Maruti Suzuki Alto taxi, I was always struck by the colourful signboards advertising holiday accommodation on either side of the road at Mawkliar village. These stood imposingly, trapping the eyes of passers-by with their quirky English names like "Wet Land Home Stay", "Cherish Guest House", "Friend Homestay" and "Happy Holiday Guest House". I had visited Mawkliar several times before, the last being five years previously, but never saw hotels or homestays, let alone a giant poster tempting you with beer and fish and chips, now available in a big hotel in the village. Other placards and posters signposted tourist spots and attractions in the village, and one could also not ignore the constant flow of tourist vehicles moving from one location to another. These markers of tourism were recent and were increasingly becoming prominent and enduring elements of Mawkliar's landscape. This moulding of Mawkliar's physical landscape in order to support the tourism industry, particularly through the planting of various tourism infrastructures, is matched by the production of Mawkliar in the symbolic realm as an idealised remote tourist destination. In tourism media which includes advertisements, government promotions and social media platforms, Mawkliar is represented as a place of pristine natural beauty, with its rolling hills and spectacular waterfalls ready to be explored by adventurous holidaymakers. Thus, as it is being shaped by local inhabitants and the village Durbar as a place functional for tourism, it is also being symbolically produced as an exotic destination for tourists, particularly those from other parts of India, a process which completely ignores the presence of the local tribal population who maintain living relationships with the land.

As a work situated in anthropology, this thesis has so far adopted an approach to landscape which places the experiences, interpretations and conceptualisations of the local Khasi people at the centre of the discussion. This includes viewing landscape

as a temporal materiality serving as an enduring record of past generations (Ingold, 1993), an embodied practice of being in the land (Basso, 1996), and a social and cultural process which is never complete (Hirsch, 1995; Ingold, 2011; Tilly & Cameron-Duam, 2017). This chapter deviates from that trajectory because it focuses on what I call the "tourism landscape" that has emerged in Mawkliar, a landscape that is, on the one hand, material and processual, and on the other, symbolic and representational. The material aspect of the tourism landscape in Mawkliar includes the village's efforts in cultivating tourism through the production of tourist spots and tourist circuits, and the emplacement of various tourism infrastructure within it. The chapter asks how these sites and the infrastructures within them are made and processed, and how some serve as embodied articulations of Mawkliar's political autonomy. Other questions concerning the materiality of the tourism landscape such as how it is affecting customary land tenure and social relations in the village are addressed in Chapters Five and Six. The symbolic and aesthetic aspect of the tourism landscape is constituted by the representational discourse of the Khasi landscape in tourism media and also traces its roots to colonial narratives. My approach to landscape as that which is representational is inspired by the works of geographer Denis Cosgrove (1985; 1998), who talks about the importance of understanding landscape as an ideological aesthetic, one which is often externally formulated. According to Cosgrove (1998, 15), landscape is a "way of seeing" through which "...certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature." Thus, although embedded in the realm of the visual, landscape is not neutral but informed by certain philosophies and motivations, which at times results in a material realisation of such aims.

Turning to my field site, the representational aspect of the Mawkliar landscape is a visual aesthetic produced and consumed by outside forces, in this case colonialists and tourists, for their own purposes rather than it being a creation of the people who live and dwell in the landscape itself. Unlike the anthropological approaches to landscape which we explore and adopt in other chapters, here we look at landscape as an imposed construction devoid of emic persuasions and used in contexts of appropriation. I want to consider this aspect of landscape because the discourse of the

Khasi landscape as an inviting place of natural beauty, found in both colonial writing and tourism media, has historically produced tangible effects; the idealisation of the Khasi landscape by British administrators was one of the reasons for it being seen as a fitting place to build a colonial hill station, and presently, this idealisation has catalysed the growth of the tourism industry. As Cosgrove (1985, 46) argues, the symbolic landscape throughout history is "…closely bound up with the practical appropriation of space." Although Cosgrove's analysis largely draws from the visual arts, especially Renaissance and Realist paintings, his point about how the control of space and people through visual representation points to historically contingent philosophies and processes of the time, is resonant in the representation of landscape in my field site, which has been appropriated by colonial machinery as well as the tourism industry.

Tourism in Context

Tourism in Mawkliar village can be understood in light of the growth of the tourism industry in the state of Meghalaya and the larger North-Eastern region in the past two decades. Mawkliar is one of the villages in the popular Cherrapunji area, known for its spectacular landscape and its extreme monsoon climate as it holds the second highest average annual rainfall in the world. Although certain places in Mawkliar have long attracted visitors, a serious engagement with tourism unfolded in the early 2000s when the Elaka Mawkliar Durbar started recognising tourism as an important industry, providing livelihood opportunities and support to the local economy. Over the years, the Elaka Durbar has cultivated tourism through efforts in identifying tourist spots, the restoration and refurbishment of existing tourist locations, and the expansion and improvement of the nascent hospitality sector. Thus, although tourism here exists as a symptom of the state-wide push for the industry, the local authority, i.e., the Durbar has also enthusiastically embraced it, and more importantly, have exercised strong control over it. The Durbar's control over the industry emerges from the customary land tenure that exists in Mawkliar, one which determines all land within its jurisdiction as "ri raid" or community land under its authority. As I have outlined in the Introduction, traditional institutions like the Elaka have administrative autonomy over land, a provision legally sanctioned by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This means that the development of tourism is

also processed through the institution of the Durbar. I discuss the intricacies of the Durbar's land allocation for tourism in the next chapter, so I will not elaborate on it here, but I should mention for the sake of understanding that the tourism industry in Mawkliar is contained within the community because like much of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, land and property in this tribal region is owned by the local Khasi and Jaintia people and they are prevented from disposing off any land to non-Khasi parties by the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act 1971. Thus, there is little scope for the state or private companies from outside to establish themselves on this tourism landscape.

Before I further elaborate on the specific milieu of Mawkliar tourism, I first give a brief overview of the wider field of tourism development in Meghalaya and North-East India, recognising the value of context when talking about a nascent and growing industry like tourism and the crucial relationship between policy and local situations. In the past decade, tourism has been identified as one of the most important sectors that could fuel economic growth and generate large-scale employment, as well as enhance infrastructural development in North-East India. Historically, the region has been the most under-developed in the country, with a nominal GDP of only 64 billion GBP in 2020, as compared to the highest held by the Southern Zonal Council at 716 billion GBP (Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, 2020). The establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) in 2001, a ministry of the Government of India whose exclusive function is to address the socio-economic development of the eight states in the region, is testament to the disparity between the North East and other parts of India. The argument for tourism development in state discourse resides in the expectation that the industry has strong external effects, stimulating progress in other sectors (road and transport, aviation, railway, telecommunications, hospitality etc.), which are deemed as significantly important for the region.

The Indian and Meghalayan governments frame tourism development as an effective panacea for the region's alienation from the rest of the country, and as a strategy for peacekeeping particularly in light of its long history with insurgency, counterinsurgency and militarisation. The planning documents "North Eastern Region

Vision 2020"[85] (2008) and the "Tourism Development Plan for Meghalaya"[86] (2010) both discuss the potential of tourism to instil feelings of national integration and inclusion through its anticipatory delivery of socio-economic progress. Lastly, the call for the development of tourism is articulated in light of India's Act East Policy[87] (formerly Look East Policy), a diplomatic foreign policy initiative introduced in 1991 to build economic, cultural and strategic relationships with Southeast Asia. Since North-East India is the only geographical link between India and Southeast Asia, the discourse of its development has a strong presence in the Act East Policy, and tourism is one of the industries considered to be crucial in realising these aims. The NER Vision 2020 mentioned earlier specifically talks about the creation of international tourism circuits, stretching across the North-Eastern states into Myanmar and Thailand. Thus, the consolidation of the tourism sector in the states of North-East India is driven by a combination of local, regional, national and international factors and situations, and its emergence in the Mawkliar landscape can, to an extent, be read as a symptom of this larger phenomenon.

The Government of India and Government of Meghalaya have both taken huge initiatives in terms of schemes, campaigns and investments, towards the development of tourism in Meghalaya. The most prominent of the recent central government schemes is the Ministry of Tourism's Swadesh Darshan Scheme, launched in 2015 with a focus on funding tourism infrastructure and the creation of tourism circuits. The North-East Circuit, of which Meghalaya is a part, is the only region-based circuit drawing a total of Rs. 1,727 crore (173 million GBP) between 2015 to 2023. Additionally, through the Tribal Sub-Plan,[88] the Ministry of Tourism had earmarked another Rs. 98 crore (9 million GBP) for tourism in the region for the years 2022-2023. To increase the visibility of and the tourist share in the North-Eastern states, promotional campaigns like "Paradise Unexplored: India's North East" and "Dekho Apna Desh" ("Go see your own country") were launched in 2013 and 2020 respectively.

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85 The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) and the North East Council (NEC) 2008.

86 Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the Ministry of Tourism, 2010.

87 The Act East Policy is also perceived as effort by India to hold dominance over the region, counterbalancing the position of the People's Republic of China.

88 A planning strategy adopted by the Planning Commission in 1972 to channel funds towards the socio-economic development of tribal regions.

Among the state government schemes, the Meghalaya Tourism Development and Investment Promotion Scheme was introduced in 2012 by the Department of Tourism to aid the development of tourism infrastructure across the state. More recently, the Homestay Scheme was launched in May 2022 with a Rs. 10 lakh (10,000 GBP) starting budget which aims to support rural homestay construction projects with a 35 percent rate subsidy. It is in this context that the tourism in Mawkliar Elaka is flourishing.

Most locals have plugged themselves into the largely informal tourism market taking on a variety of roles; some are tour guides, some have shops or sell goods as vendors at tourist sites, and relatively well-to-do households run hospitality businesses such as homestays and restaurants, whilst also employing locals to work in their establishments. As pointed out earlier, the local commitment to tourism intensified after limestone mining, an activity which people were engaged in for more than half a century, was met by several legal restrictions. In 2015, it faced a ban from the Meghalaya High Court, followed by an order prohibiting limestone export in 2017, and most recently, another High Court decision dated November 2022, to further continue the export prohibition for the next ten years. The importance of the tourism industry to the people of Mawkliar is reinforced by the lack of agriculture as a livelihood option owing to the particularity of its topographical location and climatic conditions. Situated on the barren Cherrapunji tableland, and receiving among the highest amounts of rainfall in the world, the Mawkliar hills are primarily treeless and covered with a stubborn grass that renders agriculture impossible. Unlike households in villages elsewhere in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills where subsistence agriculture is predominant, or where like Sohtrai and Laitrum, people earn from cash crops, in Mawkliar, people do not have farming as a safety net to fall back on in moments of crisis. This was starkly evident when the local tourism industry collapsed during the 2020-2021 Covid-19 pandemic, affecting many families in the village. A statement which captures the distress the community experienced in those months of lockdown restrictions came from Kong Jes who said, "When I hear the word 'lockdown', I smell hunger." A woman in her forties, Kong Jes works at a tea and rice shop (*dukan ja bad sha*) at one of the tourist spots and has five children and an aged father who are dependent on her.

The Tourism Landscape and Tourism Placemaking in Mawkliar Village

Like other tourist locations in Meghalaya, the tourism landscape in Mawkliar is built around the area's natural landscape, characterised by a hilly terrain that nestles caves, cliffs, rivers and waterfalls. "Nature tourism"[89] and "hill tourism"[90] are, thus, the predominant forms of tourism in the village. Each tourist spot is reliant on a natural setting which has its own entertainment and aesthetic value. The spectacle of the Mawkliar landscape is, thus, a huge element in Mawkliar tourism, making tourist gazing (Urry and Larsen, 2011) a primary activity in the tourist experience. This is true especially now with the dominance of social media and its inherent system of consumption via visualisation. Further, although one encounters the term "eco-tourism" in government tourism plans, and more interestingly, despite the existence of an Ecotourism Society in Mawkliar, I argue that the tourism that exists in the village has more features of mass tourism. First, the tourism is not based on a regime of conservation, even though the two tourist parks in Mawkliar are enclosed areas with social forestry projects, one which is on-going and the other which failed a few years after it started. Second, there is no evidence of a sustainable approach to tourism here, despite the wide usage of "sustainability" in government rhetoric. So far, there is no limit placed on the number of tourists who visit tourist spots and the number and type of vehicles that tourists use, there is no functional eco-conscious waste disposal plan, and there are no guidelines for homestays, guest houses and hotels on how to limit their adverse ecological impacts.

To better understand the kind of nature tourism that exists in Mawkliar, I shall briefly summarise attractions at each tourist spot. First is Mawkliar Cave or what is locally called "Krem Pubon", a limestone cavernous formation that makes up the interior of the Mawlong Syiem hill. It has been open as a tourist site since the late 1980s and the primary activity here is amateur caving, where visitors explore the limestone tunnels and enjoy the spectacle of stalactites, stalagmites and rock fossils.

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[89] Nature tourism is tourism associated with natural beauty, where the tourist experience is drawn from nature, and where leisure activities relate to the available natural settings (Goodwin, 1996; Valentine, 1992; Alaeddinoglu & Can, 2011).

[90] Hill or mountain tourism, a sub-category of nature tourism, is tourism which takes place in hilly and mountainous areas and where tourist entertainment is closely linked to the specific topographical, vegetative and climatic characteristics of those places.

However, the cave had attracted attention long before it was officially assigned for tourism. My elderly informants Bah Kitdor and Bah Donlang recall the times when they accompanied British and European touring groups to the cave in the 1940s and 1950s. Using kerosene-fed bamboo torches called *dongmusa* to illuminate the insides, they chaperoned their visitors to see the intricate designs of the subterranean karst landscape. Thus, much before the formalisation of tour guide roles, young boys in the village like Bah Kitdor and Bah Donlang had the experience of occasionally earning wages from taking people to the cave. And therefore, long before the formalisation of tourism, there was already a culture of visiting the cave for leisure[91]. Now, Mawkliar Cave is the busiest tourist spot in the village having over a hundred thousand visitors a year (Bah Biang, 2022, personal communication, 15 March); the interiors of the cave are frequently inundated with people in the tourist season, leaving the fragile cave ecosystem vulnerable to damage.

Second is Eco Park, a leisure park built on top of the Mawtyngkong cliffs where a few tiny rivers run through the otherwise barren but scenic landscape. It was opened in 2004 by the Soil and Conservation Department of the Meghalaya Government, with the intention to initiate an ecotourism programme by combining reforestation and tourist activities at the location. Although the reforestation project failed, the park remains a popular tourist spot and is now under the supervision of the Mawkliar Elaka Durbar and run by the village's Ecotourism Society. As it stands today, the Ecotourism Society primarily concerns itself with managing touristic activities and does little towards the ecological protection and conservation of the park. Third is Thangkharang Park, another leisure park which opened as a tourist site in the early 1990s and is run by the Social Forestry Division of the Forest and Environment Department of Meghalaya. It is the only tourist spot not directly in the hands of the Mawkliar Elaka Durbar. Located on the south-facing hillside of the Mawkliar hills, Thangkharang Park offers tourists spectacular views of Bangladesh in the distance and waterfalls cascading down the cliffs in the rainy season. Last is Noh Sngithiang Viewpoint, a tourist spot that exists specifically for the activity of viewing the surrounding landscape. Located on the Mawkliar stretch of the Sohra-Shella Road, it was opened in

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[91] In fact, even further back, Mawkliar Cave was mentioned in geological reports by colonial officers like Henry Yule (1844) and Thomas Oldham (1854) as a site of scientific as well as aesthetic interest.

the last few years when viewing platforms and shop buildings and toilets were constructed at the site. From the viewing platform, one can see the multiple plunge seasonal waterfalls flowing over the Mawtyngkong cliffs in Eco Park across the valley. These waterfalls collectively make up the Noh Sngithiang Falls.
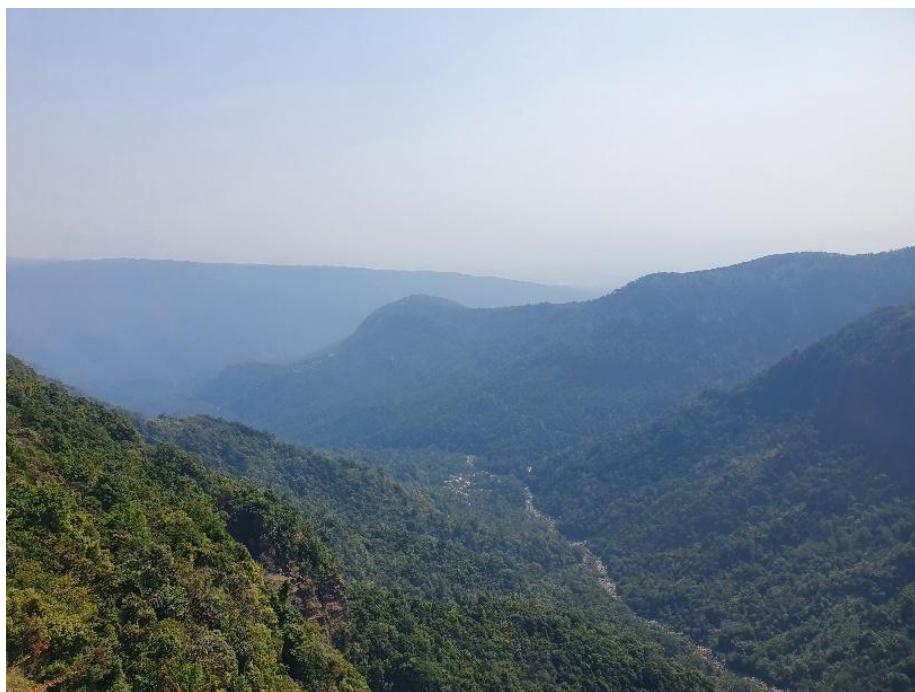
Figure 22. View into the Valley from Eco Park, Mawkliar.

In Mawkliar, tourist spots are the primary features in the local tourism geographies and in the tourism landscape because they are the places that tourists specifically pay to visit in the village. Tourist spots often become the elements on which the identity of a village is built. For instance, most tourists know Mawkliar Cave and not the village simply because Mawkliar Cave as a tourist attraction is often mentioned in travel websites and other publicity platforms. It is through the limited avenue of the tourist spots that tourists experience and learn about the local landscape. Apart from being spaces for tourists, tourist spots are also important sites where many people from the village make their livelihood as they set up small businesses selling food, clothes and souvenirs at tourist spots, and a few advertise for their services as local guides there. The Mawkliar Elaka Durbar also collects revenue from tourist spots, specifically from car parks at the various locations. Collectively, the tourist spots in a particular place make up what tourism studies call a tourist circuit.

Defined by India's Ministry of Tourism (2008) as a route in a particular area covering three or more tourist destinations, the tourist circuit is becoming an important tool through which the landscape of a tourist place is organised. In Mawkliar, the tourist circuit covers the four main tourist sites in the village (Mawkliar Cave, Noh Sngithiang Viewpoint, Eco Park and Thangkharang Park), although it is part of the larger tourist circuits in the state like the Cherrapunji circuit.

I became aware of the spatial distribution of the tourist circuit in the early weeks of my stay at Mawkliar when I would roam about the village looking for Bah Lam, one of my key informants. Twenty-five-year-old Bah Lam makes his living by oscillating between two jobs; on some days of the week, he is a salesperson in souvenir shops, and on others, he is a tour guide, chaperoning tourists to tourist sites in the village and nearby areas. Despite staying not too far from where he lived with his mother and brother, it was always difficult for me to meet Bah Lam; he did not have an adequately functional phone with a 4G data connection, and his incessantly busy and erratic schedule meant that he could not be easily traced. Since he was always going to be at a tourist site, either selling souvenirs or taking tourists around, I had to walk to two or three of them each time before I could spot him among the crowd. This was how I gradually learned about patterns of mobility in the village, much of which follows the trajectory of the tourist circuit. The tourist circuit performs an important spatial structuring function on Mawkliar's tourism landscape; first, it is through the geographies of the tourist circuit that the landscape is increasingly being understood and narrativised, and second, tourist movement and engagement, as well as some locals' livelihood activities, are beginning to follow the tourist circuit. While tourists experience the landscape through the map of these circuits, the locals involved in tourism gravitate towards their parameters because it is there that they make a living. The existence of homestays, hotels, shops and restaurants along the route of the tourist circuit speaks to this phenomenon. Like Bah Lam, many people working in tourism in Mawkliar have aligned their daily navigation and inhabitation of their own village with the tourism circuit.

Figure 13. View of Mawkliar Cave Car Park (Photo taken by author)

The making of the tourism landscape in Mawkliar through the establishment of tourist spots and tourist circuits is an example of what geographer Alan Lew (2017) calls "tourism placemaking". Unlike "place-making," a concept I explore and use elsewhere in the thesis which relates to how people individually and collectively endow values, perceptions, memories and meanings to landscape and places, "placemaking" (without the hyphen) is a term associated with urban planning, that which refers to the physical development of a place according to a set urban design and fulfilling a certain planning goal. Tourism placemaking is therefore the making of a place through the alteration and modification of its environment to prepare it for tourism. At a macro level, tourism placemaking on the Mawkliar landscape is the intentional diversion of land-use towards tourism; in other words, it is the conversion of certain sites on the landscape into tourist spots and the channelling of land in the village towards the hospitality industry supporting tourism. At a micro level, tourism placemaking in Mawkliar can be witnessed in how tourist sites have been marked out and landscaped in ways that an orderly presentation of nature is brought about. In Eco Park, this includes the building of small dams on the streams that make the Nohsngithiang waterfalls and the installation of bridges and pathways across the precarious stony landscape. In Thangkharang Park, the otherwise densely forested hill

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has been cleared for grassy gardens and flower beds. Further, the creation of playgrounds with slides, swings and see-saws and picnic sheds with tables and benches are also gestures of tourism placemaking on the landscape. The ways in which the natural environment in both Eco and Thangkharang parks have been cosmeticized to appeal to tourists is also reminiscent of the "natural servicescape" (Arnould, Price and Tierney, 1998; Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grundén, 2012). Borrowing from Bitner's (1992) concept of the servicescape as a space designed to inspire commercial action, nature as servicescape in tourism becomes the space which is "...manipulated and designed in order to facilitate commercial exchanges" (Fredman, et al., 2012, 291) and produced for tourist consumption. Thus, at the crux of tourism placemaking is the idea that places are seen as valuable only if they are made to conform to the tourism market's ideas of pleasure, aesthetics and entertainment, particularly those geared towards Indian middle-class tourists.

Apart from the fundamental difference in meaning between the two terms, "place-making" pertaining to the realm of the symbolic and "placemaking" concerning matters of the built environment, Lew (2017) also underlines their difference in relation to power. While place-making is an organic process, often based on the perceptions and feelings of people who inhabit places, placemaking is a more top-down process associated with governments and the private sector, and their vision to create economic activities in a particular place. In Mawkliar (and in much of rural Meghalaya), tourism placemaking is largely facilitated by the local administration, i.e., the Mawkliar Durbar, not the state, even though the latter provides the context for tourism to thrive in Meghalaya as explained earlier. This is because, as per customary law, the Durbar is the main administrator over land at the village level, making it the ultimate authority over how land is used for tourism in the village[92]. It is the responsibility of the Durbar to identify and operate tourist spots and to allocate land for tourism hospitality. Since we explore this in detail later, I shall only emphasise here that land ownership restrictions in Mawkliar create a situation where tourism businesses are owned and run by Mawkliar residents, and the work force is also primarily constituted by people from Mawkliar and the local areas. This also means that there is little room for the private companies and investors, particularly those

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[92] I shall explore this in detail in Chapter Five.

from outside the state, to establish themselves in Mawkliar and play a role in tourism placemaking processes in the village. However, this is not to say that there are no manifestations of privatisation on the tourism landscape; in fact, most tourism businesses in Mawkliar are privately run but they are the establishments of Mawkliar residents as we shall learn in Chapter Five. Thus, apart from a few exceptions, there is significant local control over the tourism landscape.

This renders the engagement with the tourism industry in Mawkliar and other Khasi and Jaintia villages different from other contexts of hill tourism in India, particularly in Sikkim where, as Chettri (2022) explains, tourism placemaking has resulted in an "emptying of the landscape" during the tourist season when locals move out and tourists come in. This trend occurs not because the locals are forced out but because they find it commercially more beneficial to lease out buildings that they own to non-local hoteliers who come in to operate the hospitality industry, bringing migrant workers along to work for the season. Sikkim is protected by Article 371F of the Indian Constitution which, like the Sixth Schedule, protects tribal rights over land and prevents the transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals. Thus, similar to the Meghalayan context, the buildings where hotels and guest houses are located have to legally belong to Sikkimese locals, but clearly, there has emerged a system of leasing which bypasses these restrictions. Therefore, it appears that, according to Chettri's (2022) account, the majority of the tourism businesses are not in the hands of locals but in those of actors from outside the state. Although this strategy of leasing out properties to non-locals and non-tribal entrepreneurs can be witnessed in a few cases in Meghalaya, most establishments are still run by Khasis, and in Mawkliar specifically, apart from Polo Orchid Resort, a case which we shall discuss further later, all hospitality properties and food and drink businesses are locally owned.

Despite these elements of local control over tourism placemaking, ultimately it is a process that dissociates land and landscape from local imaginations and inscriptions. This does not mean that local imaginations and inscriptions are absent, but that they are excluded from representations in tourism discourse altogether. The cultural and symbolic significance of land and landscape, and the overall relationship that the local community have with the landscape, is irrelevant to tourism placemaking. The latter completely ignores the fact that to the Khasi people of

Mawkliar, this landscape of tourism is also a landscape of ancestors and kin, and a landscape of deities and powerful non-humans, as I shall explore in the next chapter. The Mawkliar landscape is also a mnemonic landscape inundated with collective memory as captured in evocative placenames, even those of tourist spots. For instance, the place where Thangkharang Park was built used to be an old resting place where people travelling between Cherrapunji and Sylhet took breaks from their journeys. The name "Thangkharang" which directly translates into "burn smoked fish", is known to have come from the practice of smoking fish that travellers had ritualised at the location. Not only my informants in Mawkliar but those in villages downhill like Sohtrai and Laitrum have also narrated their experiences of participating in this smoked-fish feasting at Thangkharang when they were younger. There is no trace of that tradition now, but in the winter months Khasi picnic-goers still frequent the place, as they gather around bonfires, cooking their meals next to the streams near the park. Further, like many waterfalls in the Khasi Hills, Noh Sngithiang Falls gained its name from a local Mawkliar legend. Sngithiang was believed to be a woman from Mawkliar who jumped to her death off the waterfalls. While this story does not make it to the noticeboards at the location, there are placards warning enthusiastic tourists about the sharp drop into the gorge, marking parts of the viewpoint as "Selfie Danger Zones". Thus, within the realm of tourism placemaking, the landscape exists for tourists and their imaginations. In the following section, I examine the representational discourse surrounding the Mawkliar and the Khasi Hills landscape and how tourism placemaking contributes to this representation on tourism media.

Brockington et al. (2008, 193) argue that it is through "virtualisms" like images, ideas and discourses produced by various actors (tour companies, NGOs, government campaigns, and I should add, at present, by social media influencers) that tourists relate to and experience nature and natural landscapes. Calling this image-making process 'the Spectacle of Nature', Brockington et al. (2008) explain that these hyperreal representations are part of "a global economy of images" (Brockington et al., 2008, 194) and exist beyond the economy of tourist consumption of nature since they are circulated, used and sold in and for themselves, and sometimes as promotion for other larger projects; thus, it is not only nature that is a commodity but the images themselves. Furthermore, they assert that the "Spectacle of Nature" is one of the most

important ways in which capitalism and conservation are working together because it also communicates the idea that consumption via ecotourism and investment in conservation are essential acts of protecting the represented nature. While the question of investment does not apply to the Mawkliar natural landscape, the relationship between tourist consumption and the "Spectacle of Nature" in the Khasi Hills is increasingly intensifying.

Landscape Representation in Tourism Media: Landscape as Spectacle

Figure 24. Noh Sngi Thiang Falls (www.cherrapunji.com, 2023)

"Steamy jungles and spellbinding cliffs, rushing rivers, unique cultures, delicious cuisines, windswept highlands, and lush, verdant valleys – Meghalaya welcomes you with a breathtaking array of sights and experiences…."

Taken from the website of the Tourism Department of the Government of Meghalaya, the above quote presents an embellished image of the Meghalayan landscape, one that tantalises and matches tourists' imaginations and expectations at the same time. Meghalaya is portrayed as the romantic, exotic and refreshing dose of experience that tourists need, and it comes ready-made and packaged with all the various listed elements. Such a description is not unique and instead follows a pattern of representation widely found in tourism media promoting Meghalaya. From holiday websites to social media outlets like Instagram and YouTube, descriptions of

Meghalaya always emphasise its landscape, particularly elements like waterfalls, forests, clouds and rivers. Thomas Cook India starts the Meghalaya page with: "...proud hills rise – dappled in every shade of green, with waterfalls spilling down their lengths," and the Lonely Planet explains that "...hilly Meghalaya ('the abode of clouds') is a cool, pine-fresh mountain state set on dramatic horseshoes of rocky cliffs." Whether it is the government or various stakeholders in the tourism industry, the aesthetic quality of the Meghalayan and Khasi Hills landscape takes centre stage in its promotional narratives. It is the projected feature that is meant to define what Meghalaya is and that which is promised to potential visitors.

Figure 25. Instagram advertising post by a travel company called Backpackstoriess (@backpack_storiess, 2025)

Like other places marketed for hill and nature tourism, Meghalaya's landscape has a strong representational existence in tourism media. It is a landscape that, for the past two decades, has been extensively produced, circulated and consolidated in visual forms. More importantly, it is a landscape whose representation has followed a consistent trajectory, where signifying tropes and motifs have been reproduced over time. In this sense, the Meghalaya tourism landscape in tourism discourse can be seen as what Denis Cosgrove (1984; 1988) calls a "symbolic landscape". It is a visual and representational entity which has its own symbolic existence in tourism media.

Although Cosgrove's thesis is largely premised on landscape representations in European art and architecture from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the centrality of representational material in the constitution of the Mawkliar tourism landscape, particularly one which relies on its aesthetic and scenic components, renders the concept of symbolic landscape beneficial to this analysis.
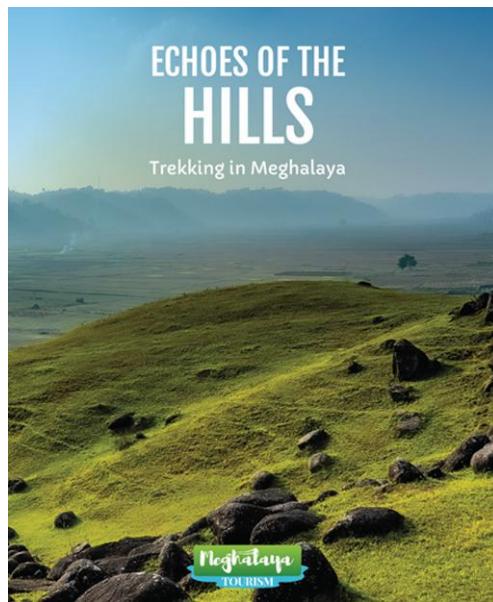
Figure 26. Cover photo of Echoes of the Hills Brochure (www.meghtouirsm.in)

Adopting a linguistic approach, Cosgrove treats the symbolic landscape as an image or a text whose symbols reflect cultural feelings and ideologies predominant in the context of their production. In the Meghalaya tourism landscape, the signifiers that are consistently reproduced as part of landscape's symbolic making, like the hills, clear rivers, waterfalls, etc., convey certain cultural ideas about the landscape in the region, many of which have their roots in colonial discourse as later sections will reveal. Primarily, they hint at the presence of a remote and romantic "prelapsarian" material nature which, unlike in other parts of India, has not yet been spoiled by the destructive hands of industry and development. However, the symbolic tourism landscape here is not merely an ideological notion but a commercial one as well. Crucially, they suggest that this "pristine" material nature is available as a commodified entity for Indian tourists to access and consume. Such a representation in tourism media underlines the situation where nature, in the tourism landscape, has its own symbolic value which lies outside the parameters of nature in its material form, something which Brockington et al. (2008) and Buscher (2010) identify as endemic to nature's existence within a

neoliberal context. Buscher (2010, 261) argues that "the realm of the symbolic is becoming the necessary and logical focus for neoliberalism" in its appropriation, marketisation and occupation of nature through conservation and tourism. This is even more so the case in Mawkliar because, as discussed in the previous section, the private sector's role in the material tourism landscape is very limited owing to customary land tenure. In the realm of the symbolic, i.e. in tourism media, tour companies, sponsored social media influencers and booking websites engage in the promotion of the tourism landscape without having any real material presence on the Mawkliar landscape itself.

The other important dimension of Cosgrove's symbolic landscape, one which he draws from art historian Panofsky (1970), is that landscape is a way or act of seeing, and equally a product of it. The process of viewing and gazing at the landscape is therefore an important element which makes up, and is also a component of, its universe. The primacy of sightseeing in tourism, particularly in the Khasi Hills, makes the act of gazing and viewing of the landscape an important form of tourist consumption. Apart from viewing representations of the landscape in tourism media, tourists physically and materially engage in the practice of viewing during their holiday trips. In Mawkliar and much of the Khasi Hills, viewing points are key sites of the tourism landscape, as they are spaces through which the surrounding landscape is consumed. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in Mawkliar, sites like Noh Sngithiang Falls Viewpoint, Thangkharang Park and Eco Park are popular for the spectacular views of the Khasi Hills ridges to the east and west, of waterfalls draping down nearby precipices and of the expansive plains of Bangladesh in the distance. The attention to and interest in the construction of viewing-points by village Durbars and the government is a process that is at the heart of the creation of the tourism landscape in Meghalaya. It speaks of an attempt to fully utilise and optimise the topographical character of the existing material landscape to match its symbolic counterpart. Serving as spaces through which practices of visual consumption are realised, viewing points are infrastructures enabling the tourist gaze and in fact, are also sites where the tourist gaze materially imposes its presence. Moreover, since viewpoints help bridge the gap between the landscape as represented in images and the landscape as visually experienced in real time, and since that experience is often further documented in

more images, the viewing point has a cross-temporal function and could be understood as a gaze within a gaze. Lastly, viewing points are the physical manifestations of the culture of commodification of views in tourism. Such is the consciousness of the importance of viewpoints for tourism in the village that the responsibility of identifying the "view-potential" of certain spots in the Mawkliar landscape is shouldered by and processed through the bureaucratic functioning of the village Durbar.

In their book *The Tourist Gaze*, Urry and Larsen (2011) explore the politics of gazing within the realm of tourism, and echoing Berger (1972), Jencks (1977) and Foucault (1979), emphasise that the tourist gaze is a cultural practice that is not inactive, neutral or detached but one that bears generative and constitutive effects. The "tourist gaze" objectifies the entity being viewed and often sees the latter as a sign of something else; Urry and Larsen (2011, 26) give the example of a village in England representing the continuity of English tradition from the medieval period to the present. While Urry and Larsen use the "tourist gaze" as a general analytical device, in this chapter I approach the *tourist gaze* as a specific category that emerges in the historical context of travel and tourism in the Khasi Hills and North-East India, that which is attached to Indian tourists who visit the region from other parts of the country. I do this because the demographic which constitutes the majority of the tourist population in the region are Indian tourists and because many of the representations of the Khasi Hills and the North-East Indian landscape in tourism media and campaigns primarily target them as potential consumers.

The predominant way in which the tourist gaze operates in the Khasi Hills and North-East India is by objectifying the natural landscape, as it actively pursues the latter's romanticised and idealised aesthetic versions, while eliminating its less-picturesque dimensions (like the mined hills in Mawkliar), despite them being vital parts of the landscape. On Instagram and YouTube, a search of "#meghalayatourism," "#meghalayadiaries" and "#khasihills" (conducted on 2nd of March 2023) took me to countless photographs, videos and drone shots which capture visuals of rolling hills, waterfalls and misty forests in their pristine glory, enticing the visitor/gazer to come witness them immediately. However, this idea of an "unspoiled" hilly landscape is not only visually communicated (through photographs and videos) but is captured in the

linguistic branding of Meghalaya and the North-East region as a whole. National tourism campaigns like *India's North-East: Paradise Unexplored* and package tours like "Mystic Meghalaya" (www.thrillophilia.com) and "Explore the Unexplored Today with a North-East Tour" (www.traveltriangle.com) present ways of seeing which cast the hilly landscape in the region as a pure and exotic mysterious entity simply waiting to be experienced and consumed.
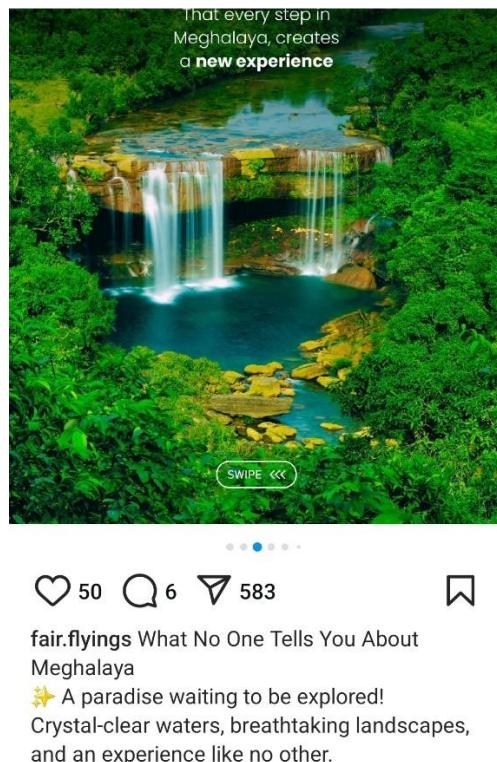
Figure 27. Instagram advertising post by travel and tour company Fair Flyings (@fairflyings, 2025)

The idea of North-East India being "unexplored" and therefore explorable through touristic travels can be understood in the context of the region's historical marginalisation which on the one hand is rooted in its geographical remoteness from mainland India, and on the other is dated to its organisation as a frontier space under British colonialism, and the continuation of frontier policies in the postcolonial era. As explained in the Introduction, colonial frontier policies implemented in the North-East Frontier, many of which relied on the institutionalisation of boundaries, isolated the region and restricted the movement of people to hill and tribal areas[93]. While the isolation of the region remained largely unchanged in the first fifty years of the post-

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[93] Instruments like the Inner Line Permit and the McMahon Line were meant to check the unauthorised entry of people (Indian and British included).

Independence period owing to a combination of administrative and security reasons, in the 1990s, the Indian government's attitude towards the North-East changed, as it called for a developmentalist approach, aiming to boost infrastructure, economic activity and connectivity in the region. The tourism sector's growth, and therefore the increasing movement of tourists to the region, unfolds in this era of post-isolation developmentalism. Since the majority of tourists in Meghalaya and North-East India are Indians from other parts of the country, the narrative that the previously unexplored and unavailable landscape is now explorable to Indian tourists is particularly important to the tourism discourse surrounding the region.

Figure 28. X (formerly Twitter) post by the official X handle of Meghalaya Tourism Department. (@meghtourism, 2024)

The touristic pursuit of the hilly and lush nature aesthetic of the Khasi Hills symbolic landscape on the part of Indian tourists is also linked to the idea of difference, one attributed to the physical and cultural landscape of the North East and the Khasi Hills in relation to mainland India. While it is true that the tourist gaze in general relies on a distinct experience, particularly on a visual experience that is "extraordinary" and different from that at home (Urry and Larsen, 2011, 23), the notion of *difference* here is crucially tied to the historical and discursive construction of the region as different from the rest of India. It is beyond this chapter's scope to delve

deeply into this question of difference vis-à-vis North-East India and mainland India, but to briefly explain, much of the tourist perception of the region, and therefore its landscape and people, hinges on certain historical (and colonial) framings like the hills and plains and tribal and non-tribal dichotomies discussed in the Introduction. The idea that the North-Eastern landscape with its rolling hills, clear rivers, white foamy waterfalls and stunning panoramic views, elements which are presumed to be less accessible closer to home for Indian tourists, would deliver to them unique and adventurous outdoor experiences, features widely across tourism media. Indeed, underlying this narrative of difference is the assumption that the dearth of largescale urban development in North-East India means that the natural landscape is less exploited and thus more aesthetically pleasing to the tourist gaze. In this way, the pristine, cooler and more peaceful atmosphere and environment of the hills is perceived as an ideal escape from the stifling atmosphere of busy and polluted Indian cities. Kathleen Baker's (2010) work on Indian tourists in Himalayan stations echoes this particular point about Indian tourists' perception of hills and holidays in the hills as providing a contrast to lives in the plains and specifically of lives in plain-bound cities.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the symbolic representation of the North-Eastern and Khasi Hills landscapes is premised on the feature of the spectacle. As mentioned before, the "Spectacle of Nature" (Brockington et al., 2008) is a powerful medium through which nature and natural landscapes are commodified (even through models of conservation) and marketed in nature tourism. In the symbolic realm of the "Spectacle of Nature", manipulation of what is being represented, and how, is integral to its mechanism so as to ensure interests and enthusiasm from investors, tourists and policy makers (Buschner, 2010, 261). As much as the "Spectacle of Nature" showcases, it also conceals. In the context of the Khasi Hills, the "Spectacle of Nature" that appears in images and videos systematically excludes elements which contradict the narrative of nature as "unspoiled". However, more significant is the near erasure of the local community, in this case the Khasi people, from the frame of vision, as if to suggest that the landscape is independent of local associations and social lives, and that it is there exclusively for tourists. In other words, the diversity of Khasi landscapes as explored in this thesis is completely neglected and omitted from the tourism narrative. In the rare

instances where attention is paid to cultural and ethnic specificities of the local people, it takes the form of ethnic tourism, a modality which carries its own format of objectification and exoticisation, particularly of tribal people and culture in this case[94].
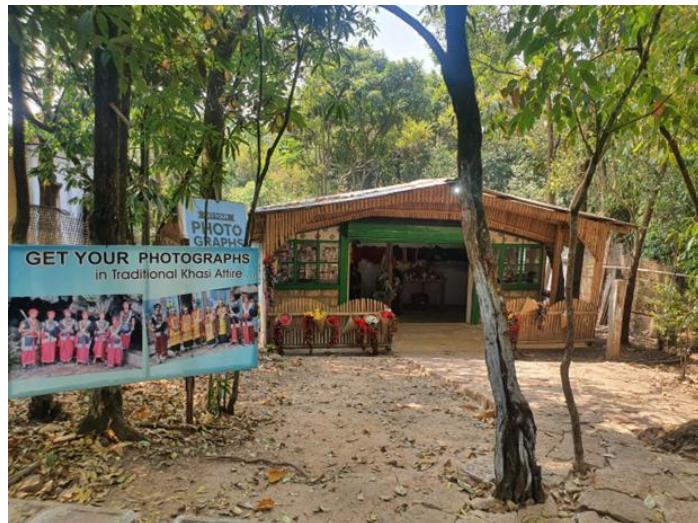
Figure 29. A shop at a tourist spot in Mawkliar Village. (Photo by author)

Although an elaborate analysis of ethnic tourism in Mawkliar and the Khasi Hills in general is beyond the scope of this chapter, I should briefly explain how it manifests because the "Spectacle of Nature" is at times closely tied to the spectacle of the tribe in North-East India. In the Khasi Hills, cultural and ethnic representation in tourism usually focuses on the spectacle of festivals like the Seng Kut Snem (a day which marks the start of the Khasi calendar) or Ka Pomblang Nongkrem (a harvest festival), traditionally and religiously significant events which have increasingly become exhibitionist in nature, if not commercial. However, apart from these occasion-based samples of ethnic tourism, there exists a more ordinary and everyday form of ethnic tourism which revolves around the sale of ethnic objects at tourist spots. It is this form of ethnic tourism which is predominantly present in Mawkliar where Khasi items like traditional clothing and weaves, and miniatures of Khasi tools, implements and musical instruments are sold in shops at the various tourist spots where people come to enjoy the natural landscape. In Mawkliar Cave, there is even an opportunity

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[94] While tourism scholars like Leong (1997) and Kahn (1997) argue that ethnic tourism might offer possibilities for marginalised tribal communities to share and showcase their cultural heritage and earn an income, most scholars agree that it is a form of commodification and exoticisation which has various adverse effects not only on cultural life but on the social fabric of the community as well (Cohen, 1988; Wood, 1997; Smith, 2001).

for tourists to put on Khasi ethnic clothing temporarily and be photographed in them. In this case, even though ethnic tourism is largely a secondary engagement, one which accompanies nature tourism, the spectacle of the tourist in traditional Khasi clothes and ornaments is a popular tourist activity that has become a consistent part of tourism representation. Such an approach to landscape and people in the Khasi Hills and the North-Eastern region makes it difficult to ignore certain parallels between the "tourist gaze" and the "colonial gaze". Analysing tourism campaigns and brochures promoting the North East, Banik (2017) insists that tourism discourse is steeped in colonial idiom, where the destinations in the region are portrayed as geographies of discovery and conquest by tourists. In the next section, we examine the colonial roots of the representation of the Khasi landscape that we now see in tourism media, and further discuss the similarities between the two.

Colonial Roots of Tourism Representation of the Khasi Landscape

The romantic representation of the Khasi Hills has a longer history and can be traced to its appearance in colonial writing, particularly between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period in which colonial exploration was expanding in the hills. In this early phase of the colonial encounter, colonial reports, letters, and memoirs written by missionaries and representatives of the East India Company, many of whom were first-time travellers into the region, were important registers of knowledge about new territories and communities of interest. As many have established, regimes of representation guided by the authoritative and intrusive gaze of the "European observer" were fundamental to the colonial enterprise and for the consolidation of colonial dominance (Pratt, 1992; Bewell, 2004; Arnold, 2006). Indeed, these practices of recording, documenting and producing information and narratives about distant places, what Edward Said conceptualised as "the Orient", mark a continuity of European Enlightenment travel-writing traditions. It is worthy to point out here that the aesthetic viewing of landscape prominent in this period coincided with the emergence of the aesthetic in the culture of sightseeing in Europe. As Adler (1989) has pointed out, in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the visual experience of travel and touring changed from the scholastic to the aesthetic; the "tourist gaze" was not only guided by science but by art, and that an

encounter with beauty and the sublime was strongly sought for.[95] Interestingly, the elements of nature featured in these accounts are the ones reinvoked as essential aspects of the Khasi Hills landscape in contemporary tourism media.

However, this is not to say that colonial government reports could be equated with travel literature of the time, but that despite the objective and formal template of bureaucratic writing, there is often evidence of creative reflections, and hence articulation of affective responses to places and landscape in the colonies. In other words, while the new land and landscapes were viewed as exciting fields for colonial scientific gazing and mapped out for resource extraction, they were at times aestheticized and romanticised. This is particularly true of hilly regions in India, which the British perceived as somewhat reminiscent of the British landscape. The usage of romantic language to describe the Khasi Hills can be discerned in a few colonial accounts like botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker's[96] who said the Khasi Hills held "incomparable beauty and luxuriance" and that the "grandeur of the scenery" was something that he, even as a staunch "naturalist", was compelled to acknowledge (1854, 32); Major Adam White of the Sylhet Light Infantry who recalled the "enchanting verdure" and the "pure and balmy atmosphere" of the hills when he journeyed from Assam (White, 1832, 33); and a writer identifying as "F" in a short publication in the *Gleanings of Science* (1829) who viewed the waterfalls in Cherrapunji, near Mawkliar, as the "...most stupendous and magnificent objects, calculated to excite mingled sensations of pleasure and awe in the beholder" (F, 1829, 254). Although present in texts of political and scientific reporting, such writings contributed to the aestheticization of the Khasi symbolic landscape. In them, we see how an aesthetic representation, informed by a sensuous experience of the landscape, accompanied utilitarian, scientific and imperial views of the Khasi Hills.

In the context of colonial India, the element of nature, and therefore the natural landscape, was at the heart of colonial representation. The unfamiliar and unknown Indian nature was both an object of desire and fear, and while it was appreciated for its

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[95] Adler explains that it was then that landscape viewing as a restorative activity became a fundamental part of leisure travel, a phenomenon that remains a crucial part of tourist travel today.

[96] Joseph D Hooker was a close friend of Charles Darwin and later became Director at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew.

"scenic delight" and natural resources, it was also associated with death, disease and desolation (Arnold, 2006, 3). While colonial science (particularly disciplines like botany, geography and economic geology) was the primary epistemic framework through which an engagement with nature and landscape was realised, an engagement through aestheticization via literary and visual media was also flourishing. In fact, scholars like Alan Bewell (2004), David Arnold (2006) and Jay and Ramaswamy (2014) identify aestheticization as a practice preceding the objectivist tradition of scientific scrutiny associated more with the second half of the nineteenth century. While nature was viewed, read, studied and evaluated through scientific regimes, it was also produced symbolically through a European aesthetic convention like the *picturesque.*

In *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India*, Romita Ray (2013) argues that the visual and epistemological construction of the Indian landscape under colonialism, or how India was "visualised from the outside," was heavily embedded in the idea and imaginary of the picturesque. Indeed, the picturesque was drawn from European eighteenth century Romantic ideals about viewing nature, in life and art, mediating between perceptions of beauty and the sublime. Transported to the Indian landscape, the picturesque was a way in which new sensorial encounters were captured and represented for a home audience in Britain, and although a European aesthetic, its lack of a fixed definition meant that agents of the picturesque could adapt it to any type of colonial nature. At the same time, following picturesque conventions like roughness and irregularity of colours and light, for example, picturesque representations of Indian nature could be made adaptable and palatable to the European eye, whilst also being a platform where India's *different* and exotic natures could be gauged and consumed. In colonial representations of the Khasi Hills, evidence of the picturesque exists in both literary and visual form, and although the represented nature is part of the larger rubric of the unfamiliar Indian nature, the different climatic, topographical and at times, vegetative constitution of these hills when compared to their neighbouring plains (Assam and Sylhet), renders their romantic and picturesque framing as somewhat unique.

The earliest and most notable example of a picturesque descriptive style of the Khasi Hills landscape can be found in Robert Lindsay's[97] (1849) memoir. Robert Lindsay journeyed to the Khasi Hills from his base in Sylhet (now in present-day Bangladesh) in the late 1780s to insert himself in the burgeoning limestone trade networks in the region. The following passage describes his first view of the hills:

The mountain appears to rise abruptly from the watery plain and is covered with the most beautiful foliage and fruit trees of every description peculiar to a tropical climate, which seem to grow spontaneously from the crevices of the lime-rock. A more romantic or more beautiful situation could not be found than the one then before me. The magnificent mountain, full in view, appeared to be divided with large perpendicular stripes of white, which, upon a nearer inspection, proved to be cataracts of no small magnitude; and the river, in which the boats anchored was so pure that the trout and other fishes were seen playing about in every direction; above all, the air was delightful when contrasted with the close and pestilential atmosphere of the putrid plain below, so that I felt as if transplanted into one of the regions of paradise.

Although the striking spectacle of the Khasi Hills when looked at from the Sylhet plains down below is something that many colonial writers have narrativised, Lindsay's account most elaborately captures the scenery, drawing from the contemporary conventions of the picturesque. Such styles of textual composition were not uncommon for their time; Mary Louise Pratt (1992), studying the "Victorian discovery rhetoric" in the writings of the British colonial officer Sir Robert Burton, argues that colonial narrations of geographies in the colonies sometimes took the form of verbal paintings which followed the rules and traditions of landscape art in Europe. Apart from imprinting notions of beauty and romance on the landscape, Lindsay's description carefully structures the placement of the various elements in the scenery as if they were different components of a painted landscape. Interestingly, symbols like the waterfalls, the fish-laden clear water and the sight of hills prominent in this "verbal painting" are still key elements contributing to the symbolic landscape in tourism media today. As Pratt (1992, 204) explains, in such works, "the sight is seen as a painting and the description is ordered in terms of background, foreground, symmetries between foam-flecked water and misty-flecked hills, and so forth." Further, the usage of superlative language – "most beautiful foliage", "a more romantic or more

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[97] Collector of Sylhet (in present-day Bangladesh) for the East India Company between 1787 and 1790.

beautiful situation could not be found," – and the invocation of paradise, represents the exoticising style of narrative construction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and ironically similar language is adopted in tourism advertisements today.

Figure 30. View of the Khasi Hills from below Cherrapunji, 1875, Colonel R.G. Woodthorpe. Victoria and Albert Museum, Collections.

The picturesque in Lindsay's description is also based on another European idea of the time, that of *tropicality.* The Khasi Hills here are depicted as the "tropical other" of the British landscape, rich and lush with thick vegetation aided by a tropical climate. As David Arnold (1998) reminds us, in colonial discourse, the "tropics" was a concept and not only a physical space;[98] it "existed in mental and spatial juxtaposition to the perceived normality of the northern temperate zone" (Arnold, 1998, 2). In this construction, the tropics are often associated with heat, humidity and luxuriant flora, untouched nature and primordiality, although their conceptual expanse was by no means limited to them. Lindsay's idea of tropicality here hinges on the landscape's rich

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[98] Like "the Orient", tropicality is constituted by a collection of ideas, representations and experiences, some of which contradict each other, but are nevertheless organised to produce the discourse of "the tropical."

and diverse vegetation and appeals to the colonial notion of fecundity and endless abundance of exotic nature. In his book, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze,* Arnold (2006) emphasises the role of the colonial gaze in constructing images and notions of tropicality, particularly those embedded in the idea of nature and the natural landscape[99]. Gazing through the lenses of cartography, botany, art or literature, the discourse of tropicality thrived, with images and notions of the tropics being applied to, exchanged and transported across colonies. However, this narrative of the exotic tropical nature is not the most predominant among colonial representations of the Khasi Hills symbolic landscape, as discussed below.

Representing Home in the Hills

"At the point where the view opens, a bleak stony region commences, bearing numberless plants of a temperate flora and of European genera…" – Joseph Hooker, Ascent of the Khasia Hills.

Climbing up from Sylhet and the foothills to the top of the Cherrapunji plateau where Mawkliar is ensconced, botanist Joseph Hooker took note of the change in vegetation, topography and climate. Leaving the "tropical scenery" (Hooker, 1854, 483) of the foothills, the part of the Khasi Hills described by Lindsay earlier, he arrived at Cherrapunji station sitting at 4000 feet above sea level and abounding with "temperate flora" which he identifies as distinctly "European". Hooker's observations echo that of many colonial workers who, on their ascent to the Khasi Hills, happily welcomed the change of climate and landscape because it unexpectedly embodied the familiar. Even in Lindsay's description which invokes tropicality in the landscape, we see a distinction made between the "delightful air" of the Khasi Hills and the "pestilential atmosphere of the putrid plain." Thus, while the colonial gaze viewed the foothills closer to the plains as the exotic tropical, the uplands of the Khasi Hills were largely understood as temperate geographies similar to that present at home in Britain. While the former was perceived to bear a relation of difference with the British landscape (like the scene of the lower hills in Lindsay's account), the latter was seen as sharing similarity and affinity. This shows that the colonial symbolic landscape of the Khasi

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[99] However, the tropics were not only constituted by romantic ideas about landscape but were also associated with fear and danger, particularly in the form of diseases, pests, intense heat and humidity.

Hills, and the colonial gaze itself, was not stable or uniform but transformed and adapted to an individual's perspective and their experience of the change in the landscape.
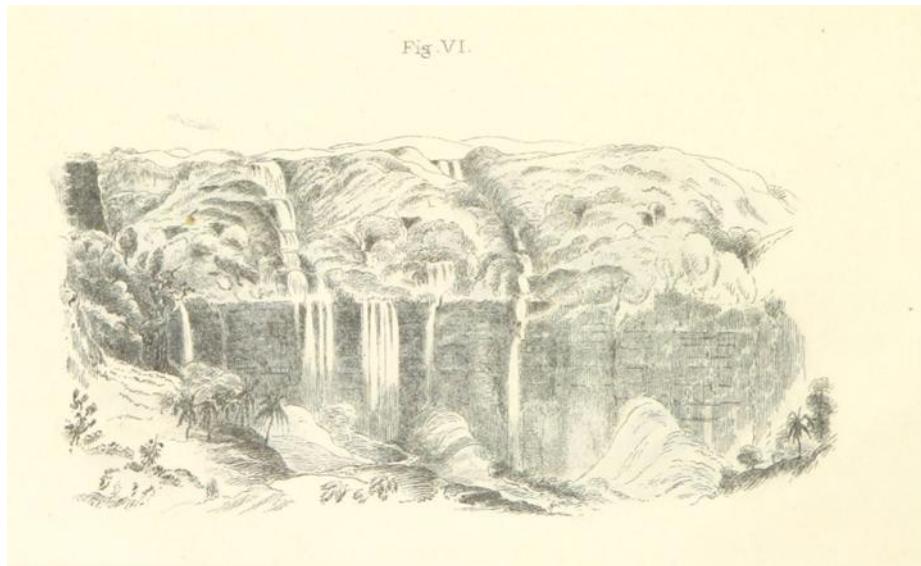
Figure 31. View of the Waterfalls in Mawkliar Valley, 1854, Thomas Oldham.

Casual comparisons between the Khasi Hills and places in Britain were made in several accounts. The undulations on the Shillong Plateau were often compared to those across the British Isles, from Ireland to the South Downs. While Cherrapunji reminded Henry Walters, a judge at the City Court of Dhaka, of his childhood village in Bannerdown, Somerset (Walters, 1829, 505), botanist William Griffith likened it to Buckinghamshire (Griffith, 1847, 8), and Major Adam White found Nongkhlaw "very similar" to South Scotland (White, 1832, 33). Thus, more than the "tropicality" of the foothills that Lindsay writes about, it is the hills and uplands of the Khasi Hills that nostalgically reflected home for the British. According to Kennedy (1996, 40) mountains had their special place in the picturesque, and it was only expected that the British carried their aesthetic inclinations abroad and applied them to the hills in India. For example, tours and travels to the uplands in Wales, the Peak and Lake Districts and the Scottish Highlands had become trends in the eighteenth century, making it likely that the visual and sensorial appreciation of mountain and hill sights was already a common proclivity. One of the most enduring comparisons is between the Khasi Hills and Scotland, to the extent that the region is still frequently referred to

as the "Scotland of the East." Although it is difficult to trace the source of this phrase, it is a tag line widely, and often proudly, used by people of Meghalaya, government representatives and the tourist industry alike. The top results of a Google search of "Scotland of the East" are the "Shillong" Wikipedia page and three travel articles on Meghalaya, and on Instagram, the hashtag #ScotlandoftheEast has over ten thousand posts featuring pictures of Meghalaya, most of them uploaded by tourists and tourism agencies. The continued popularity of the tag line "Scotland of the East" is an example of how the comparative association between the Khasi Hills and the British landscape, which has its roots in colonial history, survives today in its appropriation by the tourism industry. This is where we see the coming together of the colonial symbolic landscape and the tourism symbolic landscape.

The relationship of affinity between the Khasi Hills and the British landscape, as viewed and formulated by the colonial gaze, did not confine itself to the realm of the symbolic. In the early 1820s, sanatoriums were built in certain Khasi villages[100] and later some of these turned into British hill stations. These developments marked a material assertion of the colonial gaze via occupation. Hill stations were British towns in mountainous and hilly regions of India, chosen for their cool weather and "temperate" atmosphere, and they served as health and holiday retreats for Europeans, whilst also being used as important administrative centres and military bases for the colonial government[101] (Kenny, 1995; Kennedy, 1996; Bear; 2007; Sacareau, 2007). It was thought that the landscape and cooler climate of the hills resembled the temperate atmosphere of Britain and this in turn led to the assumption that the hills were perfect places for Europeans to recuperate and retain a healthy constitution[102]. The hill station then was not only a spatial category of British political authority over India but also a symbolic geography whose climate and landscape communicated British racial superiority, setting them apart spatially from Indians in the plains (Kenny, 1995, 695).

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[100] Like Nongkhlaw, Cherrapunji, and later Shillong.

[101] Therefore, while being places of leisure, rejuvenation and recuperation for the British to escape to away from the heat and humidity of the plains, they were also landscapes of systematic colonial occupation and domestication, making them what Andrew May (2012, 81) calls, "paradoxical sites of empire."

[102] Although Kenny (1995) has pointed out that the association between British subjects' healthiness and the hills was not always consistent. Many did not maintain good health even in hill stations.

Hill stations therefore became places of settlement colonialism and with this arrived the domestication the natural landscape; it was not enough that the landscape was reminiscent of home, British plants, flowers and trees were introduced to make the natural surroundings even more homelike. As Kennedy (1996) reminds us, the main experiments initiated were the establishments of British home and botanical gardens where British flowers, fruits, vegetables and trees were grown, and the construction of artificial lakes to recreate images of certain British sceneries which feature hills and lakes. In the biggest and most important hill station in the Khasi Hills, Shillong, these colonial landscape projects were realised in the Ward's Lake, the Lady Hydari Park (now called the Phan Nonglait Park) and the Shillong Botanical Gardens, all of which are key tourist spots in the city. This further "improvement of nature" in order to achieve familiarity and comfort in an alien landscape proves the point that Romita Ray (2013) makes about the picturesque in colonial India as a gesture of power and control. Thus, the hill station phenomenon is one example of how the representational and the symbolic can also generate material effects, precisely through the structure of colonial control and domination.

However, it should be pointed out that in the Khasi Hills, the hill station project was a bit more complicated and did not always prove to be successful. Apart from Shillong, the other hill stations did not grow into British towns, and it was only Shillong that was extensively fashioned and developed as the big hill stations in the Himalayas, like Shimla and Mussoorie. Cherrapunji, situated less than two kilometres from Mawkliar village and one of the most popular tourist attractions in Meghalaya today, was chosen as a sanatorium and station headquarters site in the 1820s for its higher elevation, its familiar topography and its supposed temperate climate. However, by the late 1850s, the British headquarters was moved to Shillong, abandoning Cherrapunji as a hill station altogether, because while the air was cooler and the landscape reminiscent of home, colonial employees and their families could not withstand the summer monsoon, known for its relentless rain,[103] and thick fog and mist. In fact, this extremely humid atmosphere, which some compared with the dampness of the British air, routinely caused illness and many deaths among Europeans. As historian Andrew May (2012, 87) notes, "...shrouded in cloud for too

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[103] As explained earlier, this region has one of the highest percentages of rainfall in the world.

many months of the year, the progression of Cherrapunji from sanatarium [sic] to high refuge, then from hill station to town that was to characterise the development of many of India's hill stations, did not materialise."

What we actually witness in Cherrapunji's trajectory as a hill station is the failure of a colonial enterprise aimed at bridging the symbolic and the material. In fact, the Khasi Hills landscape in Cherrapunji materially resisted and rejected colonial impositions, both symbolic and political, and it did so through the "temperate" and torrential climate. Interestingly, the monsoon rain is a very important element of the Cherrapunji and Mawkliar tourism landscape now. To most tourists, especially those travelling from other parts of India, the hard and incessant rain is a great novelty and a source of excitement and fascination. More important though is the fact that the Cherrapunji landscape[104] with its rolling hills, cliffs and waterfalls, is one of the most popular attractions in Meghalaya tourism today. This landscape has re-entered the symbolic through tourism media[105] and as explained earlier in the chapter, has been systematically recast through discursive frames by the objectifying gaze of the tourist. Studying the afterlife of British hill stations across India, Sacareau (2007) has demonstrated that these places did not fall out of use but have emerged as favourite holiday destinations for Indian tourists. She argues that these stations which represented the familiar to British residents are to Indian tourists forms of "alterity" and "exoticism" (Sacareau, 2007,43). As we have discussed earlier in the chapter, exoticisation and objectification of the natural landscape and to a certain extent the tribal Khasi culture in the Meghalayan context, is indeed a key part of the tourism experience today.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the emergence of the tourism landscape in Mawkliar village and the Khasi Hills amidst the growth of the tourism industry in the state of Meghalaya. I view the tourism landscape as both a material entity and a

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[104] Neighbouring villages like Mawsmai, Mawmluh, Mawkma and Tyrna are all marketed as part of the Cherrapunji experience.
[105] In fact, according to the 2011 Tourism Policy Plan of Meghalaya, Cherrapunji would be promoted as an independent brand within the Meghalaya tourism market (Government of Meghalaya, 2011).

representational and symbolic one, and as discussed early in the chapter, the two aspects are intimately connected. In Mawkliar, a village in the Cherrapunji area of Meghalaya known for its scenic hills and waterfalls, the natural landscape is increasingly being mobilised for tourism, as the industry is also becoming an important source of livelihood for people in the village. The physical and material aspect of the tourism landscape captures the mobilisation, utilisation and alteration of the village landscape for tourism expansion. Although the drive towards tourism is a part of a larger phenomenon across Meghalaya and North-East India, the channelling of land and landscape administratively for tourism purposes is largely in the hands of the local authority, the Mawkliar Durbar. While these developments materially unfold, there is simultaneously a representational process that takes place at the symbolic realm, where the natural landscape of the region is portrayed, imagined and consumed in a particular way. Thus, from a discussion about the material utilisation of the natural landscape, I move to an exploration of the symbolic representation of the same landscape, because both mechanisms and processes contribute to the *tourism landscape*.

The landscape of Cherrapunji and the Khasi Hills has historically been subjected to various regimes and modes of representation, and in this chapter, I have drawn a link between ideas and images present in and circulated on various tourism media platforms and those in colonial narratives and visual productions. In many ways, the nature and natural landscape that features on YouTube videos and Instagram photographs today is the same nature and landscape that has been romanticised in colonial writing, drawings and paintings about two centuries before. Thus, the Spectacle of Nature is a consistent feature in the representation of the Khasi Hills. However, representation is not confined to the symbolic realm. As discussed previously, the effects of landscape and nature representation spilled into material reality in the colonies. Aesthetic and conceptual ideals like the picturesque and tropicality can have very real and tangible effects, as in the creation of hill stations in colonial India. Colonial views about the Khasi Hills being topographically, climatically and aesthetically ideal for Europeans led to the acquisition of land and the establishment of Cherrapunji and later Shillong as British hill stations. In the context of tourism in the Khasi Hills landscape today, the representational and the material

coexist and appear to support each other. While tourist spots and homestays are constructed on the Mawkliar landscape, picturesque images of the Mawkliar hills and waterfalls also thrive on the internet tantalising visitors, altogether making the tourism landscape.

There are many parallels then between the colonial gaze and the tourist gaze in the Khasi Hills landscape as they both use the template of representation to generate a certain discursive language associated with the region. Simultaneous to these constructions are the material manifestations, first of colonial occupation and assertions on the landscape in the case of the colonial gaze, and of tourism placemaking and the channelling of land towards tourism in case of the latter. Both the colonial gaze and the tourist gaze engage with nature and the natural landscape through processes of romanticisation, objectification and exoticisation, with no recognition of the meaning and value of land and landscape to the local Khasis who bear a living relationship with their surroundings. In fact, one could argue that the colonial gaze and the tourist gaze engender an erasure of people from the landscape, while placing the coloniser and the tourist firmly within it. In the next chapter, I attempt to counter this by turning to the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang,* an example of Khasi place-making on the Mawkliar landscape, where the land is not representational but a living spiritual force embedded in people's lives.

Lawkyntang Conjuring in the Khasi Landscape

It was the last week of March in Mawkliar and the land was waiting for the first monsoon shower of the year. Tourist season starts when the rain arrives, so locals working in tourist spots were also waiting for the rush and for business to be better. To escape the stagnant heat that usually precedes the rain, my informant Kong Da, who runs a tea shop at Mawkliar Cave, suggested we go to the forest and look for *jhur khlaw* (wild vegetables) so we both could have something to cook for dinner that evening. As we navigated through narrow forest trails carpeted by dry and shrivelled leaves, Kong Da drew my attention to different trees and plants: "That's a *dieng soh manir* (lychee tree) and over there is *ja jew* (roselle plant)." When we reached a muddy and grassy clearing, Kong Da told me to take off my shoes and walk in the mud as she taught me the dexterous business of spotting and plucking a tiny rhizomatous herb called *ja miaw* (known as "slender speedwell" in English). Pointing to a forested hill nearby, Kong Da says, "You know, that there is a *lawkyntang*[106] (sacred forest). We can't forage there but here, in these forests down below, we are allowed to. In the *lawkyntang*, we touch nothing. If we do that, who knows what will happen to us!" Kong Da here is referring to the Khasi belief that anyone who disturbs and desecrates a sacred forest will be met with misfortune, even death, because their action would be an offence to *u Ryngkew u Basa,* the tutelary deity who protects land and nature in the village. Although the Durbar (the village council) is also the authority which determines forbiddance regarding forest use and access, Kong Da was primarily concerned about the powers of *u Ryngkew u Basa*, the being whose abode is the forest itself.

In this chapter, I want to explore the *lawkyntang* as a space of sacredness and potency in the Mawkliar landscape and how people understand and negotiate with such a space located at the heart of the village. As made clear in the previous chapter, being one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Khasi Hills, Mawkliar's landscape is now largely viewed through the lenses of tourism as an aesthetic and as a resource. However, people in the village also experience the Mawkliar landscape,

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[106] "Law" translates to forest and "kyntang" translates to sacred in Khasi.

particularly the *lawkyntang,* as a sentient and powerful place which manifests and communicates its will to humans in various ways. The *lawkyntang* can thus be understood as an enduring form of Khasi place-making, one which firmly sits amidst various transformations of the landscape. In highlighting this aspect of the Mawkliar landscape, this chapter attempts to emphasise the thesis' point that the Khasi tribal landscape is a multivalent and temporal one where different and sometimes seemingly oppositional values coexist. Further, attending to the question of power and potency of the *lawkyntang,* this chapter also attempts to place the Khasi *lawkyntang* in the specific discourse of "sacred" versus "spiritual" landscapes in the anthropology of landscape (Allerton, 2009).

Ki Lawkyntang: Ecology and Governance

In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, *ki lawkyntang* (also called *ki law niam*, *khlo blai* and *law lyngdoh* in some areas) are particular forests which have been kept relatively undisturbed and unexploited because they are believed to be the homes *u Ryngkew u Basa*, the guardian spirit of land and nature. Although people are allowed to visit the *lawkyntang*, they are not permitted to extract any resources from them, and this includes the collection of forest products and foraging. Some say that even the removal of a stone, a twig or a leave from a sacred grove is taboo because it will anger *u Ryngkew u Basa*. Thus, many understand the keeping of *ki lawkyntang* among the Khasis as a method of indigenous forest conservation, which has historically supported many ecosystem services like soil conservation, protection of water sources and catchment areas, apart from preserving biodiversity in area (Tiwari et al, 1995; Misra and Rangad, 2008). Kharkongor and Tiwari (2015) also underline that such forms of local forest conservation have helped protect habitats and species that are excluded from state-based protected area frameworks. Further, being models that are rooted in local beliefs and practices, and therefore accepted by local communities, these conservation methods have proved to be more successful (Kharkongor and Tiwari, 2015, 347). Therefore, as Tatay and Merino (2023) point out, such sacred natural sites have become key places of interest for conservationists, international organisations and Protected Areas managers all over the world. Although there are 125 sacred groves left in the state today (Department of Forests and Environment,

Government of Meghalaya, 2022), many have been lost over the past two centuries and more are known to be ecologically precarious and under much pressure.

The *lawkyntang* that Kong Da showed me and which I had visited later with other informants is called the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang*, named so after the Mawlong Syiem hill where it is located. The Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* is one of several forests in Mawkliar village, all of which sit quietly dispersed among the otherwise barren landscape. The other forests in the village are Blei Bah, Law Bah, Ramjadong and Law Mot Palong. As explained in the Introduction, unlike Sohtrai and Laitrum in the lower hills which are more thickly covered with forest vegetation, Mawkliar located in the uplands is predominantly a grassland with a few pockets of forested land. However, environmental scientists like Ramakrishnan (1997) and Bdoor (2016) have established that all the forests in Mawkliar were once parts of the same upland rainforest in the Cherrapunji area which gradually depleted through the centuries. While Blei Bah is another sacred forest, the others are considered secular and categorised as *Law Adong* and *Law Shnong* where forest use is allowed but restricted. For instance, the foraging of fruits and vegetables is generally allowed as long as there is no widescale damage of the specific forest ecosystem. The collection of firewood is also allowed, but highly regulated; informants in Mawkliar say that among the non-sacred forests, firewood collection is permitted only in certain areas of the forests and only in particular set periods.

The authority which sets the rules of forest use in Mawkliar is the Durbar which, as pointed out earlier in the thesis, is the primary authority over land in the village. Thus, all forests in the village are administered by the Durbar. This is also true of Mawkliar because the customary land tenure that is followed in the village establishes all land as community-owned—meaning that all forests in Mawkliar are community forests. Privately owned forests like those in Sohtrai and Laitrum are completely absent in Mawkliar. There is an understanding that this arrangement of local ownership and administration provided by the Sixth Schedule is one of the factors aiding the survival of *ki lawkyntang* in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Former Sirdar of Mawkliar, Bah Kitdor and the Durbar Secretary, Bah Biang also made this claim in separate conversations, citing the ability of the Mawkliar Durbar to be firm with people in the village about forest use. Since it is not the aim of this chapter to

investigate the role of the Durbar in *lawkyntang* preservation, I shall leave this point here. However, I want to draw our attention to two cases that happened elsewhere that contradict this assumption. In both examples, the *lawkyntang* is destroyed for commercial purposes through the misuse of power by local authorities like Sirdars and Syiems[107].

In his ethnography of resources in Meghalaya, *Unruly Hills*, anthropologist Bengt Karlsson (2011) reported that the Lum Shillong (or Shillong Peak) sacred forest was cleared under the supervision of the Francis Syiem, the Syiem of Hima Khyrim (Khyrim State) in the early 1980s, who leased the forest to a logging contractor. Folklorist Desmond Kharmawphlang (2016) also documented a similar episode that occurred in Raid Thaiang in the 1970s, where Jolen Syiem, the then Syiem of Thaiang, leased out the *lawkyntang* to loggers. Thus, although there is an argument that the local control of forests, including sacred forests, enables their survival; there are also examples which reveal how local authorities exploit their positions and allow the *lawkyntang* to be harmed in return for personal gains. Indeed, these acts not only ruin the sacred forest ecosystem but also dismantle the *lawkyntang* as a longstanding shared tradition of the community.

Notably, in the examples cited above, Karlsson (2011) and Kharmawphlang (2016) talk about the misfortunes that followed the two *lawkyntang* destructions, which people interpreted as reflective of the anger of *u Ryngkew u Basa*. According to Karlsson (2011), Francis Syiem's death shortly after the Lum Shillong sacred forest was cleared was read as retributive of his misdeed, and Kharmawphlang (2016) explains that the ruin of the *lawkyntang* was followed by a series of droughts in Raid Thaiang — circumstances which people attributed to *u Ryngkew u Basa*'s rage. Thus, whether the sacred forests survive or not, the belief in their potency, the presence of *u Ryngkew u Basa* and the spirits' ability to generate experiences of hardship, suffering, and indeed death, lingers on.

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[107] Traditional Khasi Chief.

The Lawkyntang: Sacredness and Potency

The usage of the word "sacred" to describe things and places is often seen as a problematic imposition of Eurocentric and Christian dualistic understandings of the world (Allerton, 2009; Keller, 2014). The existence of sacredness implies the existence of the non-sacred. This argument is often based on critiques of the Durkheimian dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, where the sacred is associated with transcendence, reverence and ritual, while the profane is the ordinary realm of daily life. According to Durkheim, the sacred and the profane are seen as oppositional entities that are completely separated and set apart in that they "...should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity" (Durkheim, 1964, 40). In order to enter the realm of the sacred, elements — whether objects, animals or humans — must leave the profane completely and expunge all attachments to it. Scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1961, 12) also builds on this idea of separation and division between the sacred and the profane, identifying the sacred with "power" and "reality" and the profane with unreality and meaninglessness. More relevant to our discussion is Eliade's formulation of the sacred as spatial. He establishes that the sacred space is characterised by the existence of a threshold and boundary that distinguishes it from the profane. Eliade calls sacred space "axis mundi" and explains it as a point or centre which "...at once connects and supports heaven and earth" (Eliade, 1961, 36). "Axis mundi" is therefore premised on the notion of sacred space being a centre whose sacredness and power emerges from its connection with a transcendental realm.

For Catherine Allerton (2009a; 2009b; 2013), an anthropologist of landscape in South-East Asia, this division and segregation between the sacred and profane is not useful. She argues that ethnographies from the region, including her own, strongly show that people do not make a distinction between the sacred and the profane in their everyday engagement with the landscape. She uses the term "spiritual landscape" instead: first as a negation of the exclusionary idea of the sacred and second, to encapsulate the rich and plural presences of spirits on the land. She states that while people engage with spiritual landscapes through ritual activities, they also do so in pragmatic and informal ways; thus, spiritual landscapes are not necessarily 'religious'

(Allerton, 2009a, 238). She explains that among many Southeast Asian societies, much of the landscape is animate and spiritual; ideas of power and potency are therefore not only limited to specific locations. The potency of the land is acknowledged in everyday situations like walking and farming (Allerton, 2009a, 241). At the heart of Allerton's argument is the emphasis of local and "vernacular" understandings of places and landscape, much of which is not strictly mediated through ritual activity (Allerton, 2009a, 238). As elaborated upon earlier, the Khasi landscape is also a spiritual landscape, in that it embodies plenty of powerful energies and spirits. While there are specific locations of mythic and ritualistic importance, there are always other kinds of spiritual presences across the landscape. In this sense, the Khasi Hills landscape is an animated landscape, a point we shall elaborate on later. Our first task though is to address the question of sacredness and how it is situated within the Khasi Hills landscape, particularly the *lawkyntang.*

First, the specific deployment of the term "sacred" to describe *ki lawkyntang* is fundamentally based on the literal translation from Khasi – *law* or *khlaw* means "forest" and *kyntang* means "sacred." The notion of sacredness attached to *ki lawkyntang* comes from the Khasi belief in and experience of the presence of *u Ryngkew u Basa*, the guardian spirit of land and nature, in these forests. Although much of the Khasi Hills is understood as a mythic and spirited landscape, *ki lawkyntang* or sacred forests are known to have a more intense potency which often generates tangible and often, somatic effects. When visiting sacred forests as children, we were always warned quite firmly by accompanying adults not to pluck or pick up anything or cause any disruptions inside the forests for fear of being recipients of the punitive actions of *u Ryngkew u Basa.* Although punishment by illness or death is the most common experience, other forms of encountering with *u Ryngkew u Basa* are also reported. Further, the idea of sacredness is consolidated by the fact that these forests are the sites of sacrificial rituals performed for *u Ryngkew u Basa.*

The inhabitation of *u Ryngkew u Basa* in the *lawkyntang* has a mythic explanation, one tied to the myth of ULum Diengïei. According to the myth, U Diengïei was a giant tree that connected humans to God, u *Blei nongbuh-nongthaw,*[108] and when

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[108] Although there are multiple gods and deities according to Khasi indigenous faith Niam Khasi, the concept of one ultimate creator God also exists.

humans destroyed it and chopped it off, God punished them with diseases and deprivation. Eventually, to mark his forgiveness, God sent *u Ryngkew u Basa* as a tutelary spirit and deity of nature to live in forests on earth; as atonement for their blunder, humans have to make offerings by performing annual sacrificial rituals. These ritualistic offerings (*ka kñia ka khriam*) made to *u Ryngkew u Basa* are conducted in places identified as sacred forests, and in Mawkliar, they have always been performed at the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang*. There is a general understanding that as a *lawkyntang*, the Mawlong Syiem forest is a microcosm of the forest inhabited by the originary *u Ryngkew u Basa* sent by God in the Lum Diengiei myth, and therefore is a part of a larger sacred landscape. However, it is also important to point out that the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* has its own mythic significance. The Mawlong Syiem hill, of which the Mawlong Syiem forest is a part, is also the Mawlong Syiem god/deity, understood as *u Ryngkew u Basa* of the Mawkliar region worshipped by people in Mawkliar (Gurdon, 1907, 1996; Rafy, 1920; Elias, 1937, 2012). It is said that U Mawlong Syiem deity used to be central to the religion of the Mawkliar *hima* (state) and that former Syiems (traditional Khasi chiefs) and the people of Mawkliar would sacrifice a goat to him twice a year. The deity U Mawlong Syiem is also strongly associated with music, specifically the beating of the "ksing" (type of Khasi drum), the sound of which would be heard emerging from the *lawkyntang* by people in Mawkliar and nearby villages. The drumming sound is however not entirely celebratory; in Gurdon's (1996, 170) and Elias' (2012, 58) accounts, the sound of the drum is meant to be a foretelling of the death of a Syiem — again underlining the significant role of the deity in the affairs of the Mawkliar state. However, as explained in the Introduction, the Mawkliar Hima was abolished after it was defeated by the East India Company in the Anglo-Khasi War of 1829[109], and its status was reduced to that of a "British village." This event saw the end of the Mawkliar as an independent and sovereign state[110].

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[109] The Mawkliar chief, Mookoond Sing, lost his title as "Syiem" and Mawkliar came under the administration of local heads called "sirdars," who were partially controlled by the colonial administration (Allen, 1858).

[110] The only remnants of the erstwhile Mawkliar State and its chiefs are the eight granite monoliths that stand in the village centre next to the Wah Sawriang river. According to oral historical accounts (or *khanatang*), these stones were erected to mark settlement in the village when it was founded by a Khasi chief called Syiem Bor Sing and the seven clans who followed him from Nonglba, a village to the north.

My point in elaborating on the two the mythic accounts about *ki lawkyntang* in general and the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* in particular, is to show that one of the ways in which the forest's identity as a sacred space is conceptualised is through mythology. Intimately connected to myth is ritual practice, often considered fundamental to the realm of the sacred. The historical sanctification of the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* through ritual for centuries speaks to this. Even after Mawkliar had come under British administration, the Sirdars of Mawkliar continued to perform sacrificial rituals to the Mawlong Syiem deity at the *lawkyntang* until the early decades of the twentieth century[111]. Although there is no official record about when the last ritual was performed, according to Bah Donlang[112] (2022, personal communication, 24 February), an informant who was born in the 1930s, the last sacrificial ritual that was performed inside the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* took place about a decade before his birth. A Catholic himself, Bah Donlang learned about the ritual performances from his uncles and grandmother. Given that the mass conversion into Christianity from Ka Niam Khasi (the indigenous religion)[113] in the Khasi Hills happened between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (see Syiemlieh, 2013 and Census of India, 1901), Bah Donlang's statement cannot be too far from the truth.

Ritual and the Sacred

In a conversation with Bah Kitdor[114], former Sirdar of Mawkliar who is of a similar age to Bah Donlang, we discussed the impact of Christianity and the abandonment of sacrificial ritual on the *lawkyntang*. "Unfortunately, we have lost all the people who could perform the rituals in the forest. Now all of us are Christians and we don't know anything about Ka Niam (the religion) anymore." I asked him if the

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[111] As explained in the Introduction and in Chapter One, the East India Company and later the British Government largely did not interfere with the religious and cultural lives of the Khasis but colonisation nevertheless provided the conditions for proselytization and conversions to Christianity by allowing missionaries to practice without much restriction across the Khasi Hills.

[112] Bah Donlang passed away a year after we met in 2023.

[113] However, it is important to remember that Ka Niam Khasi was institutionalised by Ka Seng Khasi only in 1899. Previous to this period, although all Khasi indigenous religions followed a range of common deities, each Hima, *kur* (clan) and *shiiing* (matrilineal household) would also follow and perform rituals for their own gods and deities, and ancestors.

[114] Bah Kitdor passed away in May, 2025.

abandonment of the rituals also meant that following the rules of the *lawkyntang*, i.e., not harming and exploiting it for resources, was no longer mandatory. Examining sacred forests in other parts of the Khasi Hills, Karlsson (2010) and Ormsby (2013) have underlined the correlation between the level of disturbance in *ki lawkyntang* and the abandonment of Ka Niam Khasi religion, and therefore, the rituals performed inside the forests. Ormsby (2013, 195) states that there is certainly a "weakening" of people's concern for sacred groves because of their adoption of Christianity. Bah Kitdor argues, that this is not the case in Mawkliar and points out that the Mawkliar Durbar maintains the strict prohibition of forest encroachment and exploitation. However, he did remark that although Christianity had not impacted the village's forest management approach, it had certainly enfeebled the powers of *u Ryngkew u Basa*. He said, "In the old days, the moment you did something disrespectful in the forest, something awful always happened to you. But now it's less and less so. I think it is because we no longer perform the rituals on that hill."

In Bah Kitdor's view, there is a strong correlation between the *lawkyntang*'s potency and the offering of sacrificial rituals to its deities inside the forest. To him, the perceived decline of the forest's potency is a logical outcome of the disappearance of rituals. At first, this seems to make sense. According to Eliade (1961), sacred spaces like sacred forests, as imitations of a cosmological centre, are constructed through acts of ritual repetition. Emphasising the dependency of sacred space on ritual, Jonathan Z Smith (1992, 103) states that, 'Ritual is not an expression of or a response to "the Sacred"; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual.' Indeed, these are non-substantive arguments based on the underlying assumption that sacredness is an attributive entity which is arbitrary and contingent, and not innate or intrinsic to places, people and things. In Durkheim's (1964, 229) words, sacredness is "superimposed" (by ritual). Perhaps there is reason to entertain this idea when looking at how rituals generate sacredness and potency spatially, in that sacrificial rituals performed at Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* made the forest and all entities within it "sacred" and powerful. However, the temporal aspect of Smith's and Elaide's argument, that which establishes sacredness as a condition which only exists with the continuation of ritual action, does not entirely describe the *lawkyntang*. As the next section will show, the acceptance of a world religion like Christianity, and the

abandonment of sacrificial rituals has not resulted in a complete erasure of people's beliefs in and experiences of the powers of the *lawkyntang*, and thus, the forest's "sacredness."

Presences of u Ryngkew u Basa and the Experience of Sacredness in Mawlong Syiem Lawkyntang

All I knew about Mawkliar before I started fieldwork was its importance in the larger tourism ecosystem of the region. I knew about the tourist spots and had visited them several times before. Mawkliar Cave was a particular favourite because navigating the cavernous landscape, with its stalagmites and stalactites, was the perfect adventure for me and my cousins as children on our school winter holidays. Therefore, when Kong Da first told me that the forest sprawling over the hill under which the Mawkliar Cave is ensconced was a *lawkyntang*, I was taken by surprise. Not one of the numerous signposts in the village which identified places, especially tourist spots, and sometimes explained the history and significance of particular locations, bore any information about the forest, so close to a major tourist spot, being a *lawkyntang.* When I started speaking to people about the forest, it soon became clear that the *lawkyntang* remained a spiritual force in the village, with several people experiencing encounters with *u Rynkew u Basa.* These encounters are the avenues through which people continue to experience "the sacred" in Mawlong Syiem.

One Saturday morning, I got an unexpected call from my key informant Bah Lit, who said that I should come to his house and meet his uncle, Bah Donlang. Bah Lit is a fifty-something man who runs a snacks-shop in the Mawkliar Cave parking lot. His uncle Bah Donlang used to work in the station of the Cherra-Chhatak Ropeway Company located in the village and I was eager to speak to him about his experiences there. Fresh with the knowledge about the existence of the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* after the walk with Kong Da, I could not help ask both of them about it. "I personally truly believe that *u Ryngkew u Basa* have not abandoned our *lawkyntang*," Bah Lit responded, "And I say that because of what I have seen with my own eyes." Bah Lit then went on to tell me about what he believed were his encounters with *u Ryngkew u Basa.* One time was when he was at his shop at Mawkliar Cave early in the

morning. He was the only person there and suddenly, he felt a breeze coming through, and then heard the loud crashing sound of a waterfall coming from the forest. He ran to see what it was but by the time he went close by, the sound vanished and the breeze died down. "At that moment, I was completely overwhelmed with fear. But then I realised it was the works of *u Ryngkew u Basa,* telling us that they are here," Bah Lit said. Another time was when he and three others, including his wife, had just left their shop in the evening and were walking home. Bah Lit started seeing a white substance, "like melted candle wax," he said, slowly covering the Mawlong Syiem hill and forest. His eyes fixated on the sight and realised that his wife and one of the three people with him stood still looking at it too. It lasted a few minutes and then suddenly, all the strange phenomenon disappeared. "I asked my wife, 'did you see it?' and she said 'yes' and so did the other person. For some reason, one of us didn't. I should have noted the date of that day but we were all too shaken," Bah Lit explained.

Bah Donlang excitedly jumped in and asked, "Oh remember Stan?" addressing Bah Lit and then looked to me, "He's my nephew and when he was working as a cleaner at the toilets near the Cave a few years ago, he saw things as well." Bah Donlang said that his nephew witnessed the rare sight of a monkey with bright yellow hair and a wild horse with a golden mane entering the *lawkyntang*. The horse gave him a long stare before making its way into the forest again. "Stan came running to me and asked if it is common to see these animals. Of course not, I told him, we don't have such animals here. Poor boy was so bewildered!" Bah Donlang smiled, "You see, Mawlong Syiem is really *kyntang.*" Another account that I heard was from a tourist guide called Bah Hep who said that one time when he took a group of tourists inside the Mawkliar Cave, he tried to take a picture of them but kept seeing a man dressed in a white *jaiñkup* (wrap shawl) and wearing a white *jaiñ spong* (Khasi turban), who stood still looking at them. "He was like those Khasi *mynhyndai*[115]," Bah Hep explained and said that the photographs did not work and came out spoiled.

Above were some of the accounts which my informants noted as encounters with the spirit *u Ryngkew u Basa.* Although it is generally believed that as tutelary deity of land and nature *u Ryngkew u Basa* primarily manifests himself as the tiger, he

[115] "Mynhyndai" means "during the old days."

is also known to take other forms, human and non-human. Such encounters are understood as affirmations of the existence of *u Ryngkew u Basa* in the *lawkyntang,* and some even read the sightings as moments willed and intended by the deities, for them to be seen by humans. "They want to remind us that they are the guardians and that they are still looking out for us," said an informant.

In order to understand the sacredness of the *lawkyntang* and the spirit beings who live in it like *u Ryngkew u Basa*, we need to locate it within the larger field of the animated Khasi landscape. As mentioned in the Introduction, this is one important aspect of the Khasi landscape that this thesis wishes to pay attention to. The Khasi landscape is animated because it possesses various kinds and levels of potency that is embodied by elements of the landscape like hills, rivers, stones, trees and numerous other non-human entities, including animals and human-like beings. Like Mawlong Syiem, other hills like Lum Shillong (after which Shillong city is named), Lum Symper and Lum Kyllang are deific entities with their own personhoods[116] and sacrificial rituals are again the main expressions of these entities' relationships with humans[117]. Many rivers are also understood as persons and deific-others; sacrificial offerings are made to rivers like the Umtyrngui and Myntdu for using their waters, although for certain rivers like the Umta in Ri Bhoi District, simply a dialogue between the river and ritual experts is enough to appease the former. The Myntdu river, on the other hand, is known to be stern; when the Myntdu-Leshka dam was under construction, several labourers lost their lives in accidents in the course of the project. Many said that the deaths signalled the river's anger against the dam and that the river wanted to consume human blood in return for the success of the project. In Sohtrai, not far from where I lived during fieldwork, there is a spirited rubber tree and people hear it wail and cry from time to time. Stones, as we learned in Chapter Two, are important presences which carry power in multiple ways: megalithic stones perform mnemonic functions for families and clans; they also embody the spirit of ancestors. In most sacrificial rituals, stones are fundamental ritual objects which become potent entities in that ritual space; for example, the ritual stones inside the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* are still seen as sacred, with deific energy. Stones are also a common

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[116] Lum Symper and Lum Kyllang are also brothers, known to have a rivalrous relationship with each other.
[117] Annual sacrifices are still performed at Lum Shillong, but not at Lum Symper and Lum Kyllang.

shapely manifestation of *u Ryngkew u Basa* as they are emplaced in various locations; apart from inside forests, stones embodying *u Ryngkew u Basa* also exist in paddy fields and on river banks.

Simultaneously, there are invisible agents with potency in the form of spirits, deities and energies of ancestors (usually clan-based), all of whom share the landscape with humans. Waterbodies like rivers and lakes are homes to *ki puri*, female undines who entice men, marry them and sometimes have children together[118]; thick and deep forests are inhabited by *ka thabalong* and *ki boit,* the former being a long-haired human-like usually seen hanging upside-down from trees[119], and the latter are little non-human persons with long beards whose sightings bring great danger or death. Not associated with a particular element or place on the landscape, *u kla* is a spirit known to take people and place them in precarious locations like cliffs and the top of waterfalls. Another spirit which roams the land is *u suidtynjah* who captures humans and forces them to scratch his back. In Chapter Six, we shall read about *u thlen*, the evil spirit that certain Khasi households keep in order to get wealthy; in return they have to serve him human blood. Similar malevolent spirits kept by people and families, like *ka taro* and *ka shwar,* are all a part of the animated Khasi landscape.

The vibrant existence of these various powerful beings and entities, including *u Ryngkew u Basa* of the *lawkyntang*, finds resonance in Allerton's (2009a) concept of "spiritual landscape," one where spirit-beings and energies are a part of people's everyday negotiations with landscape. According to Allerton (2009a, 237), the frame of "spiritual landscape" helps to draw attention to how people imagine, conceive and experience these spirit-beings and energies and their connection to and embeddedness in the landscape; also, to people's comportments and responses to them as elements not of the "visible earth," yet powerfully a part of it. The point of emphasis most pertinent to this chapter is however the expansive definition of "spiritual landscape," that which does not limit itself to particular sites of "sacredness" or religious significance. The spiritual is one where the potency emerging from various beings, human and non-human, spills over and is scattered all over the landscape,

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[118] Such men are called "ngat puri" or those entrapped by the *puri*.
[119] Ka Thabalong is known to attack humans in fear of them harming her children.

temporally and spatially in varying degrees[120]. As shown earlier, the Khasi landscape is constituted and experienced in a similar way. The *lawkyntang* and all the powerful entities within it (the plants, trees, animals, stones and *u Ryngkew u Basa*) are essential constituents of this spiritual landscape.

Why then is the "sacredness" of the *lawkyntang* seemingly emphasised in the spiritual and animated landscape? The use of the term "kyntang" ("sacred" in Khasi) when referring to the sacred forest is not to underline an incommensurable separation of the forest from the rest of the landscape because the rest of the landscape outside the *lawkyntang* cannot be understood as "profane" in the Durkheimian sense. The potency and spiritual force of the landscape is ubiquitous and continuous, although differentiated and uneven in its distribution. Thus, the Mawlong Syiem sacred forest is not "kept apart" from the larger Mawkliar landscape. This does not mean that every element in the landscape is a spirited entity but that the potency embodied by certain beings emplaced in the landscape is abound and emerges in unpredictable ways. Although one is careful and cautious when walking in a *lawkyntang* so that nothing is damaged or disturbed, similar attitudes of caution and alertness surface when navigating through a *law adong* or a *law shnong* — forests which are not considered "sacred," because there are other spirit-beings and entities to fear for different reasons, like the *suidtynjang*, the *thabalong* and the *menshohnoh* (murderers hired by families who keep *u Thlen*).

However, the *lawkyntang* is a ritualised space and the term "kyntang" in this context is a reference to the process of ritualisation, as something ritualised or affected by ritualisation. As an important site for sacrificial rituals, especially those which address the well-being and safety of the *hima/elaka* (Khasi administrative units) or village[121], the *lawkyntang* is "kyntang." Thus, when focusing on the particular connection between sacredness and ritual whereby ritual creates "the sacred" as

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[120] The edited volume *Masters of Stone*, edited by Holly High (2022) also addresses the idea of the spiritual landscape in Southeast Asia. Speaking from and different contexts across the region, contributors discuss the "occultic presences" on the landscape through a focus on figures of "stone" or stone-like entities like mountains, trees, lamp posts and shrines. The "Masters" referred to in the title are various spirit beings otherwise called "guardian spirits" or "tutelary deities" emplaced on the landscape through "stones."

[121] This is because the *lawkyntang* is where *u Ryngkew u Basa*, the guardian and protector of land, nature and the *hima* predominantly lives.

argued by Smith (1992) and others, the *lawkyntang* is something "sacred" because its sacredness is aided by sacrificial rituals. However, I would argue that the *lawkyntang*'s "sacredness" does not exclude or cancel out the potency and transcendental powers of other entities and places outside the *lawkyntang*. Further, as discussed earlier, despite the abandonment of ritualisation in the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang*, the "sacredness" survives. In this context, the "sacredness" of the *lawkyntang* emerges from the affective encounters with the spirit beings — those which occur among the quotidian rhythms of the everyday — something which we will expand on later. When Bah Donlang called Mawlong Syiem a place which is "really *kyntang,*" he was directly addressing people's present-day experiences of seeing, hearing and feeling *u Ryngkew u Basa*, and not the idea of sacredness attached to the sacrificial rituals. In other words, the sacredness and the potency that comes with it, exist outside the ritual frame. Therefore, the word "sacred," with all its theoretical associations (and baggage) in anthropological and religious studies, might slightly distort the semantic scope of a Khasi word like "kyntang." Discussing the Apsáalooke tribe's usage of the category "sacred" to describe their geographies, Keller (2014, 89) argues that "sacred" is an umbrella term within which "culturally specific concepts can be studied and invoked…" Although Keller is talking about the politically-driven deployment of the word to convey the Apsáalooke's relationship with their land — the land being an embodiment of memories and "stories of the blood and bones" (Keller, 2014, 89) — his point about specificity and the need to pay attention to particular indigenous conceptions of the sacred is relevant to this chapter's argument.

Animated Landscape and Power

Within the realm of the spiritual and the sacred, both of which describe the Khasi landscape and the *lawkyntang*, is also the element of animation. Considering the consistent reference to the "animated landscape," it would be incomplete to not discuss the *lawkyntang* and the Khasi landscape in light of animism. Doing this will also help explain further the relationship that people in Mawkliar have with spirit-beings and the *lawkyntang*. By animism, I do not mean the classic Tylorian interpretation which views the attribution of life, personhood or divinity to non-humans like animals, plants, and various elements of nature, as "primitive" and

"childlike" (Tylor, 1958 [1871]). This interpretation is based on a modernist and naturalistic distinction between nature and culture, mind and body, human and non-human, which this chapter is resisting. The animism that I refer to is based on revised conceptualisations by the likes of Descola (1992, 1996), Viveiros de Castro (1998), Bird-David (1999) and Ingold (2006), which emphasise the equality of personhoods among human, animals, plants and inanimate entities and their shared relationality. Arhem (2015, 5) summaries this more recent form of animism as "...a 'social' cosmos populated by human and non-human persons (animals and plants), communicating and interacting with each other as autonomous subjects in an intersubjective field of relations." What is more relevant to our discussion is Arhem's (2015, 5) point that these new interpretations of animism are less representative of ethnographic worlds in Southeast Asia "...where human-animal relations are of minor cosmological concern while human-spirit relations are at the forefront of metaphysical reflection." Although the Khasi Hills is in South Asia, Arhem's (2015) comment rings true of animisms in the Khasi Hills as well. Indeed, there exists multiple forms of relationality between humans and animals, for example between humans and tigers, the latter who is often perceived as *u Ryngkew u Basa*, and between certain clans and their totemic animals. However, there are far more experiences of intersubjective relationships between humans and spiritual entities, including elements of nature, and the *lawkyntang* is one such example.

Another notion that Arhem (2015, 25) introduces is that of "hierarchical animism" — a type of animism common to many Southeast Asian communities, particularly among hill-tribes. He explains it as: "Like standard animism, hierarchical animism posits a universalized subjectivity – but one that is graded along a vertical scale rather than segmented along a horizontal plane." In other words, as opposed to the egalitarian form of relationality in standard animism, in hierarchical animism beings are connected by an "asymmetric intersubjectivity" where beings are intrinsically unequal and differentiated having "different degrees of spirit/potency..." (Arhem, 2015,25). Arhem speaks of a cosmology where despite the element of relatedness, i.e., where relation is fundamental to the process of being, hierarchy structures certain relationships. In this cosmological matrix, the power of spirit beings over humans abounds. The predominance of differentiated powerful spirit-beings on

the Khasi spiritual landscape, as discussed earlier, is representative of this formulation. The "vertical scale" of intersubjectivity includes God, u Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw, deities, spirits, humans, animals and plants. The power of spirits like *u Ryngkew u Basa* over humans can be understood in this context.

Like many powerful spirit-beings emplaced on the land, *u Ryngkew u Basa* is an ambiguous figure who is both a benevolent guardian and a figure of fear. In that sense, *u Ryngkew u Basa* is similar to the *lulik* in Timor-Leste (Bovensiepen, 2009), the *devaru* among the Nayaka in South India (Bird-David, 1999), the *chao thi* in northern Thailand (Baumann, 2022) and others. People's relationships with these powerful-others or "owners" or "Masters" (High, 2022) of the land, is therefore a continuous process of negotiation set in the everyday. Although encounters with *u Ryngkew u Basa,* often experienced through sightings but not always, are not explicitly interpreted as ominous or dangerous, there are other incidents of misfortune which people positively read as punishments of *u Ryngkew u Basa,* those which happen when people transgress the *lawkyntang* rules. The fundamental premise of the *lawkyntang* in people's understanding in Mawkliar today is the notion of prohibition and taboo, attached both to an idea of sacredness and to an extent, the authoritative stance of the Durbar vis-à-vis resource use inside the forest. As a powerful-other, *u Ryngkew u Basa* has punitive faculties directed at taboo violators who exploit and desecrate the forest, often resulting in illness, disease or death. In conversations, people use the term "ym bit" and not "ym shah" to explain why they do not access the *lawkyntang* for resources; while both phrases can be translated to "not allowed", "ym bit" specifically carries a deeper moral tone, similar to the word "sang" or taboo. To say that an action is "sang" or that it is "ym bit" to do something implies a kind of prohibition that is absolute for moral reasons, and that disobedience will positively be met with a bad outcome. To me, this choice of "ym bit" over "ym shah" expresses an awareness and fear of the spiritual realm, manifested in *u Ryngkew u Basa,* and its power to punish and harm. Before furthering the discussion on the question of taboo, I want to first cite a few accounts of incidents that my informants shared with me, identifying them as punishments of *u Ryngkew u Basa.*

Kong Dahun was a woman from the village who one day collected firewood from the lawkyntang, an activity which is forbidden. When she went home that evening, her neck

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suddenly got twisted from back to front and was stuck that way. People tried to help but nothing attempted was successful. Soon, what she had done came to light and it was only then that people understood what had happened. They were certain that she was being punished by u Ryngkew u Basa. Accordingly, arrangements were made for rituals to be performed, specifically to seek u Ryngkew u Basa's forgiveness. It was only after the ritual appeal was done that her neck could be twisted back to place and she was well again.

A few years ago, there was a group of Indian Army personnel visiting Mawkliar Cave and after exploring inside, they walked around on the edges of the lawkyntang. Among them, one got excited when he spotted vines hanging from the branches of trees and started swinging playfully, while also laughing and enjoying the attention of his friends. A few Mawkliar locals working at the Cave approached this man and advised him to stop, explaining that the forest is full of dangerous pointed limestone jutting out of the ground. They also tried to make him understand that the forest was a lawkyntang. The man refused to listen and as he was swaying, the vines broke and he was thrown across and landed on the stones. This accident resulted in him breaking his spine and he was immediately taken to the military hospital in Shillong. When nothing much could be done there, he was taken to a hospital in Guwahati but died a few days later.

Bah Wan and his wife Kong Lin were exploring a section of the Mawkliar Cave closed to tourists. Bah Wan was fascinated by a little pebble that was formed as the limestone water from the stalactite dropped to the ground. Without letting his wife know, he picked up the pebble quickly and kept it in his pocket. In its place, he put another pebble that he collected from elsewhere in the cave. That night, after dinner, he started getting intense aches all over his arms. He took a painkiller and applied an ointment, hoping they would help. Hours later, and the pain had not abated. Kong Lin sensed that something was wrong, and asked if Bah Wan had done anything untoward inside the cave. He showed her the pebble in his pocket and they both concluded that Bah Wan was being punished for breaking the lawkyntang rule. The next morning, he went back to the forest and prayed for forgiveness from u Ryngkew u Basa, explaining to them that he did not mean to destroy anything and that he took the pebble because he appreciated how beautiful it was. A few moments after his appeal to the deities, the pain vanished and Bah Wan never took the lawkyntang for granted again.

Although in each of the cases, the form of transgression is different – the first incident involves extraction, the second is an act of disrespect and the third can be framed as a case of "stealing" (Bah Wan used the word "tuh" meaning "to steal" in Khasi to describe his action) – they can all be understood as acts which have disturbed and compromised the physical constitution of the *lawkyntang.* In this sense, the *lawkyntang* can be understood as an embodiment of *u Ryngkew u Basa,* and the transgressions as acts which harm the embodied *u Ryngkew u Basa.* In my conversation with Bah Lit and Bah Wan recounted earlier, they emphasised that "ka jingpynshitom" (the punishment) emanates from the place, i.e., the *lawkyntang,* implying that the forest itself is sentient and acts towards humans. Thus, the notion of taboo here is not so much about pollution or contamination that are bases of many taboo practices, but about an avoidance of actions that harm or impair the subjectivity of the spirit-being in its material form. Since observing the *lawkyntang* taboo is also about the preservation of the *lawkyntang* as an ecological space, I agree with Mary Douglas (342) who says that taboo is an avoidance that "…implies an idea of self-preservation mediated by the preservation of this "other" in this case *u Ryngkew u Basa*, one which "must be, or ultimately become, more powerful than oneself, perhaps because it stands for the cosmos itself." Thus, the *lawkyntang* taboo is about maintaining and respecting the intersubjective relationship between human and the spirit being. Transgressions are violations of the relationship, and the punishments which follow are expressions of the cruel power of *u Ryngkew u Basa*.

At the same time, the punishments, all of which are communicated through the body – Kong Dahun's twisted neck, the army personnel's fractured body which eventually dies, and Bah Wan's achy arm – are experiences of knowing and sensing the presence and the potency of *u Ryngkew u Basa* on the Mawkliar landscape. Along with the more benevolent encounters recounted earlier, as experienced by Bah Lit, his wife and their friend, and Bah Donlang's nephew, Stan, these occurrences are important modes of relating to the spirit-others. As Sprenger (2022, 39) says, "The sensual accessibility of spirits is thus a function of the relationship they establish with their human counterparts." In other words, to sense the power of *u Ryngkew u Basa,*

whether as guardians or figures of fear and anxiety, is a fundamental way of being in a relational world.

However, sensing is not one-way in that it is not merely the human who senses the non-human. In order to communicate to the spirit-being, people also appeal to its senses by presenting various material objects known to have some symbolic value. In 2001, when footpaths were being built in Mawkliar Cave funded by a government tourism scheme, a few people from the village got the contract. Bah Lit was one of them. "I was happy to get the contract but before I did anything, before I started any construction work, I prayed to *u Ryngkew u Basa* first," he said. Bah Lit involved a cousin of his who was a ritual expert to pray with him at the site where they presented grains of rice to *u Ryngkew u Basa*. Sprenger (2022) calls such ritual objects "communicative devices" which build and maintain human's relationships with spirit-others on the landscape.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the Khasi *lawkyntang* tradition through an ethnographic exploration of the Mawlong Syiem sacred forest in Mawkliar. In Mawkliar, much of the forest cover that remains is constituted by a group of sacred forests, which includes the Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang*. Perhaps, this could be an indication of how there is historically a correlation between the *lawkyntang* belief and practice among the people in Mawkliar and the conservation of certain forests which are not exclusively identified as exploitable (or at least, fully exploitable) for resources. However, this does not mean that there is a distinction between exploitable and spiritual land and landscape; the two are not mutually exclusive. As I iterated earlier in this chapter, all of the Khasi landscape can be considered a spiritual landscape because spirit presence on the landscape is not confined to specific locations. The premise of the *lawkyntang* is more so based on the role of ritual (past or present) and how it intensifies the powers of the spirits of and in the forest. Thus, the *lawkyntang* is a sacred place among many other potent entities on the Khasi spiritual landscape. The Mawlong Syiem *lawkyntang* which stands to the west of the village used to be a forest sacralised by sacrificial ritual but it no longer is. However, people in Mawkliar still

believe in its power, one that emerges from the *u Ryngkew u Basa*, a presence the people negotiate with from time to time. When I asked Bah Lit why he as a Catholic felt the need to pray to *u Ryngkew u Basa,* he explained that in the realm of "jingim mynsiem" (matters of the soul), he believes in Jesus because he wants his soul to go to heaven. However, "ha pythei" (on earth), there are many elements on the landscape — *u Ryngkew u Basa, u thlen,* and even ancestors — that have their own powers. He says, "We have to respect and treat these elements differently, not through Christ." What I understood from what Bah Lit said was that the Khasi spiritual landscape, characterised by the abundant presence of spirit-beings presents its own challenges; one could pray to Jesus but Jesus does not exist on the land, *u Ryngkew u Basa* does.

Tourism Landscape and Customary Land Tenure in Mawkliar

In Chapter Three, I delineated the ways in which the Mawkliar landscape is increasingly being shaped and prepared for tourism consumption through the process of tourism placemaking, showing how the industry is embedding itself in the village, shaping lives and livelihoods, making what I call the tourism landscape. I explained how this phenomenon is the outcome of both external stimulations, especially those induced by the central and state governments through national and international promotions, grants and schemes, and internal initiatives, that of people in the Elaka Mawkliar, articulated most strongly through efforts of the Durbar (village council) in embracing tourism as the main source of village revenue today. I also argued that the tourism landscape as a material entity exists alongside its symbolic and representational counterpart, the one that exists in tourism media and has its roots in colonial discourse. In this chapter, I approach the tourism landscape in Mawkliar through the lens of political economy and examine how it interacts with the customary land tenure of the village. Within this analysis, land is understood as a resource which has historically supported livelihoods and which, in the process, can also become a commodity, albeit an "incomplete" one (Li, 2014, 591). This is because, as mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter Three, the customary land tenure followed by Elaka Mawkliar establishes all land within its jurisdiction as *ri raid* or community land, owned and administered exclusively by the Durbar. Given these legal and socio-economic circumstances, I ask two fundamental questions in this chapter: How has the customary land tenure determined the general structure and operation of the tourism industry in Mawkliar? And how has the tourism industry, an embodiment of the capitalist market economy, in turn impacted the local customary land tenure, the customary ways of distributing land and therefore, the social and cultural fabric of the village as a whole? I see these two related processes as simultaneously at work in Mawkliar, subsequently producing multitudinous effects on the ground.

Customary Land Tenure in Mawkliar

Before we address these questions, we first need to pay attention to the primary defining components of the customary land tenure itself. Because Mawkliar's

customary land tenure remains uncodified, like most areas in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the account presented here is based on the explanations and definitions elaborated in the Report for the Land Reforms Commission[122] for the Khasi Hills (1974), and the discussions I had with Durbar Executive Committee members and people in the village who were able to outline the specific conditions of Mawkliar's customary land tenure, different from other Elakas. Customary land tenure deems that all land is *ri raid* collectively owned by "u paidbah" or the people, a system which, in theory, places the idea of the collective at the centre of its structure. The Durbar is the body responsible for the supervision, administration and execution of customary law governing land. Unlike in Himas/Elakas where *ri kynti* or private ownership of land exists alongside *ri raid* or community land, here people are said to only enjoy usufruct rights over land. This means that land could be divided, allocated to and occupied by people but they do not retain the full power to transfer and dispose of the plot when and as they want. However, if there are "permanent improvements" (Land Reforms Commission, 1974, 18) made on the land, heritable and transferable rights apply. As mentioned in the Introduction, although the argument of "permanent improvements", which has its roots in the Lockean idea of individual property and Marx's theory of Differential Rent II, is adopted to describe individually occupied *raid* land, that land is still not a true commodity ascribed with an exchange value because it cannot be sold. As the Mawkliar Durbar Secretary explained, because the land belongs to the Durbar and is distributed for free, even if people appropriate it for commercial purposes, in and by itself, it is not a commercial asset distinguished by price; people can sell only the improvements they have made on the land, which could sometimes include buildings, gardens, ponds and, these days, tourism infrastructure. However, there is one important restriction even to this as explained below.

The other customary rule which governs people's relationship with land is the fact that land ownership rights are limited to the "trai shnong" or people who reside in or possess ancestral connections to the village. Thus, land cannot be transferred to a "soh shnong" or outsider, even if they are Khasi, from other Elakas and Himas. In other words, no "outside" person or entity can purchase land in Mawkliar, making rights to

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[122] The Land Reforms Commission was formed in 1973, after Meghalaya's statehood, to investigate and document the customary land tenure of various Himas and Elakas (Khasi states).

land in the Elaka a communal affair, based on people's membership in the Mawkliar Khasi community. The prohibition of transfer of land to a non-tribal applies across the state, legally backed by both the Sixth Schedule and the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971, making the ethnic and autochthonous connection with land among Khasis an element emboldened by statutory and customary laws. The only standard restriction placed on the local people in terms of their occupation of *raid* land is that they "...cannot claim more land than what they can actually occupy or actively make use of"[123] (Land Reforms Commission, 1974, 18). However, as we shall learn later, this restriction is at times contingently applied by the Durbar.

Since the Durbar is responsible for the administration of community land according to the customary land tenure of the Elaka, it remains a very influential institution, particularly in periods where there is a change in land use and occupation patterns in the village (Dutta and Dutta, 1986, 151). After all, anything that enters and fixes itself on the landscape (like roads and buildings) of the village requires the thorough approval of the Durbar. Equally, anything displaced or extracted from the land (like soil, minerals and trees) also requires the permission of the Durbar. Under these conditions, the various forms and manifestations of tourism which have taken root and grown in the Elaka, in other words, the various forms of tourism placemaking, have all been processed through the apparatus of the Durbar administration. As explained in Chapter Three, the Durbar is the authorising body which dispenses the final decisions on how land can be used for tourism, including the nature and scale of things that are built or removed, and the kind of impact they might have on the social and physical environment at large.

The Assembling of Land as a Resource for Tourism

If customary land tenure is the set of rules and regulations governing land (and other elements that live inside or are attached to it) based on custom, then in its diverse manifestations, customary land tenure works on the premise that land is a resource. Indeed, in Mawkliar, land has a rich and multiplicitous existence; it is as much a resource as it is a sentient being and it is a legal and political substance and the

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[123] Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills (1974).

stuff of kinship. Within the realm of customary land tenure, some of these various forms of land operate together, dispersed through people and institutions and the interaction between them. Since this chapter is interested in the question of customary land tenure and how it organises life and land in Mawkliar, specifically in the context of the tourism's capitalist thrust, let us focus on the assumption that land is first and foremost a thing of "resourceness" (Li, 2014, 589), used and managed to generate sustenance and support the local economy.

Because the Elaka's economy has now become hugely dependent on tourism (according to the Sirdar, 60% of the population are now employed in tourism-related activities[124]), there is a consistent effort to think of land as a resource for touristic activities. In this process of accepting tourism and its embeddedness on the Mawkliar landscape, land itself has obtained a new meaning as a resource. Briefly tracing the recorded trajectory of land as a resource in Mawkliar might help illuminate this point. Land in Mawkliar, at least for a very long time, has not existed as an agrarian entity. It has not been that of a nurturing substrate providing staple food or food crops to trade like in Sohtrai and most villages in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which depend on agriculture for livelihoods. Instead, land in this region was used for iron-ore extraction for centuries, as evidenced in the archaeological record and articulated through folklore (Prokop & Suliga, 2013; Mitri & Wahlang, 2022). Iron-smelting was an activity the Khasis from the uplands like Mawkliar were known for and its trade supported livelihoods significantly in pre-colonial times (Syiemlieh, 2015; Umdor, 2017). Further, in the nineteenth century, British subjugation of the Mawkliar chiefs ultimately paved the way for colonial and accumulative exploitation of land as a resource for minerals. This manifested in coal and limestone extraction by the British Government and British speculators and companies; however, a few Khasi entrepreneurs also integrated themselves to the trade eventually. And as mentioned in the Introduction, until a few years ago, limestone mining was an important source of livelihood for many in the village.

Today, land is a resource for the tourism industry not because of what it contains underneath but because of its ability to hold physical elements and structures

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[124] Personal communication, 2022.

that constitute the tourism world, like homestays, tourist spots, shops and restaurants, safety railings, children's parks and viewing points. Through tourism, land enters a different realm of material existence and therefore a new kind of relational world, distinct from previous registers of value and meaning. Land is clearly not a new resource; land has not suddenly appeared or been "discovered". The newness resides in the fact that, with tourism, land is now partly viewed, imagined, used and disposed of in different ways. It is "resourceful" in a new situation made up by different sets of circumstance. In order to comprehend this phenomenon better, I am first using a concept introduced by resource economist Erich Zimmermann (1933, 3) who stated that "resources are not: they become." The notion of the "becoming of a resource" has since been adopted by other scholars like Bridge (2009) and Richardson and Weszkalnys (2014) to underline the importance of process, knowledge, expertise, labour and demand in the becoming and transition of matter into a resource. To explicate with an example from Mawkliar, the "becoming" of coal as a resource in the nineteenth and early twentieth century could be attributed to things like the geological appraisal of coal from Mawkliar, the technology of digging, the local labour available to work in the pits and the demand of coal in tea gardens and to run railways in Sylhet. Land, on the other hand, undergoes a different process of becoming through tourism. Land as a resource in the tourism landscape of Mawkliar is not "becoming" because of its intrinsic chemical qualities. Land is not transformed or refined through scientific and technical processes to produce a commodity; in fact, land here is not shifted or moved. Indeed, it is precisely land's firm locatedness in the Mawkliar geography that makes it a resource. Land becomes a resource through its fixity and because of the possibility of it being built on to accommodate tourism infrastructures and constructions of various kinds mentioned earlier.

As land is "becoming," it is also assembled as a resource. In her assessment of the global land rush, Tania Li (2014, 589) uses the concept of *assembling* to point out that "…a resource or a 'natural resource' is a provisional assemblage of heterogenous elements including material substances, technologies, discourses and practices." She draws our attention to the fact that land as a resource is "made-up" and that different actors with a variety of perspectives on and relationships with land contribute to the assembling process. In a similar vein but with an ontological bend, Richardson and

Weszkalnys (2014) use the notion of assembling by emphasising the distributive and relational potentials of resources. However, the term "assembling" is quickly displaced in their work by another concept that they introduce, that of "resource materialities", defined as "...the complex arrangements of physical stuff, extractive infrastructures, calculative devices, discourses of the market and development, the nation and the corporation, everyday practices, and so on, that allow those substances to exist as resources" (Richardson and Weszkalnys, 2014, 7). Combining these two frameworks, I argue that, in the context of tourism, land in Mawkliar is composed of new resource materialities, effected by a fresh "assembling of land". This unfolds through a complex process that involves the agency, thoughts and feelings of a variety of different actors like the Mawkliar Durbar and people, the state and central governments, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), travel agents and tour organisers, the hospitality industry, social media and the imaginings and actions of domestic Indian tourists. Included in this is the aesthetic value of land as a resource mobilised for tourism discussed in Chapter Three, but more pertinent to the focus of this chapter is the materiality of land as such, i.e. how land-matter is assembled as resource for a new specific end.

How does this assembling work in practice under the conditions provided by the customary land tenure of Mawkliar? How is *raid* land assembled as a resource for tourism? First, as explained before, as per customary law, the Mawkliar Durbar and the Mawkliar community are the actors who, in theory, have the most say over land and therefore in the assembling of land as a resource for tourism. In other words, the assembling of land for tourism in Mawkliar is largely a process internally determined and controlled. Outside players like the state and private companies from elsewhere have little, if any, influence in the process. Second, it needs to be made clear that not all *raid* land in the Elaka is mobilised for tourism. Village forests on which people are dependent for various forest produce are left outside the realm of tourism, and so are the hills in the western end of the village which used to be mined for limestone and coal. Third, articulations of the assembling include the identification, mapping and establishment of tourist spots and viewing points, and the allocation of unoccupied land to local people for setting up various tourism businesses like homestays, restaurants and tea shops. Indeed, this entire process has also been termed "tourism placemaking"

in this thesis, one which results in the creation of the tourism landscape in Mawkliar, as discussed in Chapter Three. My adoption of Li's (2014) concept of assembling in this chapter is to draw attention to the centrality of land in tourism placemaking, and its treatment as a resource and, increasingly, as an "incomplete commodity" (Li, 2014, 591). In order to understand these processes and their effects, I elaborate on the specific ways in which land assembled for tourism is used in Mawkliar. These questions are important since, as examples from around the world suggest, the tourism industry's reordering of the local economy and social relations in places where it takes root is often extensive and deeply jarring. Nunez (1963) underlines the process in which urban and wealthy tourists influence cultures and ways of life of people in a Mexican village which has become a tourist destination, calling it "acculturation" via tourism; Büscher & Davidov (2016) write about the displacement of locals at eco-tourism hotspots in many African countries where villages are destroyed to make way for national parks and nature reserves; Chettri (2022) explains the intricacies of tourism displacement in Sikkim where locals who do not want to participate in tourism are slowly relocating to other cities in India.

Assembling Land for Tourist Spots

One of the main ways in which land is used for tourism is by opening tourist spots on the Mawkliar tourism landscape. Tourist spots are under the complete control of the Durbar and are never privately run, unlike hospitality enterprises, some of which are owned and run by the Durbar and some by private individuals. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there are currently four main tourist spots — Mawkliar Cave, Noh Sngithiang View Point, Eco Park and Thangkharang Park — and these are the main sources of tourist attraction in Mawkliar. According to the Durbar Secretary, a few more locations around the Elaka have been identified as having tourism potential, and these will be promoted as tourist spots in the future. Given the aesthetic drive in the kind of nature tourism that exists in Mawkliar, when land is chosen and later parcelled for tourist spots, the scenic quality of the place is hugely emphasised. The tourism potential of a place chosen as a tourist spot is thus based on the available scenery accessible from that place

and the aesthetic quality of the surrounding landscape itself. In other words, the value of such locations is heavily determined by their natural beauty.

"For now, we still want to conceal these places from people, and leave them unspoiled," the Secretary said to me in an interview. Clearly, there is an exercise of speculative thinking about land and a conscious assembling of its various types for the tourism market. Land in locations where there is a view or a waterfall is perceived to be more valuable simply because such locations are sought after by tourists. As elaborated in Chapter Three, the landscape of Mawkliar represented across tourism media is a very important resource that is at the root of tourism in the Elaka. Thus, the role of aesthetics in determining the value of a certain location and land within in it is quite significant. However, value here does not directly imply commercial value since it is a context where a fully operational land market is absent; land in Mawkliar is so far not a subject of market circulation since all land in the Elaka is interpreted as community land which is either shared or distributed among members of the community without any transactional exchange. Value is understood in terms of the returns the Durbar administration gets from using land at a particular location as a tourist spot. As it is, the Durbar gathers a huge portion of its revenue from them; at each location, it collects entry and parking fees and leases out shops to people from the village through a tender system. Recently, the Durbar has also started venturing into the hospitality sector and opened guest houses at a few locations in the Elaka, drawing revenue directly from the operation of the business.

The Durbar's sense of ownership over land assembled for tourism is also manifested in the political economy of tourism infrastructure in the Elaka. When the Mawkliar Cave tourist spot first opened in the 1990s, the need for a road linking the cave to the main highway became clear. In a conversation with eighty-three-year-old Bah K, the Sirdar at the time, he shared with me how the Durbar dealt with that situation. "Of course, the PWD wanted to build that road for us!", he exclaimed dismissively when I asked if it was the Public Works Department that funded the construction. "The PWD wanted the project but we as the Durbar decided not to hand it over to the government at all. We wanted to take on the responsibility of building the road and funding it ourselves because we knew that if the PWD took over, the government will act like it owns our tourist spot. Who knows what it could have built in our village?" A similar view

was articulated by the current Secretary. "We don't actually get much help from the Tourism Department or the PWD, but we prefer it that way. The moment they pour in money, they will want to control everything," Bah B said. These infrastructural enactments of Mawkliar articulate its suspicion of the intruding hand of the state and at the same time, they embody the Durbar's sense of autonomy and sovereignty over the land on which the infrastructure is embedded.

Assembling Land for Hospitality

The Durbar has played a huge role in the hospitality sector's development since the early periods of tourism in Mawkliar through its responsibility of allocating land to people for setting up their own homestays, shops and guesthouses. Unlike land allocated as residential plots, land assembled for tourism is not distributed to every household or family but to those who have the financial ability to build and operate a business. Depending on the scale of the business, some people make use of the same plot where they have built their houses, while some request new plots of land from the Durbar which are given without a cost. This again is usually the outcome of a collective decision among members, channelled through the work of the Executive Committee and the Sirdar, who ultimately confirm the permission with the issuing of a No-Objection-Certificate (NOC). This allocation of *raid* land to "trai Shnong" residents on the part of the Durbar at once addresses its own ambition to build the Elaka's economy around the tourism industry, and aids people's attempts at making a living within tourism.

Given that much of the assembling work and authority rests with the Durbar administration, how does it have a bearing on people's overall relationship with land mobilised for tourism? Does the assembling of community land as a resource for tourism benefit everyone equally in the Elaka? In Mawkliar, despite the fact that the tourism is internally controlled, possibilities of its market framework casting an impact on people and their relationships with land and each other are very real. In order to understand this better, I look at six families who each have different forms of engagement with the *raid* land assembled for tourism. The first three are families who run their own tourism businesses established on plots of *raid* land given to them by the Durbar administration, while the other three are families whose work in tourism

does not involve a direct and personal deployment of *raid* land. A consideration of each family's role in the tourism industry will enable us to map out each family's position vis-a-vis the *raid* land mobilised for tourism, and therefore provide an insight into how people are affected by the assembling of land for tourism in general. Among those who use *raid* land directly, we pay attention to each of their businesses because this will further help clarify the scale and nature of land-use in each case, and subsequently, reveal the existence of a variation of access to *raid* land even among those who operate tourism businesses. All families considered are "trai shnong" residents of Elaka Mawkliar who are said to have an equal right to access *raid* land. Further, families have been chosen carefully with the aim to capture a more representative picture of the varied ways in which the community interacts and engages with tourism, and the land assembled for the industry in the Elaka.

Let us begin with Kong DS and her husband Bah RT, whom we shall call Family A. Both Kong DS and Bah RT are in their early fifties and have matrilineal ancestral connections to the village. The two requested a small piece of land outside Mawkliar Cave from the Durbar where they could build a food and tea stall. They constructed the shop soon after permission was granted in 2010, and since then they have been running it together, as it became the primary source of income for the family. Being located at Mawkliar Cave, the most popular tourist spot in the Elaka, the shop always has a regular flow of customers who come in looking for tea or machine-made coffee and instant noodles. In another example, Kong LR and her husband Bah PS, whom we call Family B, own a homestay less than a kilometre from their own house. Although they started the businesses together, it is Kong LR who acts as the main manager, dealing with customers. The homestay is a two-bedroom house built on a plot given to them by the Durbar on a stretch of the village road leading to Eco Park. One could tell that it was recently constructed as it exudes freshness, with its sky-blue exteriors juxtaposed against the red roof on top. Kong LR and Bah PS do not have regular staff at the property and mostly look after the place themselves. In the third example, we meet Bah TN (referred to here as Family C) who owns a resort-like tourist accommodation, the sort distinguished by its occupation of a larger sized plot and the variety of services provided to guests. Unlike Family B's homestay, Bah TN's hospitality establishment accommodates multiple buildings, a swimming pool and a little

playground for children. The resort is somewhat professionally run, having at least ten differently classed and therefore differently priced rooms, relatively up-to-date facilities and décor, a team of on-site hospitality and security staff and an in-house kitchen and restaurant. The resort has a good online presence as well, with profiles on multiple holiday accommodation booking sites.

The families cited above run different types of tourism businesses but they are united by the fact that they have been given land by the Durbar administration specifically for the purpose of tourism. This means that they have a more direct relationship with the land assembled for tourism than others as they possess exclusive rights over the plots allocated to them. They lose these exclusive rights only if they leave the plots unworked for more than three years. However, there are many families in the Elaka who engage with the tourism industry for their livelihoods without the direct and/or private use of *raid* land. To explicate this point, let us turn to three other families in the Elaka. First, we meet Family D, represented by Kong GS, a single mother, and her four adult children. When I was doing fieldwork, the family lived in a make-shift house made of tin sheets stacked together which stood on a plot of land given to them by the Durbar more than ten years ago. While Kong GS has worked in kitchens of various establishments, her children, particularly her two sons, have often been employed as housekeeping or service staff in homestays and guest houses in the village. In a similar situation is Bah WT and his young family of three whom we call Family E. He is the breadwinner of the household since his wife, Kong BN, had just had a baby and was not employed when I first met them. Bah WT earns his living by working as a salesman in a souvenir shop at one of the tourist spots, a job he has had since leaving school about five years ago. The shop was owned by a distant relative who paid him a daily wage. Finally, there is Family F, consisting of Kong RK, her husband Bah MS and their two small children. Kong RK earns her living by selling freshly cut fruit in one of the tourist spots while her husband is a construction worker who occasionally earns extra income as a tourist guide.

Clearly, all the six families discussed do not share the same kind of relationship with *raid* land assembled for tourism. While Family A, B and C's relationships with the land are embodied in the act of building their tourism businesses on the plots allocated to them, Families D, E and F interact with tourism strictly through the labour and work

they provide, either in other people's tourism establishments or at tourist spots. We can say that the latter do not have a very direct engagement with the *raid* land mobilised for tourism even though they work in the industry precisely because their relationship with the land is not articulated by the act of occupation. While people who are vendors like Kong RK use *raid* land to support their livelihoods, the fact that their makeshift shops are temporary and sometimes mobile (in the case of vendors who sell products from cars) renders their relationship with it volatile, precarious and uncertain. Further, unlike people who obtain *raid* land for the construction of a business, street vendors' use of *raid* land is not authorised by the issuing of an NOC. Moreover, street-vending at tourist spots has only received formal sanction as late as five years ago, showing that perhaps the Durbar did not want to prioritise it as an essential trade within the tourism model of the village.

At first glance, this system of land distribution *somewhat* makes sense, since at a material level it does not violate the rule that *raid* land has to remain within local ownership and occupation. After all, whether in mining or tourism, *raid* land is mobilised to be appropriated by Mawkliar residents and not people from outside the village. However, it quickly becomes apparent that not everyone benefits from the system equally, even though the whole premise of *raid* land is based on the principle of the commons. Since tourism in Mawkliar is at a nascent stage where the building of tourism hospitality infrastructure is essential for the development of the tourism landscape, people who do not have the economic reach, i.e. some available capital to engage in this process, are automatically excluded from accessing *raid* land for tourism. Despite there being no formal or intentional framework that deprives them this access and the fact that all land in Mawkliar is recognised as community land, the disproportionate distribution of the land among families who are financially more secure under tourism, simply because they can afford to make "permanent improvements" to the land, undermines the egalitarian ethos that is rooted to the existence of *raid* land. To be specific, although a huge percentage of the local Mawkliar residents draw their livelihoods from the tourism in the Elaka, only a handful of them do so through the direct occupation and use of *raid* land because they can build homestays, shops, hotels and resorts. Moreover, there is no obligation to share any percentage of the profits that one makes through taxation methods with the Durbar

and the village at large[125]. As we have discussed, Families D, E and F still make a living in hospitality and the food and drink sectors in tourism, but they do not have exclusive rights over any plots (apart from the plots they have built houses on), because even if land is technically available to them, they are not financially able to build permanent structures. In this way, the assembling of *raid* land under tourism weakens the customary land tenure's role in supporting and protecting the welfare of all families in the Elaka, and instead, creates conditions where only a few truly enjoy the fruits of the commons and reap direct benefits from the custom of community ownership.

While the unintended, yet regular channelling of *raid* land assembled for tourism towards families who have an easy access to financial resources to build is a pattern associated with the growth of tourism in Mawkliar, it is worth recognising its embeddedness in older practices of land-use and distribution in the Elaka. Before land was a resource for tourism and when small-scale coal and limestone mining were the primary industries supporting people's livelihoods, local "trai Shnong" residents were allowed to mine portions of *raid* land that had either limestone or coal. Instead of plots under tourism, land subjected to mining was divided and allocated in the form of quarries which were individually run and managed. However, similar to the allocation of land for tourism, it was common that only families and individuals who could afford it were given permission to open a quarry. Others who did not own quarries worked in them as labourers and miners employed by their fellow village members. In this way, *raid* land assembled for mining was also made less accessible to some sections of the community and more accessible to others. Thus, there is a continuity in the way community land that is available for everyone is made less available because of the particular kind of land-use (permanent improvement through industry or agriculture) required to concretise one's claim to land. If agriculture was a source of livelihood for people in Mawkliar, like in most Khasi and Jaintia villages, perhaps this form of unequal access to land for livelihood would not be as dire; however, because tourism as an industry is dependent on the availability of tourist infrastructure, it presents a

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[125] Indeed, Section 10(26) of the Income Tax Act, 1961 also exempts members of Scheduled Tribes in Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and districts of North Cachar Hills, Mikir Hills, Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills from paying income tax to the State.

situation of unequal economic opportunities, which in the long run reinforce socio-economic disparity in the Elaka.

In this attempt to better understand the relationship between land access for tourism and economic privilege in Mawkliar, it is also important that we pay attention to the fact that there is often diversity in socio-economic histories and statuses even among the families who receive *raid* land from the Durbar. To use the example of families cited before, Family A and Family B are business owners who may have had access to some capital when they established their food and drink shop in the case of the former, and the homestay in the case of the latter, but neither family has experienced long lasting economic stability, let alone prosperity. In fact, for both, their current small-scale family-run enterprises are their first significant attempts at having a steady form of livelihood. Moreover, in both examples, the owners use their own labour to operate the businesses; for instance, in Family A's food and drink shop, Bah RT is the cook while his wife Kong DS caters to customers and they do this for between ten and twelve hours every day. In Family B's case, Kong LR and her husband Bah PS manage their homestay themselves, doing everything from handling bookings to cleaning rooms and laundry.

On the other hand, Family C is among the few families in the Elaka who have had access to accumulative wealth for many decades. While they now own a resort holiday accommodation, the family previously ran a limestone quarry and also a lime kiln for quicklime production. The family has therefore had a longer experience not just with business and accumulation but also with the privilege of *raid* land access, even before tourism. Indeed, we can understand the establishment of the resort as a translation of the accumulated wealth from mining into tourism hospitality. This is the case with a few other families in the Elaka, whose history in mining has aided their participation in tourism, particularly through a ready access to substantial capital that would fund the construction of bigger and better-equipped tourist establishments. As mentioned before, Family C's resort is expansive with multiple rooms, a restaurant, a swimming pool and a children's play area, all of which are products of bigger financial investments. On the other hand, the capital that Family A and B had put into their (significantly smaller) businesses came from savings collected from a variety of previous occupations. In the case of Family A, Bah RT worked as a labourer, a cook and

a porter in the mines and his wife Kong DS had a small makeshift shop for a few years after their youngest child started school; in Family B's case, Bah PS was employed in a now-closed cement factory in a nearby village, as his wife worked as a cleaner in a village school. Further, even the operation of the resort is different from how Families A and B run their businesses; unlike them, Bah TN, the main owner of the resort, is seldom at the site and is completely reliant on a host of staff whom he employs to run the establishment 24/7. He also does not interact with customers directly. Thus, despite the fact that Family C's is a family-owned business, the absenteeism of the owners and their ability to simply depend on employees for their business operation sets them apart from others like Family A and Family B who are always at the forefront in their respective establishments.

What this discussion has shown is that as much as Mawkliar's customary land tenure has helped to ensure that land remains within the hands of the community, it has also contributed to the uneven wealth distribution in the Elaka, where the very use of *raid* land creates accumulative opportunities for certain families but not for others. In other words, although the existence of community land prevents landlessness in the village as each and every family has a piece of land to build a house on, it has not been able to curb or suppress socio-economic hierarchies. This situation is enhanced with tourism because the assembling of *raid* land in the tourism industry is more extensive than that in mining; a bigger percentage of *raid* land is mobilised for tourism, unlike in mining where the assembling of land as a resource is confined to areas where mineral deposits exist. This is not to say that processes of accumulation in the community emerged with tourism but that the industry is a new force that is presently reordering the economy as well as social relations in the Elaka. Although the existence of *raid* land has provided the conditions for people to engage with tourism and for tourism businesses to be locally-owned, while generating employment for the community at large, these same patterns have also resulted in the sharpening of socio-economic differences and produce what Tania Li (2014b) calls "capitalist relations".

Capitalist Articulations in Customary Tenure

Tania Li (2010; 2014b) has repeatedly argued that the model of indigenous communities as people who live harmoniously with nature and each other does not always align with all indigenous contexts. Writing about an indigenous community's changing relationship with common land in the Sulawesi highlands of Indonesia, Li uses the concept of "capitalist relations" to describe the ways in which some people in the community experienced accumulation and prosperity through individual occupation of community-owned land, while others who failed to do the same lost out. These changes unfolded when tree crop cultivation was adopted, specifically with the transition from kapok to cacao farming, the latter being seen as more productive and lucrative. Li explains that cacao cultivation stimulated the enclosure of land because cacao was perceived as a "permanent" crop and the growing of cacao as an enactment of individual property. Some people started growing cacao on inherited or ancestral land, claiming those plots as one's own. In this process, land became a private holding and a commodity easy to sell[126]. As it was, not all among Li's highland informants switched to cacao; some simply sold their land to cacao farmers who migrated from elsewhere or even their neighbours and relatives and lost their land that way. Simultaneously, people who had access to capital or credit could grow their wealth by buying more land to grow cacao and also by expanding connections with merchants and traders on the coast. Gradually, there was an uneven access to land. In this context, capitalist relations developed, characterised by the "unequal ownership of the means of production (land, capital)" (Li, 2014b, 8). Li points out that although these processes resulted in some level of conflict, it "did not become the subject of moral censure or debate" (Li, 2014, 97) and that people largely consented to the enclosing of land, even

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[126] Li (2014) identifies some of these processes as dynamics of what she calls an "indigenous frontier," spaces which are usually territories of indigenous people, distant from centres of political and economic power. These spaces and the resources in them are often viewed as "under-utilised" by colonial and postcolonial governments, as well as private sector interests, and are therefore interpreted as geographies of potential for future capitalist activity. Li explains that at times, indigenous peoples also see their own lands and landscapes as zones of potential and therefore are ready to participate in new systems of production and exchange. She argues that one of the reasons is ecological, in that hilly frontier regions usually lack extremely fertile soils and a tradition of intensive agriculture, making it relatively easy to switch to another mode of farming or to a different form of livelihood altogether. Another contributing factor that Li cites is the geographical remoteness of indigenous frontiers, frequently marked by a dearth of state infrastructure, employment and livelihood alternatives. In these circumstances, her Lauje informants started growing commercial crops for the local and global markets because of the fundamental need for ready cash to sustain themselves and families.

to the point of their own exclusion. This was partly because growing cacao was understood as a justified way in of improving earnings and also because they saw continuity in how hard work created property, in the context of both shifting cultivation and tree crop farming. Further, Li crucially points out that capitalist relations here materialised in a mundane way and not dramatically; they emerged "piecemeal and by stealth" (Li, 2014b, 116), without the theatrics of a corporation landgrab or government land acquisition process.

There is a certain similarity in the way inequality is emerging in the Sulawesi highlands and Elaka Mawkliar. Both cases feature indigenous or tribal people in highland territories among whom inequality arises from the change of land use and the slow erosion of the principle of the commons enshrined in their customary land tenure. While the inequal access to land in Sulawesi happened with the change to tree crop cultivation, in Mawkliar it first emerged with mining, and later tourism, and almost organically through the provision in the Elaka's own customary land tenure of *raid* land being available to everyone who can use it for their livelihoods. More specifically, it is the fact that some people can make "permanent improvements" on the land through their access to capital that creates the conditions for these capitalist relations. Under tourism, gestures of permanence include shops, restaurants, homestays and resorts, projects which require relatively big monetary investments, not just labour. Those who have the economic reach to build these kinds of tourism infrastructure can benefit from the tourism industry more than others, even if most people in the village engage with tourism. Indeed, they become business owners and the wealthier among them become even more capitalistic, owning not just land but also labour, as they hire others to work in their establishments.

Further, like in Li's field site, capitalist relations were not imposed by external forces, like mining companies, hotel chains or the government, but developed within the community. Despite the widescale promotion of Meghalaya tourism by both the government and tourism and hospitality companies, the fact that they have very little control over land administration in the Elaka makes them less responsible for capitalist relations directly rooted in the economy of land access. Thus, here is not an example of "accumulation by dispossession," a concept introduced by David Harvey (2004) but expanded by Michael Levien (2013, 360) who defines it as dispossession

involving "...the use of routine and highly visible extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of production, subsistence, or common social wealth." Although there are pockets of accumulation within the village manifested in the few locally-owned hotels and resorts, there is no external party, government or company, coercively taking away land from people, depriving them of their livelihoods. Later in the chapter, I discuss a case of land acquisition in the village but I will show how even in that instance, dispossession takes a different form. These processes show that even without community land entering the universe of the land market, and despite its continued existence as a commonly-owned entity in Mawkliar, accumulation for some and a lack of access to land for others is still a reality in the Elaka today.

Can we therefore talk about occupied land in Mawkliar as private property? Is the use and occupation of *raid* land assembled for tourism by people in the village an act of privatisation? Does it indicate a trend of land tenure in Mawkliar changing from *ri raid* to *ri kynti*? There is no simple answer to these questions. As mentioned in the Introduction, unlike in other Khasi and Jaintia Himas and Elakas where the existence of *ri kynti* or private holdings is sanctioned by customary land tenure, in Mawkliar, it is not and people insist on the land in the village being deemed *ri raid* where usufruct rights exist. Everyone has the freedom to use and occupy parcels of land in the village but the land itself is community-owned. This precondition applies to all individually occupied plots of land assembled for tourism as well, despite the performances of exclusivity attached to their land use. The regime of collective ownership is also manifested in the fact that people do not pay for parcels of land that they use either for settlement or to establish a tourism business. They also need the permission of the Durbar before they proceed with any alteration to the land, like building a house, shop or even a wall. Moreover, if they abandon the land, it automatically goes back to the hands of the Durbar, making complete alienation of land a highly impossible phenomenon. Since the freedom to alienate land is often viewed as the ultimate indicator of ownership, the inability to execute alienation with a monetary return undermines the identification of people's relationship with land assembled for tourism as a gesture of privatisation. Transferable rights exist but are primarily based on kinship inheritability and any transfer to people considered alien to the Elaka is completely prohibited. In the instance where whole families have migrated elsewhere

with no living kin in the village, ownership of the ancestral home and land is either retained from afar or transferred to the Durbar. More significantly, and as discussed in this chapter, the democratic arrangement within the concept of *ri raid*, where everyone is free to use it (with the permission of the Durbar) has itself created a situation where enactments of private ownership are possible simply because financially more abled individuals and families can take on more *raid* land for themselves because they have access to capital. As people take on land from the common pool of *ri raid*, they have exclusive rights of occupation and use, making such occupied land a manifestation of the private property.

Further, outside the parameters of customary law, land registration, a practice that a few families in Mawkliar have engaged with, is something that brings into question the "private" status of individually occupied land, particularly that which is used for tourism. What happens to plots on community land which get registered under an individual or a family through bureaucratic processes of the state? How are they subsequently viewed socially, by the community and the Durbar, and where do they stand legally, according to courts of law? In Mawkliar, registration is done with the permission of the Durbar, again embodied in the form of an No Objection Certificate (NOC) or a Deed of Declaration, after which the concerned individual or family approaches registration bodies like the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council or the state government via the Sub-Divisional Officer of the local Civil Sub-Division[127] or both. The majority of the people who register their land are owners of tourism businesses and those whose houses are next to motorable roads in the village. Thus, it would be partially correct to say that people who do not use community land assembled for tourism seldom register their plots, and that most of them are either indifferent to or unaware of the mechanics of registration altogether. Wage earners Kong GS and Kong JM, discussed earlier, expressed surprise when I asked them about registration, and in turn asked me how to go about the process and wanted to know whether doing it was a good idea at all. According to the Secretary of Mawkliar, the Durbar itself encourages land registration among some so that business owners can access government subsidies and to ensure that people who live next to roads are

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[127] In this case, the Sohra Civil Sub-Division of the East Khasi Hills District. The Sub-Divisional Officer here acts as Sub-Registrar of the Sub-Division's Registration Branch.

compensated in the event of land acquisition, particularly for road expansion projects in the future.

Examples from various contexts around the world suggest that the implementation of registration technologies over land governed by customary tenure is often pushed by people as much as governments (Sauls et al., 2022; Holland & Diop, 2022). On one hand, registration is understood as a way of securing land rights, amidst the threatening possibility of landgrabs by governments and multi-national corporations, and on the other, registration is a part of larger efforts to formalise land tenure, facilitate governance and enhance economic growth, specifically in the eyes of the state. Keeping these processes in mind, how do we understand the acts of registration by individuals and families in Mawkliar amidst the assembling of land as a resource for tourism? Since people who register their lands do so in order to get either government subsidies or compensation for land acquisition, we can say that registration in Mawkliar is closely linked to issues of security and to access of welfare vis-à-vis the state. The tenure security provided by customary law and sanctioned by the Sixth Schedule exists, but people seek other measures of tenure formalisation, particularly through avenues provided by the state government, and in Mawkliar, it is the Shella Sub-Division's Registration Branch. Although there is a system through which people could register with the KHADC, among those in Mawkliar, that route has so far been largely ignored. However, more pertinent to our discussion is the fact that when people do register land, they do so as individuals, and are recognised as legitimate "owners" of the parcel of land they occupy. This official identification of the individual is backed by titling documents which establish the relationship between the land and the individual as absolute ownership. Further, as part of the registration process, a survey is conducted which declares the boundaries and measurements of the particular plot, officially dividing it from the rest of the land. It is clear that these mechanisms are gestures of privatisation, operating in a place that is said to only follow a tenure tradition of community ownership. In these instances, what happens to the notion that land in Mawkliar is a shared resource? In order to understand this better, I want to cite a land dispute case from years ago, in which an individual from Mawkliar challenged the Mawkliar Durbar over ownership of a particular plot in the

Elaka. Here we see how the presence of these varied legal and cultural understandings of land led to a situation of conflict.

The case I am citing was first filed at the District Council Court but later reached the Meghalaya High Court. Let us call the petitioner Bah SS, a man in his mid-forties who is a "trai Shnong" resident of Mawkliar. The respondents are the Durbar of Mawkliar Elaka, represented by Bah. L.N. To briefly summarise, the conflict arose out of a disagreement about the allocation of plots by the Durbar administration to Bah. S.S., in the year 2010. According to the petitioner Bah SS, he was given two separate plots for the establishment of a tourism business and this was allegedly supported by a deed of declaration signed by a few members of the Executive Committee. Bah SS was trying to invoke the logic of private property, particularly through the availability of the signed deed of declaration he received from the Durbar. While the Durbar acknowledged that the first plot (which we call here Plot 1) was given, they completely rejected the idea that the second plot, which we call Plot 2, had been consented to. In the earlier phase of the case at the District Court, the Durbar alleged that Bah SS had overstepped the limit of the land given to him and that he had appropriated community land. At the same time, the Durbar made an application seeking permission from the Court to start the construction of a viewing point on the alleged encroached plot. Subsequently, the orders produced by the District Council Court stated that Bah SS was allowed to operate his business without altering the nature and character of the suit land. The order restrained Bah S.S. from entering Plot 2 and interfering with the possession of the Mawkliar Durbar over the suit land. The High Court petition filed by Bah SS challenged these allegations and orders of the District Court, but his petition was disposed of, while the case was remanded back to the District Council Court for further orders.

My intention in citing this case is largely to point out two things; first, it shows us that despite the customary land tenure of Mawkliar, individual titling could be exploited to officialise the appropriation of community land, and second, that the individual claim empowered by registration threatens the overall collective approach to land administration in the village. Registration in the form of individualised land titling has the potential of disrupting the provisions of customary law like the existence of community rights over land, and the idea that people only hold usufruct

privileges in the Elaka. As explained before, individual occupation and use of *raid* land is not against Mawkliar's customary law but once the narratives of exclusive occupation and use, and absolute ownership are honoured by documents provided by the state, it leaves the entire regime of customary tenure in a precarious position. Meinzen-Dick and Mwangi (2008, 37), who write about customary land tenure in Kenya, point out that formalisation of property rights, a process which they explain as an "identification, adjudication and registration" of interests in specific resources, has historically led to the creation of more exclusive forms of ownership of those resources, particularly land. Viewing property rights as fundamentally social relations, they use the phrase "a web of interests" to underline the fact that property rights of resources include various types of rights holders, not just individual owners, and that gestures of formalisation like registration and land titling sometimes end up puncturing the web of overlapping interests, consequently benefitting individuals. In the legal case above, the exploitation of the land titling through the deed of declaration in Bah S.S.'s claim over a plot of community land disturbs the web of interests embedded in the question of land in Mawkliar, where the idea of common interest of the people is the governing principle.

To many in the Elaka, Bah SS's claim of land being private was a violation of the spirit of the Durbar and the tradition of the Elaka, where decision-making was understood as democratic, and where *ri kynti* or private land does not customarily exist. A few people I spoke to were of the view that Bah SS, who already had one plot for a hotel, wanted too much land for himself, thereby threatening the wellbeing of the collective. However, the most dominant response to the case was people underlining that the incident had badly impaired "ka imlang ka sahlang" in the Elaka as a whole. "Ka imlang ka sahlang" is a Khasi concept which encapsulates the observance and practice of social harmony and social integration by people living in a village or a Hima. It carries with it strong notions of the collective, whereby people hold and respect shared values and are united by a common identity. In people's eyes, Bah SS's action had not only undermined the authority of the Durbar but had also injured the collective essence in the village and destabilised social relations. Another reason behind the widespread disapproval of what Bah SS had done was its involvement of the courts of law. This offence needs to be understood in light of the Khasi taboo of taking matters to court,

embodied in the saying "kiew iing lieh iing saw" which translates to "climb the white and red house." The saying captures the idea of earnest distaste for matters of dispute that reach the court as it implies the failure of "ka ktien" or dialogue between the parties involved, the form of communication considered sacrosanct in an oral society. A consideration of these emic ideas about conflict resolution is an important way in which we could understand the significance of this incident.

Drawing from her fieldwork in Tanzania, Alden Wily (2016) points out that acts of formalisation of individual properties also mark a certain degree of substitution of traditional institutions as the primary backers of rights over resources by the state. In the Mawkliar context, amidst formalisation and registration of individual properties, the authority of the Durbar might be undermined by either the KHADC or the Meghalaya government in certain circumstances where the NOC issued by the Durbar is seen as inferior to the other registration documents provided by the District Council or the Registration Branch of the government. So far, the Elaka has not been confronted with such a situation but the very coexistence of these different land documents issued by parallel, and sometimes competing, administrative authorities, could pave way for various incidents of conflict in the future, especially given the steady assembling of land for tourism in the village. However, the case cited before is a clear example of how the Durbar's authority is undermined by the courts of law. Bah SS's claim of private ownership processed through the state's and District Council's justice system works to question the supremacy of the Durbar's say on land allocation in the Elaka. As mentioned in the Introduction, there is always an underlying tension between the Himas/Elakas and the state, as well as the District Council, and these contestations often play out in the realm of land administration.

The case summarised above has been the only one of its kind in Mawkliar to date and therefore cannot be understood as a general reflection of the nature of the assembling process of land for tourism, nor the overall dynamic between the Durbar administration and the people. However, it does present a situation that highlights the complexities that could arise from the administration of community land today, especially amidst the wilful incorporation of the competitive market logic of the tourism industry. While Bah S.S. went so far as to invoke the argument of private property in his claim of land assembled for tourism in the Elaka, most people who run

tourism businesses on individually occupied community land have not done so until now. However, all of the tourism businesses in the Elaka which stand on community land are nevertheless expressions and enactments of individual ownership. Since people who own tourism businesses are known to register their land with the state which sees them as the absolute owners, whether they reach a situation of conflict with the Durbar or not, their engagement with practices of land titling exists as a latent threat to community land and customary tenure in general.

State Presence on the Tourism Landscape

So far, we have explored the pivotal roles played by the Durbar and Mawkliar residents in the assembling of community land towards tourism, and we have underlined that this has been possible largely because of the customary land tenure followed in the Elaka. However, despite these visible changes of land-use and land distribution, it is true that tourism in Mawkliar has not yet been an aggressive manifestation, resulting in large-scale dispossession of land or the intrusion of the private sector on the tourism landscape. Examples from elsewhere have shown that there is a strong correlation between tourism land development and displacement of the local population, affecting Indigenous as much as non-indigenous communities. Closer to home, we have seen how villages adjoining Kaziranga National Park in Assam consistently face eviction threats owing to the expansion of wildlife tourism in the area (Barbora, 2017); the park is said to be double the size now than what it was when it started in 1974 (Saikia, 2020). In Gujarat, the opening of the Statue of Unity (a giant statue portraying Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel), intended to be one of the most popular tourist sites in the state, has led to the dispossession of forest land that tribal communities in the area have depended on for centuries. This was done through the Government's implementation of the Statue of Unity Area Development and Tourism Governance Act, 2019, in which the Fifth Schedule provisions protecting tribal land in the region have been completely overlooked (Prajapati and Krishnakant, 2020). And just across the border from Meghalaya, the Khasi and Garo communities in the Moulvibazar District of Sylhet routinely get eviction notices from the government threatening to remove them from their 1,500 acres of ancestral land so as to make way

for eco-tourism parks and tea gardens (Paul & Amin, 2024). Unlike fellow Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya, Khasis and Garos in Bangladesh do not have special provisions for land rights, leaving them perpetually vulnerable to acts of dispossession either by the state or by non-indigenous communities in the region.

However, although many of the tourism establishments in Mawkliar are locally run and despite the fact that people in the Elaka have not generally had violent encounters with the assembling of land for tourism, there is one example that contradicts this narrative. Over thirty years ago, Bah R T and his mother and siblings were forced to abandon a plot of land given to them by the Durbar administration. They were told that the plot was due to be taken over by the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), a public sector corporation under the Tourism Department of the state, to open a tourist spot. The plot was considered ideal since it was on a cliff edge with a scenic view of the valley and waterfalls. At that point, the family were in the process of building a small concrete house on the plot in order to replace the old decrepit one made of tin. "We had to take it down, brick after brick," said Bah RT "Can you imagine? We had saved for years as a family and finally, we had enough money to build something secure, but we couldn't even complete it. Instead, we had to take down what we had worked so hard to build." The meagre compensation given by MTDC to Bah RT's family was accepted but it hardly helped recover the loss. How was this allowed to happen in Mawkliar, a place where customary law protects people's rights to land? At the time of the eviction, tourism in Mawkliar, and generally in Meghalaya, was in its nascency; there were only two tourist spots in the Elaka — Mawkliar Cave and Nohsngithiang View Point — and there were no hotels or homestays. Wanting to expand tourism development in the village, the Tourism Department asked for land from the Durbar, and specifically requested for the location where Bah RT's family had lived for decades. Without much consultation with the Durbar members, the Sirdar at the time singlehandedly made the decision to give in to the government's request, forcing Bah RT's family out immediately.

This one and only case of land acquisition in Mawkliar was not a typical example of state power exploiting the imminent domain in order to seize community land under customary tenure. Although the state was the acquisitioning entity, the acquisition did not officially unfold through the implementation of law, specifically the

Land Acquisition Act, 1894 which was effective at the time. According to Bah RT's family, their eviction was in fact the product of a quiet transaction between the Sirdar and the state, in which the Sirdar played an active role in aiding the acquisition. Further, since they were the only ones affected (being the only ones living on that piece of land), it was easy to undermine their protest against the move. But given the relatively democratic structure of the Durbar that we have learned about so far, how was the Sirdar able to act alone without being challenged in this instance, especially since it was a matter involving land administration and the state? A few members of the current Executive Committee that I spoke to viewed the unfortunate incident as an exception, and more importantly, one that could have happened only in the past, not now. They explained that even though the Durbar has historically symbolised the will of the collective, there was a period, decades ago, when the internal system of checks and balances was undermined by some Sirdars, now long deceased.

Whether the reasoning of these gentlemen — in which acts of injustices are conveniently associated with the past — is convincing or not, is not my concern. However, it is within the interest of this chapter to show that the assembling of land for tourism in Mawkliar started with this incident, much before the widespread engagement of people with the tourism industry was even envisioned. Further, the episode reveals how the misuse of power by a traditional head like the Sirdar (or in other contexts, the Syiem or Rangbah Shnong) can undo and betray the long tradition of collective administration of the Elaka/Hima and community ownership of resources. But it is true that the exploitation of positions and privileges of traditional heads in processes of land acquisition has been a common feature in Meghalaya in the past few decades. In one of the biggest land acquisition projects in the state's history, that of the New Shillong Township Development, many of the Rangbah Shnong (village headmen) of the villages whose lands were acquired, played key roles in the dispossession process. Many of them facilitated the conversion of community land into private land by selling plots to private individuals from outside the villages, who later sold the same to the government at three or four times the price. As Soreide (2020) argues, the private buyers were able to exploit the hierarchy in the traditional institutions, easing the way for the government to acquire the land.

Although Bah RT's family's experience of dispossession is unique and one which is temporally displaced from the present shape of tourism in the Elaka, it nevertheless is an important fragment of Mawkliar's tourism history which could perhaps help forewarn us of the future. This is true especially if one pays attention to the gradual trend across the state to manipulate and corrupt customary land tenure, in order to smoothen, accelerate and expand private sector involvement in the state economy. And as mentioned in the previous chapter, tourism is one of the main industries through which this process is envisioned to transpire. In fact, the recently published Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023 blatantly proclaims that the customary land tenures in Meghalaya are major obstacles to tourism development, posing an "extreme challenge" particularly to largescale infrastructural projects and private sector investments supporting tourism. To circumvent that, it proposes the establishment of "land banks" across all the major tourist locations/destinations/routes. In international governance, land banking is a practice in which the government sets apart state-owned land or acquired land in order to repurpose it, usually towards the public good. However, according to Ohdedar (2012, 6), in India land banking is primarily used to make land available for the private sector and for projects under the Public-Private Partnership or PPP model. The Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023 also suggests this as it makes it clear that land banks will be assets transferable and leasable to "...interested and eligible third parties to build infrastructure or undertake tourism-related activities" (Meghalaya Tourism Department, 2023, 16). Although the Policy does not elaborate on how these land banks would be constituted and how they would legally stand vis-a-vis the Sixth Schedule protection of tribal land in Meghalaya, the fact that they are incorporated as part of the Policy is significant enough. If they become a reality, the retention of land within the community in Meghalaya would be severely threatened and village control over the tourism industry might not be a longstanding phenomenon.

Interestingly, there is already an example of a PPP tourism project in Mawkliar, in the form of a three-star hotel called Polo Orchid Resort which has been built on the very plot acquired by the government and from where Bah RT and his family were evicted. When the plot was initially acquired, a restaurant operated by the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) was opened at the spot and it ran for over

a decade before it was replaced by the hotel in 2017. The hotel is a PPP project between the Meghalaya government and Hotel Polo Towers Group, the largest hotel group in North-East India. Polo Orchid is also the biggest tourism accommodation in the area, and the only one not run by local Mawkliar residents, being the only tourism business not built on community land. With the tall impenetrable walls that surround the property, and its strictly guarded gates, it makes for a world of its own, rather a generic holiday postcard world incongruent with the other elements on the Mawkliar tourism landscape. The hotel offers "premium living" manifested in the "luxurious" rooms, an infinity pool, and private Jacuzzis, quite different from the experience provided by the hospitality establishments owned and run by Mawkliar residents. However, most people are more indifferent than bitter to the existence of such an establishment in their village, even Bah RT's family, whose land it was built on. "We in the village have nothing to do with it," said Kong BR who runs a tea shop in one of the tourist spots, "We don't know what goes on there." A handful of young men and women from the village are employed by the hotel in various hospitality positions but most of the staff are from elsewhere in the state and other parts of North-East India. Like Kong BR, other Mawkliar residents see Polo Orchid as a separate entity, divorced from their everyday lives. Despite the fact that the hotel draws water for free from the village rivers and streams, neither the people nor the Durbar administration have expressed the desire to challenge that. "They give our kids raincoats every year and recently, they donated a pickup truck for garbage collection to the village," said Kong B.R, laughing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to explore the relationship between the customary land tenure of Mawkliar and the tourism industry. One of the main defining features of customary tenure here is the identification of land as a community-owned asset which is administered by the Durbar. Empowered by this arrangement, the Durbar plays a key role in the process of assembling land towards tourism, and therefore in determining the way tourism manifests on the Mawkliar landscape. This includes the authority over the distribution of land mobilised for tourism among Mawkliar residents. I have shown how the allocation of community or *raid* land towards an

industry like tourism could produce a complex situation affecting social relations and the administration of the Elaka. In fact, it presents opportunities for capitalist relations to emerge. Since land has been mobilised as a resource with new potentialities, the otherwise "unproductive" land of the village becomes a desirable entity. In these circumstances, the community land which is distributed becomes a collection of individualised entities which perform as private property (Blomley, 2013), even though they remain limited by certain characteristics associated with community land. Thus, while this customary system of allocating land is built on the premise of land being communally owned, through the process of land-use (in this case tourism) the plots become individualised. The tourism establishments built on individualised plots are private in their business models and bear no contribution towards the Durbar, monetarily or otherwise.

Moreover, because land-use in tourism is primarily based on the building of modern infrastructure, it immediately excludes the majority of people in the village who do not have ready access to capital or other financial assistance. Therefore, unlike in a context like Sohtrai where if a family/individual has *bri* land where they could farm, their dependence on big financial investments is rare, in Mawkliar the limited scope of land-use renders an unequal distribution of economic well-being, despite the widespread availability of common land. Kong BR, who runs a tea and coffee shop in the village, said, "Tourism is important but it mostly helps the ones who are already rich. Sure, people like us get odd jobs in the industry, but for people with money, it's really a boon." While the customary land tenure ensures that land and therefore control over tourism is retained within the community, the structure of the industry prompts an approach to land which does not always align with the principles of common ownership. In the last section of this chapter, I turned to a land acquisition case from over thirty years ago to underline the threatening possibility of dispossession in the Elaka and the state in general, given the government's neoliberal approach towards tourism through instruments like the PPP model and land banks. Considering these various phenomena in the development of tourism on the Mawkliar landscape, we can discern that while customary land tenure has structured the nature and operation of tourism in the village, the industry is simultaneously effecting changes in the patterns of land use, and therefore in the relationship of people with

land and with each other. In the next chapter, we explore one possible aspect in which such social tensions have been experienced, that is through the belief that some households in the village keep and nurture *u thlen*, an evil spirit which demands human blood in exchange for wealth.

Menshohnoh Suspicions: Witchcraft on the Khasi Landscape

In the initial weeks of settling into my field site, as if to welcome me further into the community, friends and informants in the villages decided to give me what they thought was an important piece of advice: "Don't go walking on your own after dark, and avoid deserted places at all cost," they each said on separate occasions. I was also told to keep a small pouch of rice in my handbag and sometimes, to carry a mini "tari dab", a traditional Khasi knife made of iron[128]. Although these safety measures were partly to do with my identity as a woman (who was expected to be more vulnerable to harms of the outside world in these regions), much of it was actually rooted in the widespread fear of the *menshohnoh*. The *menshohnoh* are Khasi households who worship, nurture and host the evil spirit called "u thlen" and in turn, are promised wealth, success and good health. The *menshohnoh* are figures of fear because it is believed that they are incessantly hunting for humans to kill so they can procure human blood to feed their deity *u thlen.* At times, the *menshohnoh* households hire killers to murder on their behalf; these hired killers are also called "menshohnoh". The *menshohnoh* are understood as an ever-present threat in my field site, ones whose attacks are lingering around the corner, especially at night and in deserted places (forests, fields and river banks), making protective measures such as the ones I was advised to adopt as essential everyday habits.

In this chapter, I look at the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* belief that exists in the Khasi Hills, and particularly in the three villages which make up my field site. I am interested in why certain families and individuals are suspected and/or accused of being *menshohnoh*. I situate this question in the realm of growing wealth and inequality in the region, keeping in mind the belief that wealth accumulation is the *menshohnoh*'s motivation in nurturing *u thlen*. I also seek to establish how these beliefs, and the culture of suspicion and accusation that they generate, are expressions of the collective anxiety about unequal distributions of wealth within the community, and additionally, about people's response to difference and the unfamiliar as embodied

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[128] To Khasis, rice is a powerful auspicious substance that protects as much as generates life, luck and wellbeing. The *tari dab* is useful for its function as a sharp object but also because the material it is made of — iron — is known to counter the force of an evil spirit called "u thlen."

in people. Through an analysis of the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* phenomenon in my field site, this chapter continues to address questions about inequality and the changing landscape of social relations and economic lives within a tribal community like the Khasis, which my earlier chapters describe. What does the belief, one that has survived through centuries, say about the ideas of community and collective well-being discussed in the previous chapter? How do we understand the perception of wealth in these contexts, given that the axis of *menshohnoh* suspicions is the relative economic stability of others? Finally, using both ethnographic data and newspaper reports, I want to address the question of how certain examples of the *menshohnoh* phenomenon do not go beyond uncommunicated suspicions, while others result in outright violent accusations.

The practice of *ri thlen* which is to "nurture" and "keep" the evil spirit *u thlen* is understood here as both witchcraft and sorcery, or forms of manipulative magic used to exploit and harm fellow humans for one's own accumulation of power and/or resources. Indeed, terms like "witchcraft" and "sorcery" are generic classifications emerging from a "western" tradition and therefore fail to capture the complexity of emic words and concepts (Niehaus, 2005). For instance, there are no Khasi or Jaintia words for witches, let alone a blanket term for witchcraft or sorcery, but like in many other cultures, there are a variety of differentiated terms denoting diverse expressions of the uncanny and the supernatural perceived as intrinsic to local cosmological orders (Geschiere, 1997, 12). However, locating this phenomenon within the larger scope of the anthropology of witchcraft/sorcery, this chapter recognises the belief in the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* practice as exhibitions of witchcraft/sorcery.

At the outset, it is important to state that although my analysis focuses on how the *menshohnoh* phenomenon operates in village settings (particularly in the villages where I worked in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya), it is by no means limited to them; the *menshohnoh* belief is known to be present across Khasi environments, rural and urban, and among literate and non-literate, Christian and non-Christian communities alike. Although the belief is said to be longstanding, in that it had existed long before the colonial period when it was first documented in written form (Gurdon, 1996 [1907]; Rafy, 1920), it is thriving today and manifests itself in public discourse in both overt and covert ways, with many now using the English term "witchcraft" to

describe the phenomenon. As an informant said to me once, "In our Ri Khasi[129], the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen* will always exist because this is where they originate." My informant here makes an indirect reference to the folktale of U Thlen which is understood to be the story marking the genesis of the *ri thlen* practice among the Khasis, and thereby naturalising the association between the two. The story goes as follows:

There was once a giant serpent called *u thlen* which lived inside a cave near Cherrapunji. People in the area feared and despised the creature because it not only preyed on their livestock but after some time, started eating human beings as well. Travellers who walked past the cave while commuting between the hills and plains for trade were more vulnerable to *u thlen's* greed. After many untimely deaths, there was one man who decided to take on the task of finding ways and means to kill the serpent for good. The man turned to U Suidnoh (a deity from the region), asking for advice, and the next morning, he waited by the cave's mouth and offered *u thlen* food in the form of a herd of goats. He continued feeding *u thlen* for a few days until he gained the creature's trust. At this point, whenever the man called out to *u thlen*, the serpent readily opened his mouth expecting goats to be thrown in. Finally, one day, instead of the animals, the man threw a huge lump of red-hot iron into the mouth of the hungry and unsuspecting serpent, who trembled and died on the spot. This victory called for a huge celebration and it was collectively decided that there would be a feast, one in which they would all consume the meat of the dead serpent. People of the plains were also invited to join the celebration and half of the serpent's body was eaten by them, while the other half was shared by the Khasis from the hills. This feast was prepared and held at a location in Cherrapunji which is now called Daiñthlen, a placename given to it after the event of the feast; "Daiñthlen" roughly translates to "to chop or cut u thlen."

All of those who attended the celebration finished their share of the meal, leaving nothing behind, except for one woman who brought back home a piece of the meat for her son who missed the feast. She left the meat in the kitchen near the fireplace but somehow forgot about it entirely. After a few days had gone by, the woman heard a voice speaking to her and discovered that the meat she had forgotten about had come alive and transformed back into the shape of the serpent. The creature told her that if she hosted and domesticated him, and fed him a "lang-thoh-khlieh" or spotted head goat, he would make her and her household rich, happy and secure. The woman agreed but before she knew it, *u thlen* started demanding only humans, and specifically, human blood for his meals. Although she initially hesitated, the woman knew it was too late for her to say no and gave in to *u thlen*'s demand. This moment saw the transformation of the serpent beast into the serpent demon, and more importantly, marks the origin of the contract between the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen*, and the practice of *ri thlen* among the Khasis.

The story above has multiple versions but they all build around the central plot which recounts the killing, consumption and ultimate reincarnation of *u thlen*, the latter of which was aided by a Khasi household. As mentioned before, the story is routinely used to explain the prevalence of the *ri thlen* and *menshohnoh* practice among the Khasis. Indeed, such a gesture is reflective of the general significance of oral

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[129] Land of the Khasis.

narratives to a community with a living oral tradition, and whose introduction to the written word is as recent as the nineteenth century[130]. Stories of the *menshohnoh*, along with detailed accounts of the practice of *ri thlen* are shared collectively and passed down orally through generations even today. However, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the role of the written form in documenting and preserving the folktale of U Thlen and accounts of the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* practice in the past hundred years. From colonial records to literary works[131], the topic of U Thlen and the menshohnoh is abundantly present, making it the most extensively documented form of "evil spirit worship" among the Khasis. Other evil spirits like *Ka Taro*, *Ka Shwar*, *Ka Bih*, to name a few, have not drawn such a rich literary and cultural engagement, nor do they fuel ardent public debates like the *ri thlen* and *menshohnoh* practice does even now.

The belief in the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen* was not something I learned about and encountered during fieldwork. Growing up in Shillong, I was always aware of narratives surrounding the *menshohnoh* as they featured in everyday conversations, and were discussed in newspapers and books. At home, *menshohnoh* stories abounded and were told as facts of life. I learned from elders in the family about how certain families keep *u thlen* and that they do so for wealth. It was not unusual for us children to be shown houses of *menshohnoh* families in the neighbourhood, accompanied by the advice that we should be careful while walking past them. Before reading in books about the rituals performed by the *menshohnoh* households in their worship of *u thlen*, I learned about them through my father who explained how the *menshohnoh* lures *u*

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[130] This happened first through efforts of a Bengali Baptist missionary called Krishna Chandra Pal who used the Bengali script in 1831, and second through those of a Welsh missionary named Thomas Jones who used the Roman script in 1841.

[131] The earliest records appeared in official publications of the colonial government where it is identified as a "superstition" resulting in crimes of murder. These include the Report of the Administration of Assam, 1881-1882, the Assam District Gazetteers Vol X by B C Allen (1906) and an ethnographic book titled *The Khasis* written by Major P. R.T. Gurdon (1907). Writings on U Thlen also featured in missionary publications, the most notable one being W M Jenkins' *Life and Works in the Khasi Hills* (1904) in which he elaborates on an episode in which one of his church missionaries was accused of being a *menshohnoh*. Later accounts were more literary in nature, published as short stories and novellas by British, and later, Khasi writers. Works like Mrs Rafy's (1920) "U Thlen, the Snake Vampire", A W Crown's (1959) "The Shillong Snake", H Elias' (1965) "U Suidnoh bad U Thlen", D T Laloo's (1987) *Ka Lasubon: Ka Iing Tin Saw* and K. S Nongkynrih's (2001) "The Man-Eating Serpent, U Thlen" are some noteworthy ones.

thlen from the "khra[132]" by beating the *ksing[133]* and that human blood would be served to it on a brass plate. I also remember how on several occasions, my *meikha* (paternal grandmother) woke me and my cousins up in the middle of the night to make us listen to the sound of cars, saying they were *menshohnoh* cars looking for people to kill. While it may have simply been a creative tactic for entertaining grandchildren, it was also a way in which such collective beliefs were perpetuated and instilled into the younger generation. Thus, when people in my field site talked about their fear of the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen*, I could understand.

Menshohnoh Presences

"Shane ki thaiñ ba bun ki menshohnoh"
"Here, in these regions, the menshohnoh are plenty"

I was sharing the warmth of a Khasi *chulah[134]* fire with Kong Ami in her snacks shop at the Nohsngithiang tourist spot where she sits from 6 A.M. to 9 P.M. every day. It had rained and we were looking forward to drinking tea together in between customer visits. She was one of the first to talk to me about the existence of *menshohnoh* in the village. Since our conversation the previous week was interrupted by a group of young tourists who came in looking for Maggi noodles, I was now back at the shop to hear more of what she had to say. "Of course, there are *menshohnoh* in these areas; people often disappear and die mysteriously. Who else would be responsible for those deaths if not the *menshohnoh*?" Kong Ami did not expect an answer. She then told me about a particular incident from roughly ten years ago involving the death of a man in Cherrapunji, a few kilometres away, one which most people interpreted as an episode of *menshohnoh* murder. The person concerned was a pilot who was visiting his family home in Cherrapunji. One morning, he left the house as usual to go for a run and that was the last time people saw him alive. The man was declared "missing" for weeks until his body was found on a cliff in the village. While the police identified this as a suicide case, public opinion in the local area latched on to the argument that the man was murdered by the *menshohnoh* and then thrown from the cliffs. Kong Ami spoke

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[132] "Khra" is an earthen pot traditionally used to store water, but in *menshohnoh* households, they use a special one to house *u thlen*.
[133] The "ksing" is a small traditional Khasi drum.
[134] The Khasi *chulah* is open iron stove lit with charcoal.

with certainty about this and completely dismissed my question about the death being an accident or a suicide. "The *menshohnoh* are responsible for such deaths," she said, by which she meant unnatural and unexpectedly deaths, especially those which are preceded by the disappearance of the person and followed by the discovery of the body in a deserted environment.

I learned about other such incidents from Bah Lit who similarly considered the tragedy as proof of the living operations of the *menshohnoh* in the village. A few years ago, three daily wage labourers left Mawkliar early in the morning to do a construction job in a nearby village. However, in the evening, only two of the men returned home. "The men said that they suddenly lost sight of their friend along the way, and although they looked everywhere, they could not find him. He vanished. They assumed he took a different route back and did not think much of it," said Bah Lit. The missing man never came back home and his body was found weeks later on the edges of the main river running through the village, a sure sign of the *menshohnoh*. In Sohtrai, Bah Man told me about an incident surrounding the death of his uncle. "My uncle was a *bri* farmer cultivating betel nut and betel leaf, like many of us here," he said. "Sometimes, when there is a lot of work, we stay the night in the *bri*, usually under a makeshift shelter of sticks and leaves. It was on one of such overnight stays when my uncle was caught by the *menshohnoh* and killed. You see, he was working alone so he was an easy target for the *menshohnoh*."

The occurrence of unnatural and inexplicable deaths in remote locations is one of the main explanations and reasonings presented to me for the existence of the *menshohnoh*. Although these deaths are not particularly common, once there is such a death, it stimulates these reactions. Here, death is interpreted as an act done by others, and more importantly, that even if it is a murder, it is murder committed by the *menshohnoh*. This kind of an interpretation is indeed not exceptional; even the earliest works in the anthropology of witchcraft show how communities understand misfortune, illness and death as acts of witchcraft, induced and effectuated by others. Famously, Evans-Pritchard (1937) explains that to the Azande people, almost all harmful things that happen to a person are read as being caused by someone else's evil disposition. He further argues that the "real" or what we would term as "medical" reasons for death are not dismissed in the attribution of death or illness to witchcraft,

but that these interpretations are "superimposed" for the purpose of giving moral values to social events. Commenting on the association of death with sorcery among the Lele community, Mary Douglas (1999) says that because traditionally, the Lele religion sees God as benevolent and protective, it fails to account for the occurrence of sudden illness or death. This consequently paves the way for human-aided sorcery to be the only theory that is able to make sense of them. However, my intention here is not to answer the question of why death, particularly unnatural death where the body of the deceased is found in a deserted place, is attributed to the *menshohnoh,* but to underline the fact that instances of such deaths are consistently used by informants as tangible explanations for the presence of the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen* in their environments.

At one level, the *menshohnoh* killer is an abstraction, an amorphous unknown figure/s who is out in the world with the intention of harming you. This vision is enabled by the template of the *menshohnoh* as a person/s whose purpose is to roam the land searching for human victims to kill, as well as the notion that the *menshohnoh* figure could be a hired faceless murderer not known to the community. Therefore, the fear of the *menshohnoh* also manifests as a general existential apprehension since the *menshohnoh* figure is perceived as an ever-present threat. At another level, the *menshohnoh* is a specific known person/s — neighbours, friends or fellow villagers or clan members — who are suspected of being *menshohnoh*. This vision of the *menshohnoh* is more targeted and feelings of fear and unease are attached to particular suspected individuals and families. While I was acquainted with both imaginaries of the *menshohnoh* in the villages where I worked, the latter was certainly more pronounced. People were quick to inform me that there were a few *menshohnoh* households in the community, sharing with me details of who they were and where they lived. These rumours did not take the form of overt accusations resulting in violence; instead, they manifested as suspicion, a quieter and more concealed kind of response. Indeed, incidents where accused *menshohnoh* are violently confronted are common in Meghalaya as we shall discuss later, but when I was in the field for those fifteen months, no such episode occurred. The vision of the *menshohnoh* as a specific person or family works on the basis of familiarity and to a certain degree, closeness.

The most documented contemporary episodes of the *menshohnoh* accusations, ones that get reported in newspapers, are those where accusations result in overt and violent gestures against the alleged *menshohnoh*. Such violence takes the form of public lynching and sometimes the assault of alleged *menshohnoh* houses. Although not all accusations are linked to the *menshohnoh* belief (some are attributed to other practices of malevolent magic), most of them are framed as such in public discourse, irrespective of the specific circumstances involved. Although this type of *menshohnoh* accusation is not known or typical of my field site, I mention a few below for the sake of comparison to the ethnography that follows. The accounts below are drawn from newspaper reports and opinion pieces in local dailies.

In June 2014, eleven men and a woman were arrested in Mawmyrsiang village, near Sohra for assaulting a stranger who was passing through the village. According to the villagers, the unknown man was moving around suspiciously and this led to people identifying him as a *menshohnoh*. Among those arrested were the village headman and secretary. The police arrived in time to take the victim to a hospital where he was later treated for his injuries. In March 2020, a group of nine young men who were returning from a picnic at a tourist spot in Syntung village were attacked by a mob. One of them died while the others were severely injured, and the car they were travelling in was set on fire by the angry villagers. It was reported that the young men mistakenly took a wrong turning and got lost, reaching Mawsna village instead. There they asked a child for directions and this immediately raised suspicion among the locals who quickly called them *menshohnoh*. Finally, the most recent incident took place in March 2024 in Mawthlong Mynsiang village where two men were publicly lynched by a mob who called them *menshohnoh*. It was reported that the attack was triggered by the allegation that one of the men had assaulted a woman in the village. The latter screamed for help and soon a mob formed, beating up the men and attacking their car, but the police were able to rescue the two from the scene. The violence was also visually recorded and shared on social media. In the above cases, the accusations of witchcraft were launched at complete strangers who were not local residents, and whose presence in the villages was interpreted as mysterious and threatening. The perception of threat was strongly linked to the unknowability of the accused's identity, whereabouts and intentions. The accused were people who had travelled from

elsewhere, and in the second example, they did so accidentally since the group of men were allegedly lost. In the third example, it was a case of assault, where the male perpetrators who travelled from outside the village, were reframed as *menshohnoh*. Thus, the accusations here were based on the idea of the *menshohnoh* figure as anonymous, amorphous and freely roaming, and not that of familiar and targeted suspicion that exists in the villages where I worked.

Menshohnoh and Intimacy

In my field site, the belief in *u thlen* and the suspicion of *thlen*-keeping is largely located in the intimate structures of the village (or conglomeration of nearby villages), where people's relationships are based on knowledge, familiarity and kinship. As we have seen, there are several examples from elsewhere in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills where the people accused of being *menshohnoh* are outsiders and absolute strangers, which we shall discuss later, but for now I want to focus on how suspicion works in my specific field site. Indeed, members of the *menshohnoh* families are friends, kin, neighbours, clanspersons and fellow church members, who live and dwell in a shared environment and landscape, who hold similar spiritual and religious beliefs, and who are historically affected by similar, if not the same social and economic transformations particular to that rural context, as previous chapters have shown. For witchcraft and accusations to be situated within intimate and familiar configurations like family, kinship groups, friendship groups, neighbourhoods and villages is not new or exceptional. Even as early as Evans-Pritchard's (1937) seminal work on the Azande, witchcraft was seen as emerging from within the community and accusations were perceived as ways in which social tensions are brought to the surface. Famously, structural functionalists of the Manchester school (Gluckman, 1956; Mitchell, 1956; Marwick, 1965 to name a few) similarly located witchcraft within group and tribal structures and within various granular social settings, and emphasise the significance of witchcraft for social cohesion and perpetuation.

In his seminal book *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison*, Geschiere (2013, 26) insists on a rethinking of the relationship between witchcraft, intimacy and trust, and emphasises that trust within intimacy is not always a given. In

so doing, he argues against some of the longstanding anthropological assumption that closeness is always equated with reciprocity and trust (Tylor, 1865; Mauss, [1954] 2002; Sahlins, [1965] 1974), and the sociological association between trust and social cooperation, social obligation and expectation (Giddens, 1992; Misztal, 1995; Tyler, 2001; Hardin, 2006). Geschiere (2013, 24) instead agrees with Freud (1919) who perceives the intimate structure of the family as "a hotbed of aggression and guilt" and underlines the "complex intertwinement of security and fear in people's experience of intimacy" (Geschiere, 2013, 25). Therefore, trust is not always self-evident and becomes something constantly tested even within small communities, including the Maka people with whom he worked. He explains that among them, it is precisely the fact that kinship and family are primal necessities that make them rife with elements of danger; the Maka belief in the *djambe le ndjaw* (the witchcraft inside the house) is an obvious explanation for why loved ones are not always trusted. Geschiere (2013, 29) further argues that trust or its counterparts, mistrust and suspicion, need to be studied in the context of specific historical circumstances. He therefore locates witchcraft among the Maka within the context of socio-economic transformation, specifically of 1970s Cameroon when people from villages started moving to the city for work, a process which introduced new forms of inequality; he states that individuals employed in the city believed that they were constantly being bewitched by their family members in the village who were jealous of their new status and access to money. Building on Geschiere, Mathew Carey (2017) also looks at mistrust among communities in the Moroccan High Atlas, and points out that although friendships and kinship relations are relaxed and intimate, "they are not predicated upon a progressive unveiling of one's self to the other, nor are they built on foundations of trust" (Carey, 2017, 18). He establishes that betrayal is always a considered part of relationships that may or may not surface. Mistrust here also manifests in witchcraft accusation or suspicion, especially in the form of separation and love magic, and that these ideas "…sink their roots into the infrastructures of intimacy such as friendship, kinship, and co-residence" (Carey, 2017, 8).

Although suspicions do not exclusively revolve around kin and family members in my field site, the point about closeness and trust (or the lack of it) is relevant. Indeed, in these villages, neighbours could also be kin and vice versa. If trust is not "a

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given," perhaps *menshohnoh* suspicion is also a form of constantly testing the relationships of trust within the community, and with people whose closeness presents complex emotions of affection, solidarity, jealousy and distrust. This is especially potent in a place where people are trying to hold on to certain egalitarian and community ethos - etched in the customary land tenure, clan and village solidarity, and the structure of village administration – amidst changing political and economic dynamics in the village. Perhaps, for some people, holding the belief in *u thlen* and the suspicion that certain individuals and households in the known and familiar space of the village are *menshohnoh* is a way of circumventing the possibility of rigid and intense enmities and rivalry within the community. Perhaps suspicion is an expression of the uneasiness that people feel when they witness and experience new types of social division — kin and friends engaging with new forms of livelihood in the village, their children getting better education or sought-after government jobs, or relatives switching church denominations[135] — perceived to threaten previous dynamics within various relationships in the village space. All these factors could contribute to the emergence and/or continuation of suspicion, depending on a particular case. However, more significant in the framing of suspicion than familiarity and knowability is the element of wealth. Since *menshohnoh* families are believed to keep the evil spirit *u thlen* for wealth and financial success, prosperity becomes an important factor in the formulation of suspicion. In the next section, we look at three different instances of *menshohnoh* suspicions from my field site to explore the role of wealth in the identity of the *menshohnoh*.

U Thlen, Wealth and the Economy of *Menshohnoh* Suspicions

Even though much of the contemporary discourse of the *ri thlen* belief revolves around the fear of the *menshohnoh* figure, it is wealth that lies at the centre of the belief. The pact between the *menshohnoh* and *u thlen* is based on the exchange of human blood for wealth. Along with blood, wealth is the essential component that renders the entire transaction functional. Therefore, *u thlen* and wealth have a deep

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[135] Church membership is an important part of one's identity, that which is often an extension of one's kinship group. Leaving one church for another can therefore cause deep tensions within families and kin groups.

symbolic association, one that contributes to the idea that traditional Khasi items of wealth like gold jewellery, particularly serpentine ones like gold rings, bangles and necklaces, are well-accepted manifestations of *u thlen*. An informant even told me about a family whose worship of *u thlen* started when the matriarch of the family picked up a gold ring from the road. Considering this association, it is thus not surprising that relatively more well-to-do families draw *menshohnoh* suspicions. Although wealth was not directly referenced in field conversations about the *menshohnoh,* and my informants did not typically nor explicitly use the words "ki riewspah" or "the rich" in their identification of the *menshohnoh* families, relative wealth is something that most suspected *menshohnoh* families in my field site share.

Before we turn to the examples of *menshohnoh* families, let us first remind ourselves how wealth is conceptualised in these regions today. As discussed earlier in the thesis, wealth is deeply tied to access to land, whether it is in contexts where land is individually or commonly owned. In Sohtrai and Laitrum where customary land tenure allows for the existence of private land, and where livelihood activities are predominantly *bri* cultivation and limestone mining, contemporary markers of wealth include the number and size of *bri* farmlands and limestone quarries registered with a family, along with the scale of the business that emerges from both. In Mawkliar, although land is commonly owned, the ability to lease quarries from the village *Durbar* is an indication of a relatively better socio-economic status. However, more than leasing a quarry, which many households did before the mining ban[136], it is the ownership of a limestone kiln, locally called "pajwa", that establishes a family as rich. The most economically privileged in Mawkliar are the few families who own kilns, or have owned them in the past. In recent years, this wealth has been translated into investment in tourism as pointed out in the previous chapter. Further, it is worth noting that at times, people referenced items of possessions like big houses and the number and types of cars that a family owns as representations of their economic success. Although most of the suspected *menshohnoh* households in my field site bear some of these markers of wealth and prosperity, not all of them can be associated with

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[136] According to members of the Mining Committee in Mawkliar.

it. It is within this social and economic landscape that current *ri thlen* and *menshohnoh* suspicions and accusations are planted.

In this section, I deliberately avoid naming the particular villages in question in order to ensure anonymity. "The village" is used as a general term to refer to the various village locations in my field site. The first example of *menshohnoh* suspicion that we pay attention to is that of a family whom I identify as Family A. This family is considered "trai shnong", those who have deep ancestral ties to the village. It was only after a few months of being in the field that I came to hear about the *menshohnoh* narrative attached to this particular family. I was alerted by an informant who told me when she learned that I had visited someone in that house by myself. When I asked my informant how people have come to suspect Family A as a *menshohnoh* family, she explained it as something that had started "naduh mynshwa" meaning "from a long time ago," but did not have a clearer answer. Family A's wealth is known to have come from generations of *bri* cultivation, and particularly from betelnut farming. Apart from owning huge areas of *bri* land, they have also been successful in building business relationships with betel nut sellers in Shillong, giving them the advantage of having a greater market access than other betelnut cultivators in the village. However, it is important to note that Family A are certainly not the richest in the village. In fact, unlike other wealthy households who have upgraded to big and colourful concrete buildings, Family A continue to live in a traditional Assam-type house[137] which, even if generally considered big by neighbours, is not comparable to the opulent constructions of other rich families in the village.

In a separate village, Family B is also a suspected *menshohnoh* household. Similar to Family A, they are *trai shnong*, whose ancestors are from the village. Family B is one of the first households cited by informants when they were giving me examples of *menshohnoh* families. Family B lives in a big Assam-type house from the past century which sits on a hill, freshly painted. Like most families in the village, they used to be heavily dependent on limestone mining but what marks them as wealthier than others is their ownership of the limestone kiln. Although the family still runs a

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[137] The Assam-type architecture also known as "Beton" or "Baton" is a type of colonial architectural design introduced in Shillong, Assam and Sylhet after the 1897 earthquake. Made to be earthquake-proof, the Assam-type house is usually only single or double storeyed, has a sloping roof supported by high gables and timber-framed walls, and plastered with cement.

kiln, since the mining ban was introduced in 2021 much of their income now comes from a resort they opened a few years ago. Like Family A, people say that the family has had wealth for a long time. Further, apart from having wealth, another indicator of their social status is the father of the family's role in the village, having held an elected post in the *Durbar* for an extended period in the past, and also being a respected church elder in the congregation. When I raised the question of the household's closeness with the church as a hint of possible innocence, an informant immediately dismissed me, saying, "The church is a good cover for some *menshohnoh* families."

Another suspected *menshohnoh* family, whom we call Family C, lived close to where I stayed in the village. Their house was sizable and modern, with a sophisticatedly styled roof which was probably designed by an architect. "You have to be careful, especially since you are nearby," said an informant when she visited me. "Have you noticed that you never see anybody there? The door is always shut and curtains are always drawn," she continued, referring to the belief that *menshohnoh* houses are typically dark, deserted and extremely clean. The reasoning is that you need these conditions in the home environment in order to house *u thlen*. It was true; in the three months of my stay in the village, I never had a chance to meet anyone from the family but only learned about them through others. Like Family B, they also owned a limestone kiln and ran a few quarries but had transitioned to tourism in the past decade. They now own a resort which sits at a prime location, just opposite a cliff from which a famous waterfall drops down. However, I was told that in their pursuit of expanding the tourism business, the family clashed with the village administration when they tried to claim a plot of community land to build another resort. This act was heavily condemned by everybody as it was seen as a huge violation of the *Durbar*'s authority and more importantly, the community values of the village.

In the three different cases cited above, relative wealth is a common denominator that unites the families suspected of being *menshohnoh*. In the first example, Family A's wealth is manifested in the ownership of multiple *bri* farms and their ability to develop important commercial relationships with traders. Although most families in the village own *bri* farms, only a few have multiple expansive plots. Family A are also known to pay others, usually fellow villagers, to work as daily wage earners in their betel nut farms. And more importantly, since they are plugged to the

market networks in Shillong, they have an edge over others in the distribution of their *bri* produce. This is an important advantage since most *bri* cultivators in the region struggled with the loss of control and access to markets when the border *haats* closed in the late 1980s. As explored in previous chapters, the *haats* were key sites and channels of trade where much of the *bri* produce was bartered and sold to people across the border in Sylhet. In the second and third examples, Family B and C's wealth is understood in terms of their history of owning limestone kilns as well as their successful switch to tourism hospitality after the mining ban. As explained in the previous chapter, even though land is community-owned in their village, and despite the fact that many families engage in mining, only a few families (like Family B and C) are able to accumulate wealth over time by having the means (i.e., capital) to "work the land", allowing them to benefit more from the equally available community land.

It is in such contexts of economic disparity, where some people get rich and others do not, that the belief in *u thlen* and the *menshohnoh* thrives. The casting of suspicions and accusations on certain individuals and families can be seen as an attempt to contest the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. Although terminologies of wealth are not usually mentioned explicitly or directly in everyday conversations, the fact that all suspected *menshohnoh* families are of a relatively privileged economic status suggests the quiet potency of wealth as an element of contention. Ethnographies from elsewhere reveal similar processes, in which witchcraft accusations are levelling instruments, used to target the rich and powerful. Kindness' (1996) work shows that all wealthy people in Monze, Zambia, are believed to be witches, especially men who work in business. And similar to the *menshohnoh*, these witches cause illness and murder, gaining much power from blood-shedding, an act understood as enabling wealth. In Englund's (1996) ethnography in Malawi and Mozambique, his informant Hawadi was accused of being a witch when he returned to his mother's village as a relatively affluent person after having twenty years of paid employment in the city. However, as Geschiere (1997) reminds us, there is an ambiguity in witchcraft because while it has a "levelling side", it also has an "accumulative side". Indeed, witchcraft accusations are often used by the poor and disempowered against the rich as a form of levelling, but are also used by the rich and powerful against the disenfranchised to protect accumulation. Niehaus' (2005)

ethnography in South Africa speaks to this. He points out that it is not always the case that witchcraft is used for accumulation, but that witchcraft accusation is exploited as a weapon to protect wealth and economic status. In his field site, people from impoverished and disempowered backgrounds are accused of practising the witchcraft of zombie-keeping. He interprets these accusations as stemming from the more economically-privileged who fear the levelling of inequalities. The "feebleness" of the poor during the day is meant to mask the malevolent power they exercise at night. However, it is important to underline that in the Khasi context, suspicions and accusations are exclusively directed at well-to-do households, making the belief in *u thlen* and the *menshohnoh* a specimen of the levelling effects of witchcraft.

Although wealth does not have an obvious presence in the narrative of suspicion, in that people do not readily refer to the socio-economic status of *menshohnoh* families as compared to theirs, there is one consistent feature that is mentioned. When people talk about *menshohnoh* families, they emphasise the idea that many *menshohnoh* households have maintained a relationship with *u thlen* for a long time, that they have worshipped and kept the evil spirit for generations. Families A, B and C are understood as such examples and as a result, they carry the suspicion through generations, making it an inheritable stigma. One way of explaining the longevity of suspicion and its attachment to these families is by underlining the firm existence of generational wealth among them. As mentioned earlier, Families A and B are those whose foremothers and forefathers had reached some status of prosperity in the past through their livelihood pursuits — of *bri* cultivation and mining, respectively — enabled by a privileged access to land. Therefore, the same way wealth is considered to be "from a long time ago," the belief that these families have kept and nurtured *u thlen* is also perceived as a phenomenon from the past which lives on in the present through today's generations. In this way, people's referencing of inheritability becomes a way of talking about wealth and its transmission.

We could also understand the inheritability of *ri thlen* suspicion by paying attention to the belief that *menshohnoh* households can free themselves from the pact they have made with *u thlen* if they desire to. This can be done by walking away from the house where they have kept *u thlen*, doing so in complete nudity and leaving behind every single possession that they own. Since all property and material

possessions — money, clothes, jewellery, house and household items — belonging to the *menshohnoh* household are tainted by *u thlen* who strongly attaches himself to these items (Gurdon, 1907, 99), a complete abandonment of what was previously owned is essential. Informants from one of my field site villages shared with me that, decades ago, there was such an incident where a *menshohnoh* family suddenly fled the village, abandoning their house and all their possessions never to be seen again. Until now, no one wants to settle on the plot where the *menshohnoh* house stands in complete ruins. Even if the family in question had abandoned the village for a different reason altogether, the presence of such stories in people's collective memory, combined with the potency of the *menshohnoh* belief, makes the elimination of suspicions surrounding families even today a challenge. In other words, if people do not have any evidence of the abandonment and the discarding of items of wealth, the suspicion does not vanish easily.

As we underline the role of wealth in *menshohnoh* suspicions, it is also crucial to emphasise that not every rich family in the village is suspected of being a *menshohnoh* household. There are several rich families who are accepted as "khuid" or "clean" and innocent of the use of witchcraft for wealth accumulation. When I asked informants why they did not see every rich family as *menshohnoh*, the most common answer would be that some rich families "kamai ia ka hok," while others do not. *Kamai ia ka hok* is a Khasi doctrine which translates to "earn (with) righteousness". *Kamai ia ka hok* emphasises the importance of earning a living without the deployment of unfair and corrupt means. Looking back at the folktale about *u thlen*, the one routinely used to explain the presence of the *menshohnoh* among the Khasis, it is interesting to note that the violation of *kamai ia ka hok* exists at the heart of the story. The old woman who agrees to keep *u thlen* was to become rich not through her own hard work and labour, but through the pact she makes with the creature. Indeed, this trope of obtaining ill-gotten wealth through a deal with the Devil or some other evil spirit is found in many places. In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (2010 [1980]), Michael Taussig explores the devil's pact in the context of the Colombian sugarcane plantations in the 1970s where plantation labourers made a deal with the devil so they could cut more cane and make more money with no extra effort applied. Writing about the worship of a similar evil spirit called *majini* in the Taita Hills, Kenya, James Howard

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Smith (2008, 104) underlines the transgressive element of a spirit that produces wealth and value "out of nothing." Like *u thlen*, the *majini* are also blood eaters who use unknowable occultic powers to manipulate the universe so that their human guardians or blood providers become wealthy. Smith argues that keeping the *majini* makes a mockery of the Taita moral ideal that sees work, prosperity, and virtue as inextricably connected.

That the perceived failure to abide by *kamai ia ka hok* is a factor in the formulation of *ri thlen* suspicions and accusation is hence not surprising. The case of Family C whom we learned about earlier is a fitting example of a suspected *menshohnoh* family who people say have defied the principle. The incident involving the appropriation of community land by Family C in their ambition to expand their tourism business did not only undercut the meaning of *kamai ia ka hok* but also disrespected the philosophy of community ownership integral to the village's constitution. The action was seen as self-profiting at the expense of resources which were meant to be shared. The suspicion of witchcraft here is thus not only a levelling device that targets the rich but a metaphor for the collective hurt about the suspected *menshohnoh* family's violation of the common good, that which is manifested in the existence of community land in the village. In contrast, in the cases of Families A and B, no such incidents of conflict are known to have recently occurred. However, the fact that these families are associated with generational wealth raises questions about acquisitive and opportunistic gestures in the past that live in collective memory through the *menshohnoh* belief. Perhaps Family A's success in trade-networking and the securing of markets for their produce when others did not succeed in the same was perceived as a form of unfairness and ignited feelings of jealousy among fellow villagers. Perhaps the possession by families B and C of limestone kilns, private entities which stand on hills deemed commonly owned, was a discomforting and disorienting reality for the community. Perhaps such experiences and feelings found expression in ideas about *u thlen* and the figure of the *menshohnoh* and the evilness they represent.

Witchcraft and Transformations

The intimate relationship between witchcraft and wealth has recently received fresh attention in works on witchcraft published around the millennium, where the relationship between wealth and witchcraft is situated in the larger context of the modernity/modernities of witchcraft. Disproving the colonial argument that witchcraft is a "primitive" belief that will disappear with modernisation, particularly with the growth of education, these contributions underline the thriving persistence of witchcraft in contemporary worlds, and some even explicitly identifying witchcraft as a key phenomenon of modernity/modernities (Geschiere, 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Meyer & Pels 2003)[138]. This rich literature locates witchcraft within transformative processes like postcolonialism, post-Apartheidism, globalisation, development and neoliberalism. It is within these situations that belief in witchcraft and sorcery in connection with wealth accumulation also flourishes.

Geschiere (1997) observes that, in Cameroon, witchcraft serves to address the emergence of new inequalities and the perplexing uncertainly of new social, political and economic dynamics. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) see witchcraft or the "occult" as emergent within the "restless terrain" of post-Apartheid South Africa, where there exists a tension between the newfound experience of freedom, manifested partly in the strong impulse to consume and spend, and the uncertainties and anxieties that come with a neoliberal economic system. They identify inequality, and therefore witchcraft related to wealth, as effects of capitalist restructuring, failed development and neoliberal policies, particularly in postcolonial scenarios. Taking a slightly different approach, Smith (2008) argues that in the Kenyan Taitai hills, people understand witchcraft as the "opposite" or "shadow" of development. Development here is a locally conceived idea of progress and forward movement, often existing at the level of the individual rather than a macro phenomenon, one which encompasses a complex, yet

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[138] According to Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020), there are two ways of discussing the relationship between witchcraft and modernity as presented in this literature. One establishes that "witchcraft is in modernity" and the other that "witchcraft is of modernity" (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020, 861). The first approach hinges on the fact that alongside the adoption and absorption of processes of modernisation, the position and role of witchcraft in people's lives and in society at large remains the same. The "notion of witchcraft" remains intact, and it is still used to explain various human experiences. The second approach emphasises the understanding that witchcraft is, in fact, a key element of modernity. Here, witchcraft is perceived as a response to modernity and the changes that it inspires and produces.

constructive transformation of the present and the appropriation of new things (elements of power previously unreachable) to manifest these ambitions. This dissembling process within society in the present produces intentional positionings of people vis-à-vis situations and others around them in terms of either development, which represents "creative social action", or witchcraft, which is perceived as a destructive force threatening social and moral boundaries (Smith, 2008, 9). Could we similarly see the *ri thlen* belief in the Khasi Hills as people responding to social and economic transformations in history?

The belief in *u thlen* and the *menshohnoh* has had a long and deep presence among the Khasis. If we were to consider the knowledge presented in the folktale of *u thlen*, we could at least recognise that the story is set in a context where an extractive industry like iron-smelting[139] was widely established. Is the folktale a response to forms of accumulation in the precolonial period? Since we do not have much data on the economic organisation and distribution of power within the industry, it is difficult to say, but it is worth keeping in mind that this evocative story offers a perspective on wealth that is secretly harboured and breaks away from the collective principles. According to the folktale, the old woman failed to eat her household's share of *u thlen*'s flesh and therefore broke the collective agreement made at the feast. Instead, she made the decision to house and worship *u thlen* so her own household would prosper.

As lives and livelihoods transform, as the mining of limestone supersedes iron smelting, and as tourism takes root across the landscape, the belief in *u thlen* and the *menshohnoh* thrives in my field site. In this tribal community which confronts the pressure of changing economies, accentuated by the intermittent presence of the state, the belief in witchcraft (specifically the notion that harm is always lingering and waiting) speaks of shared fears of precarity. In an environment of growing inequality, where despite the existence of customary law which is supposed to protect the idea of

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[139] The presence of iron in Khasi folktales, this and others, is perceived to be an important indication of how the industry flourished in the pre-colonial period, up until the mid-nineteenth century when the production of iron saw a sharp decline. Recent archaeological studies like Prokop and Suliga (2013) and Mitri and Wahlang (2022) have established through radiocarbon dating that the smelting of iron in the Khasi Hills is no less than two thousand years old, as it is dated between 353 BC-AD 128. The iron industry also has a huge presence in the colonial record, the earliest account being that of Robert Lindsay's (1854) from the time he visited the Khasi Hills in the 1780s.

community and shared ownership of resources, anxiety over one's deprivation against the increasing wealth of others manifests in belief in the uncanny.

Quiet Suspicion and Intimacy

In this section, I want to revisit the idea of intimacy and closeness and pursue the question of how these factors appear to have an impact on whether the response to the alleged *menshohnoh* is a violent accusation or a deep but unspoken (at least to the suspected) suspicion. Suspicion in my field site is a latent and relatively quiet manifestation which does not usually result in witch-hunting or lynching, as sometimes happens elsewhere in the Khasi Hills and Meghalaya[140]. In all three villages, there did not seem to be any sense of urgency in confronting and addressing *menshohnoh* families and their suspected evil-doing. The proclaimed knowledge that one's neighbours, friends, or even relations are from *menshohnoh* households did not result in outward violent expressions, specifically to the suspected person or persons. One seldom observed feelings of anger or disgust in people when the specific *menshohnoh* families were brought up in conversations; however, there were expressions of fear, but a kind which seemed to have been reconciled with. In one of his contributions to a local daily newspaper, Khasi columnist Dr Fabian Lyngdoh (2013) explained this lack of overt expression of disapproval of *menshohnoh* families within shared spaces of belonging like villages and towns as an act of respect, particularly as fellow residents and at times, as fellow clan members. He also cited the lack of "tangible evidence" as another reason behind people not reporting suspected families to the police. A few of my informants provided the same explanation when I asked about their lack of interest in taking action. "We need proper proof to present any suspicion in the eyes of the law, but it is hard to catch the *menshohnoh* red-handed. They always work out of sight," said one of them. Another adds "Ym sngew long phi, sngew biej," i.e. that it feels inappropriate and awkward but reasserted that "We know for sure that some of the families in the village have *u thlen.*"

As hinted by Dr Fabian Lyngdoh, there seems to be a connection between suspicion (instead of overt accusation) and closeness in relationships in the context of

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[140] We shall explore this later in the chapter.

the *menshohnoh* phenomenon. Suspicion sits perhaps uncomfortably alongside everyday practices of respect and amicability, gestures which further build continuity in the relationship rather than terminate it. In the villages in my field site, suspicion does not usually prevent or break social relationships. People become or remain friends and they acknowledge clan connections and neighbourly relations with those they suspect are *menshohnoh*. One informant told me that his very good friend comes from such a household but that his suspicion of the friend has never impacted their friendship directly. "We share a lot, see eye to eye on many things and have been there for each other," he said. Another informant who was the first to warn me about a particular family did not see a contradiction in her offering to take me to the suspected *menshohnoh* house for an interview. Instead, she insisted that it was safe to visit and even have the tea and kwai (betel nut) that members of the household offer. Visiting "parashnong" or fellow villagers, even if they are from *menshohnoh* families, is unavoidable, according to my informant since people work together collaboratively in village affairs and are part of the same village committees. All I needed to do was "pyneh rngiew" and tie my hair up so no strands fall off while we were there[141]. "If you go with me, they will not dare," she said additionally, implying that by virtue of her familiarity with them as a *parashnong* who is perhaps well aware of their *ri thlen* engagements, and because I was to be acquainted to them through her, I should be less vulnerable.

Suspicion instead of outright accusation seems to be the response to witchcraft in my field site, something which is drawn out of neighbourly, and in certain cases, clan closeness. Even though many people claim certainty over the knowledge of their neighbours', friends' or relations' involvement with *u thlen*, confrontations and outbursts of accusations do not appear. While there are deep beliefs and fears of the *menshohnoh* in general, as well as the *menshohnoh* as embodied by fellow villagers, there are also competing sentiments like concerns for the maintenance of peace and community harmony, otherwise called *ka imlang ka sahlang* discussed in the previous

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[141] The informant here was instructing me to "harden" my *rngiew*, the substance which Khasis believe to constitute personhood (Lyngdoh, 2015), invoking a common strategy of negating misfortune according to Khasis, one which we use especially while navigating difficult circumstances and encounters. The other instruction of tying my hair up is a reference to *u thlen*'s consumption and killing of a person through their hair which was explained before.

chapter, ideas of respect for and allegiance towards one's clan members and also a sense of personal loyalty among friends. Such impulses could also be linked to notions of collective identity that are attached to inhabitants of Khasi villages. The concept of "parashnong" or fellow villager, meaning a person from the same village, is particularly important in defining identities and therefore in marking camaraderie and alliances and its flipside, otherness. This seems to be the opposite of what Douglas (2013) identifies in some ethnographies like Marwick (1952), Mitchell (1956) and Turner (1954), in that the accusation of witchcraft is primarily used to break off relations in situations where the accuser desires to absolve themselves of unwanted obligations.

The villages I am studying are old settlements and had existed as independent Khasi states long before British colonisation. The majority of the families and clans have been there for generations and strongly identify with the land, the community and the village. This has paved the way for the distinction made between "trai shnong" (people with ancestral roots to the village) and "sohshnong" (newcomers with no ancestral connections to the place) who have migrated from other parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills for work or those who have married into *trai shnong* families as discussed in the previous chapter. However, these practices of differentiation are matched by the aim to build a sense of collective identity and a spirit of community in the *shnong* (village), manifested in avenues of integration like the distribution of land to newcomers (after a few years of continuously living in the village), the inclusion (and expectation of participation) of *sohshnong* members in village affairs and village administration, and the everyday expressions of cooperation and benevolence particularly through the offering of free labour in occasions like wakes and funerals and weddings. My point in highlighting these dynamics is to emphasise that the *menshohnoh* families are accepted as part and parcel of this close-knit *shnong* community, and that these various gestures of intimacy are not denied to them. Thus, I see the lack of dramatic expressions of discomfort or disapproval of witchcraft involving *menshohnoh* households in the village as a refusal to sacrifice these values easily, especially when there is "a lack of evidence".

Nevertheless, suspicion lingers even if quiet and not overtly articulated, and it is not forgotten. The coexistence of suspicion and acceptance reveals the complexity of relationships in intimate structures of kinship and the village sociality in the Khasi

Hills. As Carey (2017, 17) argues, "...the hypotheses of trust and mistrust are not mutually exclusive ways of viewing others, but are to an extent constitutive of one another... where people assume that others can be known and so trusted, they are also aware that sometimes this does not hold...". This view also contests against ideas about trust being a fundamental part of social cooperation and integration, and that without trust, there is a breakdown of solidarity and social cohesion, as argued by Hardin (2006). Indeed, it also offers an important insight into how, in fact, rural solidarity in some contexts exists alongside suspicion and in the case of my field site, it exists with the persistent collective disfavour of the wealthy, expressed through *menshohnoh* suspicions.

Othering Effects of Menshohnoh Suspicion and Accusation

So far, I have explored the manifestation of *menshohnoh* suspicion connected on the one hand with wealth, and on the other with similarity and intimacy. In this section, I turn to a case of *menshohnoh* suspicion where the axis of suspicion appears to be ethnic difference rather than wealth. Although the family concerned, whom we call Family D, are *trai shnong* who have lived in the village for generations, they bear the unique experience of having a non-Khasi grandfather. This family is not among the wealthiest in the village, but they are also not among the poorest. In fact, they are known to have been wealthier in previous generations, predominantly from successful engagements in trade in the foothills *haats*. Now, most adult members of the family work in the *bri* cultivating betel nut, and one is a teacher in a local primary school. Therefore, for wealth to be the primary factor of suspicion here, especially that drawn from current practices of livelihood, does not seem likely. When I lived in the village, warnings about the family being *menshohnoh* accompanied narratives about how the family's grandfather was a practicing Hindu who sometimes took care of the old temple in the village which Hindu pilgrims even now occasionally visit, and that their grandmother was Khasi and a follower of the indigenous Khasi faith. "But once she married their grandfather, she started cooking dinner just like Bengalis do," said one informant. "You know, adding masala to dishes." Another informant specifically cautioned me against one of the grandsons because, according to her, not only does he

mysteriously hang out within the premises of the temple but people have often found him roaming about somewhat aimlessly in the forest, "like a typical *menshohnoh*." Unlike in previous examples, here, the *menshohnoh* suspicion seems to be attached more to the idea of difference (ethnic and religious) and otherness.

Indeed, there are several ethnographic examples which document the launching of witchcraft suspicion and accusation on people identified as "different" and as "outsiders" in particular contexts. Isak Niehaus (2013) looks at why during the AIDS epidemic in South Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s, infection by the AIDS virus was at times understood as witchcraft, given to the person infected by "outsiders", included among whom were AIDS activists, medical and government workers and church volunteers. Niehaus asserts that witchcraft accusations directed at these outsiders were expressions of the people's resistance against the tendency among authorities to blame victims for the spread and transmission of the disease; it was a resistance against the stigma of AIDS. More significant to our discussion is his point that the accusations were bids to reinforce the boundary between insiders and outsiders, and also to "bolster the solidarity of domestic units" (Niehaus, 2013, 36). Thus, he argues, witchcraft accusations against the perceived outsiders helped to underline group boundaries and identities and also to strengthen group unity during the trying time of an epidemic. In another example, Bonhomme (2012) writes about the witchcraft of penis-snatching in several African cities, including Lagos, Dakar and Cotonou. As he explains, "the scenario is always broadly similar: strangers are accused of stealing (or sometimes only shrinking) the genitals of other people during a public encounter, often just a simple handshake" (Bonhomme, 2012, 207). Bonhomme argues that penis snatching is an urban phenomenon which involves total strangers, i.e. people completely unrelated to the accuser. Despite the fact that most of these accusations are based on anonymity, some of them are relatively more specific, and target people from particular groups, usually West African immigrants. Bonhomme (2012, 216) points out that in these instances, xenophobia and preexisting tensions between groups play a huge role in the accusations. The urban context of the city, where people from different places meet, mingle and cohabit, ignites latent tensions, taking the form of witchcraft accusations.

Although the *menshohnoh* and *ri thlen* suspicion surrounding Family D in my field site has not manifested in overt blame like in the cases above, nor was it triggered by a specific event or recently emerging issue, nevertheless the processes that operate within the community vis-à-vis the experience of group definition and the idea of difference are similar. Although suspicion may have initially emerged with the erstwhile association between the family and wealth, perhaps at a time when there were fewer wealthy families in the village, when paying attention to narratives that emerge in the present it is obvious that perceptions of otherness based on the family's mixed ancestry have influenced the nature of the suspicion. While the grandfather was known to be an accepted member of the village community — some people talk about how he was their tutor and that he taught them to read and write — aspects of his non-Khasiness and his Hindu identity were consistently underlined. Further, since food and methods of food preparation are intimately connected with ethnic identity, the fact that the grandmother started cooking food "like Bengalis" was perhaps seen as an extreme case of a Khasi household[142] adopting a non-Khasi culinary culture, and this had to be disapproved. Interestingly, the informant who mentioned this has a non-Khasi father herself but she proudly declared that her mother always only cooked Khasi food. When suspicion is examined alongside these relatively innocuous articulations of perceived ethnic and cultural difference, it is important to entertain the potential link between the two. Perhaps in pointing out various aspects of the family's non-Khasi ways of life, people in the village were also trying to emphasise themselves as "proper" Khasis, ones whose ethnic links to the village and the overall landscape are more seamless and justified. Suspicion in this sense is linked to people's quiet anxiety over Family D's ethnic difference and their coexistence within the intimate space of the village where certain resources are shared and collective solidarity is expressed and perpetuated every day.

It is useful to locate such sentiments within the larger context of identity politics in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Since the 1970s the region has witnessed a series of clashes between Khasis and non-Khasis, mostly contained within the state capital of Shillong. Lyngdoh and Gassah (2003) argues that one of the main causes for ethnic

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[142] Despite the non-Khasi grandfather, the children and grandchildren would still be identified as Khasi by virtue of the matrilineal lineage.

tensions in Meghalaya has been the fear of domination of the tribal population by non-tribals, in light of the steady migration of the latter, especially after 1971. They broadly categorise non-tribals into "(i) external – foreign influx of nationals belonging to other countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh; (ii) internal – influx of Indian nationals from other states within the country" (Lyngdoh & Gassah, 2003, 5024). It is important to underline that migration of non-tribals has largely concentrated in Shillong, to which, because it was established as the capital of the Assam Province in the nineteenth century, non-tribals from various parts of British India moved for commercial prospects and to work as part of the colonial administration. In the process of making Shillong the capital, the colonial government seized huge portions of land, permanently disrupting the customary land tenure in the Shillong region. However, as McDuie-Ra (2007, 48) points out, the origins of identity politics in Meghalaya are complex, and are deeply entangled with the damaging effects of colonial processes and the trajectory of state formation in the post-colonial period. Indeed, other structural factors like the state's underdevelopment, high unemployment rates, privatisation of land and resources and the overall growth of Inequality have historically contributed to ethnic tensions. As I mentioned before, although these conflicts have largely confined themselves to Shillong, the general existence of latent anti-non-tribal sentiments, which some might call xenophobia, cannot be ignored. And in this ethnographic example, such anxieties and sentiments have been processed through the language of *menshohnoh* suspicion. Regardless, it is important to emphasise that despite the element of ethnic difference, Family D are still well-accepted members of the community, some of whom hold important positions in the Durbar and village administration. This again reiterates my earlier point that suspicion and intimacy, even amidst difference, can exist concomitantly in certain situations.

Conclusion

The discourse of *menshohnoh* suspicion is clearly not uniform, even if the belief in the *menshohnoh* seems to follow a similar plot everywhere. As mentioned earlier, the *menshohnoh* is a figure of fear and horror for people that almost triggers an existential predicament. At the same time, the formulation of suspicion of *menshohnoh*

families, particularly in the village settings of my field site, shows that the particular social fabric and social dynamics within also contribute to who is suspected of the *ri thlen* practice, and how. While wealth appears to be a common denominator among menshohnoh families, other factors also contribute to the framing of suspicion. Thus, even though the *ri thlen* practice is strongly associated with wealth, the fact that not all families are accused of it makes it hard to conclude that there is one stable marker which governs all *ri thlen* suspicions and accusations. Further, in at least one example from my field site, ethnic identity of the suspected seems to play a role. However, even in this case, ethnic difference may not exist in isolation but in a context where other perceptions of insecurity and precarity flourish. Lastly, the quiet, covert and unaggressive manifestation of suspicion particular to my field site speaks of the complexity of the social dynamics in Khasi villages today where, at one level, social life is driven by collective impulse, and at another it is increasingly being threatened by an economy of acquisitiveness, one tolerated but also deeply shunned by people in the community. In such a landscape, the figure of the *menshohnoh* roams and the serpentine creature of *u thlen* makes his home. After all, *u thlen* is an energy of the spiritual landscape, a creature himself displaced from his subterranean home by human excavators looking for iron ore, and among those same humans he remains, terrorising, enriching and ruining all at once.

Conclusion

"Haba don ka jaka, ka khana kan don beit."
"If there is a place, there will always be a story." - Kong Mem from Laitrum village.

Kong Mem uttered the above statement spontaneously during a walk in Laitrum sometime in November 2021. She is an Anganwadi[143] worker and was introduced to me by the Durbar Secretary who thought it wise for me to be accompanied by a woman as I was learning about the village when I first arrived. A *khadduh* (youngest daughter) and single mother of four, Kong Mem lives in her family's ancestral house in the village. On that occasion, she was taking me to different parts of Laitrum, telling me what each place is and what it used to be. "Wah Shyah to the west, used to be full of vegetable gardens when I was child, and according to elders, it is a place where tigers visited, giving out loud roars that echoed throughout the village," she said. Now Wah Shyah is where the main motorable road runs through and where newer houses in the village are built. "Dong Pata to the north, used to be where people sold locally-brewed alcohol and where travellers on the Scott Road paused for a drink," Kong Mem continued. "But the breweries were closed decades ago when public drinking was banned by the Durbar." Now, only remnants of the structures remain.

Throughout my time in the field, narratives about places, and things in places, dominated conversations with people. Bah Ban, the first person I met in Laitrum, told me that the huge tilting boulder near the house in which I was staying was actually the metamorphosed hat of the Hindu ascetic who established the Mahadev shrine (now temple) in the village. Bah Sumar, a seventy-three-year-old man I wrote about in Chapter One, frequently referred to times spent on "u lum bam khaw," or "the hill where we ate rice grains," a rocky hill on the outskirts of the village, called such because it is known to be where travellers rested, eating grains of rice. Bah Sumar lamented the fact that parts of *u lum bam khaw* have been dug out to extract soil and stone for the construction of the village football field. "I know we need the football field for the kids, but it is still sad that the hill had to be destroyed," Bah Sumar said in one of

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[143]Anganwadi is a rural child care centre in India, introduced in 1975 by the Indian government as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

our conversations. Therefore, when Kong Mem stated the obvious, that places always have stories, I fully understood what she meant.

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The vignette above reemphasises the point made throughout this thesis that in the Southern Khasi Hills, places and landscapes are meaningful presences, those which inform people's conceptualisations of their realities, shapes their lives and livelihoods, and often, are elements that demand thoughtful and challenging negotiations in processes of *dwelling.* Places and landscapes here are not inert backgrounds or aesthetic representations but active constituents of people's ways of being in the world. In this thesis, such experiences of landscapes and places are understood in the context of the Khasis' articulated indigenous and tribal identity, within which their rootedness to land and place is perceived as distinct and somewhat special. This is not to say that Khasi people's emplacement on the landscape is an *a priori* condition but one which is built and consistently reproduced in time; the Khasi landscape is thus temporal. However, amidst this recognition of the attachment to land, this thesis has also shown how the entanglements between people, places and landscapes in the Khasi Hills are complex, unpredictable and not always harmonious. The Khasis have historically maintained diverse perspectives, feelings and approaches to land and landscape – contingent, but intimate.

Using the concept of place-making — how places are valued and made meaningful to people through their acts of being on the land — this thesis has attempted to understand how the attachment to land, place and landscape is manifested and perpetuated. Each chapter has done this by focusing on specific entities embedded in the landscape — the Scott Road, the *mot shongthait*, the *lawkyntang* and tourism infrastructure — all of which afford place-making possibilities. Indeed, place-making here is also understood as a process of claiming the landscape, and of asserting presence and ownership. In Chapter One, I've shown how the colonial Scott Road is appropriated by local Khasis in various ways. Despite embodying colonial authority (and the violence of colonial occupation), the imposition of taxes and duties on trade goods moving on the road by Sohtrai Sirdars in the nineteenth century was an important assertion of their sovereignty over the land and

territory on which the road was built. Further, as the Scott Road was incorporated into the region's trade networks or what I call the "landscape of routes", it was quickly appropriated by Khasi travellers to whom it emerged as a popular route in their commute up and down between hills and plains. Place-making on the Scott Road unfolded through people's regular acts of movement, where journeys gave way to rich and meaningful shared experiences, and afforded travellers *grounded* interactions with the landscape. The Scott Road at Laitrum became a site of habitation and was integrated into people's family histories. This was not merely because people starting building homes along the road, but also because the road became the site where conjugal relationships started and therefore where new family and kinship lines emerged. Lastly, the Sohtrai Durbar's plan to restore the ruins of the Scott Road and reopen it as a tourist site is another form of place-making which, while being an initiative embedded in the tourism industry, is nevertheless an act of reclaiming the road as their own.

In Chapter Two, I further explored the landscape of routes by paying attention to the process of place-making via the *mot shongthait*. Since the *mot shongthait* is built to memorialise deceased kin and family members, its emplacement on the landscape marks the individual families' connection with land and place, and the continuity between the living and the dead. However, the *mot shongthait's* place-making affordance is not only generated by it being a material embodiment of kinship but also because the *mot shongthait* itself becomes a *place*, where people, especially travellers, congregate, meet, rest and make moments together. In Chapter Four, I turned to the *lawkyntang* in Mawkliar which sits on top of the Mawkliar Cave tourist spot. I understand the *lawkyntang* as another material manifestation of place-making where particular spiritual and moral powers and agencies are attributed to the land. However, this is not to dismiss or erase similar potencies outside it, since I have argued that the Khasi landscape is in its entirety a spiritual landscape. The *lawkyntang* is simply another way of locating and rooting spirit-beings to land and place, and thereby recognising and experiencing them as powerful presences of the landscape.

Alongside, and in fact, overlapping the spiritual landscape of Mawkliar is what I call the "tourism landscape", a type of landscape that emerges with the presence of the tourism industry in the village. In Chapters Three and Five, I explored the tourism

landscape, as it represents a different regime of value, where land and landscape are not spiritual and moral embodiments but *resources* embedded in the "resource materiality" (Richardson & Weszkalnys, 2014) of the tourism economy. The tourism landscape was an important consideration in this thesis because first, it is increasingly a dominant feature of the Mawkliar landscape, one which is redefining the use and distribution of land, social relations and the identity of the village as a whole. Secondly, despite existing in the larger context of tourism in Meghalaya, the creation of the tourism landscape is predominantly in the hands of Elaka administration, making the assembling of land for tourism an initiative of the Elaka. Thus, the tourism landscape is an example of local place-making and placemaking[144], where the Durbar and people in Mawkliar are actively contributing to the construction of their landscape as one fit for tourism. It is important to highlight this internal control over the tourism landscape because it presents a distinct situation in India in which tourism, particularly in terms of the access to land, is not entirely dictated by the government or outside parties like hospitality or leisure companies.

In Chapter Three, I asserted that the tourism landscape is not just material; it is also representative, and the two aspects co-constitute each other. While Mawkliar's land and landscape is being assembled and prepared for tourism through the creation of tourist spots and the building of various tourism infrastructure, it is also being produced visually and textually in tourism media. I showed how the representational aspect of the Mawkliar tourism landscape, shaped by objectification and exoticisation, has its roots in colonial discourse. Further, I underlined the continuity in the way the visual realm spills into the material (in that there is a physical moulding of the landscape to match its visual representations) manifested in the creation of the colonial hill station under colonialism, and the material tourism landscape under tourism. Therefore, in order to understand tourism as a place-based historical phenomenon, this thesis emphasised the need to approach the material and representational aspects of the tourism landscape together and with the same urgency.

However, despite local control, an important effect of the tourism landscape in Mawkliar is the gradual undoing of the customary land tenure, that which guarantees

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[144] As explained in the Chapter Three, placemaking is a term from urban planning used to describe the design, architectural and infrastructural aspect of planning.

community-owned land in the village is equally accessible to all "trai shnong[145]" residents. This undoing is not a product of outside forces but internal ones, those that emerge in the process of assembling land for tourism. In Chapter Five, I explained how only individuals and households which have access to some form of capital are able to obtain land from the Durbar, establish a tourism business, and therefore benefit from the tourism landscape. Those without capital lose out on similar benefits derived from land. However, there is wealth disparity even among those who become tourism business-owners. Some families have accumulated wealth for generations (from limestone mining) and have recently channelled that wealth towards tourism. For others though, the current establishments are their first attempts at business and having a stable income. Households with accumulated wealth are also distinctly the ones owning the bigger businesses, like resorts and hotels. Further, there are those employed in the industry but who are not business-owners and have no access to land for tourism. The tourism landscape is therefore contributing to present rearrangements of social relations within the village, while also perpetuating hierarchies already established by the community's past involvement in mining.

It is within the context of these shifts and transformations that I located the phenomenon discussed in Chapter Six, that of the belief in *u thlen* and *ki menshohnoh*. Indeed, belief in the powers of *u thlen* and the fear of *ki menshohnoh* are not new; but their lingering presence today points to certain social processes and circumstances in which they thrive. I have argued that the strong association between wealth and *u thlen* underlines the collective anxiety over increasing inequality within the village community. Although patterns of inequality cannot be attributed strictly to tourism (since mining provided the opportunity for accumulation as well), it has now become an avenue through which richer families further accumulate, while some households in the community continue to be left behind despite the growth of the industry in the village. Thus, the construction of *menshohnoh* suspicion is one way in which the uneasiness of wealth disparity is being channelised. The question of community becomes important here since the particular manifestation of suspicion in my field site, that which does not result in overt accusation and violence, reveals the tension

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[145] People with ancestral roots to the village and households who have lived in the village for multiple generations.

between collective harmony and collective angst. *Menshohnoh* households remain in the community as long as these tensions exist. Further, the figure of the *menshohnoh* and indeed the evil spirit of *u thlen* are also specimens of the spiritual landscape, those whose powers are constantly negotiated by people as they dwell among fellow humans and other-than-humans on the Khasi landscape.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Since the discussions in this thesis are specific to the three villages in my field site which are located in a particular part of the Southern Khasi Hills, the thesis does not claim to be completely representative of the realities of Khasi communities everywhere. As pointed out in the Introduction, even within my field site, landscapes, vegetation and histories of land use are not entirely the same in the three villages. Nevertheless, the significance of the relationship with land speaks of the experience of people across the Khasi Hills as a tribal and indigenous community, and the village-focused ethnography here is a microscopic representation of that historical experience. In this thesis, I have taken a broader approach to the subject of tribal land and landscapes, without concentrating on a specific historical moment or a particular ethnographic "problem" as such. Instead, I have highlighted the different aspects of people's relationship with land — examined as processes of place-making — and how each aspect bears a unique significance in the lives of people in the region. The broad approach taken helps to undermine simplistic and essentialist frames which only accept a certain image of indigenous ways of life, one rooted in the notion of their timeless harmony with nature. This thesis has instead foregrounded the complexity, richness and multidimensionality of the relationship between tribal and indigenous people and their land and landscapes, and underlined the role of tribal and indigenous agency in the making and unmaking of landscapes. While monoliths are erected and the *mot shongthait* is built and while betel nut trees in *bri* farmlands are tended and *u ryngkew u basa* of sacred forests is feared, the tourism landscape also emerges and the limestone-rich hills continue to be quarried down.

Since these various forms of attachment to land are also gestures of sovereignty and of claiming the landscape, they are important considerations especially when viewed in the context of historical processes like colonialism, and amidst the Khasi

community's relationship with the Indian state and other outside entities. In Chapter One, Chapter Three and to an extent Chapter Five, the tension between local assertions and external impositions and infringements on land and landscape is an underlying theme. The Scott Road (a colonial infrastructure) and the tourism landscape (an element of the larger nation-wide tourism industry) become entities and sites on the landscape that are appropriated and reclaimed by people in Sohtrai and Mawkliar; in the first case, this manifested in relationships that people themselves formed with the road as well as the heritage tourism prospect, and in the second, this unfolded through the Durbar administration's and people's active engagement with tourism and retaining control over how the industry takes shape in the village, as described earlier. This leads us to the crucial point about the role of customary land tenure in ensuring the continuity of the various forms of attachment to land for the Khasis in the postcolonial era.

As explored in Chapter Five, the protection of customary land tenure in Meghalaya by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has been vital to land security among the community, and therefore to people's ability and freedom to engage with the landscape — practically, symbolically, spiritually and economically — and maintain relationships with it. The preservation of tribal autonomy over land and of customary land tenure in the Khasi Hills is tied to the colonial government's administrative approach to the North-Eastern region and the replication of some of this approach by the postcolonial government. The land and landscapes in the Hill Districts of present-day North-East India were distinguished from the rest of British India by several frontier policies which predominantly left them as non-revenue areas outside the direct control of the Raj. These policies were also a part of a deliberate strategy of isolation informed by the perspective of tribes in the region as distinct and geographically remote (Centre for Policy Research, 2018). In the postcolonial period, this approach is manifested in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule as well as Article 371 (A) of the Constitution, all of which provide some room for tribal autonomy and ensure limited interference of the state in land administration.

However, it is very important to point out that alongside such measures, the Indian Government has been dedicated to pushing for development policies in the

North East[146] in recent decades. Since land and access to land is at the heart of the development framework in India (Byres, 1993; Levien, 2013; D'Costa & Chakraborty, 2017), development will remain a powerful threat to existing arrangements of land governance in the region. Development in North-East India, as detailed in the Look/Act East Policy[147] and the North Eastern Region Vision 2020[148], is heavily based on infrastructure-building — dams, roads and railways — processes within which land acquisition (and therefore land dispossession) is an indispensable step in the operation. In Meghalaya, recent cases of land acquisition were for road projects like the Guwahati-Shillong Highway and the Shillong-Dawki Road, both of which generated complicated situations on the ground. Thus, in the context of the Indian government's economic policy aims, it would not be wrong to say that the land security provided by the Sixth Schedule in Meghalaya and the Khasi Hills, is increasingly tenuous; after all, there is nothing that can legally stop the state from acquiring land for "public purposes" because of the eminent domain. However, for now, and amidst these realities, the existence of the Sixth Schedule, and thus the customary land tenure in my field site, is still experienced as a vital asset supporting tribal and indigenous lives and livelihoods.

Indeed, in recognising the value of customary land tenure and what it affords to people in my field site, this thesis does not undermine the inherent weaknesses of such arrangements and the structures that govern them. As explained in the Introduction, the fundamental drawback of the Durbar specifically is the absence of women, and in Chapter Four, I cited examples from outside my field site of the misuse of power by figures of authority like the Sirdar and the Lyngdoh. More importantly, I have shown in Chapter Five how even within the framework of a customary tenure like that in Mawkliar which identifies all land as community-owned, inequality in the village is a reality that cannot be ignored. In fact, there are numerous examples from across the Khasi Hills which reveal the gradual undoing of the provision of community land as

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[146] One of the key measures taken towards this end was the establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region in 2001.

[147] The Look/Act East Policy was introduced in 1991 with the aim of strengthening India's political and economic ties with East and Southeast Asia. One of the main tenets of the policy is its view of the North East as a pivotal corridor connecting India with Southeast Asia.

[148] Launched in 2008, the NER Vision 2020 is a policy strategy that aims to address developmental goals specific to North-East India, and the improvement of infrastructure and connectivity is recognised as one of the key targets.

part of customary tenure; gestures of community land-grabbing by elites are one of the biggest factors contributing to the rise in households without access to land.

There are dimensions, narratives and experiences of the Khasi landscape that this thesis has not been able to address and incorporate into the study. There are also ethnographic accounts from elsewhere in the Khasi Hills that might contradict the discussions featured here. However, as I established in the Introduction, as much as there is variety of contexts and histories within *Ri Hynñiewtrep* or "Land of the Seven Huts", there is also sameness, affinity and a shared rootedness in land and landscapes. Although limited to the specific realities of my field site, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the relationship between tribal and indigenous people and their land and landscape, how that relationship is negotiated in the past and present, and what it might mean for the future of these communities.

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