

## WHEN THE STONE CRUMBLES

I remember clearly the last words U. Dorbar Nongkoum spoke in my presence: 'When the Stone Crumbles', he said pointing to himself, 'then everything is finished!' That was the fall of 1993. The following year, he died and was given a ceremonial cremation in the traditional Karew way, sword and shield in hand and a headband woven by his daughter around his head. Karew, incidentally are the Khasis who live on the northern slopes of the Khasi hills.

U. Dorbar Nongkoum was from Pahambir, a small jungle village in the North Khasi Hills in the state of Meghalaya, North-East India. A storyteller par excellence, a traditional healer and performer of rituals for the Nongkoum clan, Dorbar Nongkoum exemplified the way of life of the people of Raid Khatar Nonglyngdoh, a community of villages of which Pahambir is a constituent. Pahambir has its own body of traditional administrators who are charged with the task of village governance in ways, which are intrinsically linked, with the indigenous faith of the Khasis. All activities of the villages, ranging from the occupational to the social and are informed by ceremonies and practices, many of which are religious in nature. Like many other elders in the village who played similar roles, Dorbar Nongkoum was the virtual priest of his clan Khasi which included various sisters and their children and grand-children, his brothers and all who traced their descent from the Nongkoum *lawbei Tynrai* or Nongkoum 'grandmother of the root' (i.e. the root of the clan).

Religious practices are family and clan-oriented. Adherence to the system is rigid and it determines the lifestyle of the people. Agriculture is the mainstay of Pahambir's economy. The agricultural calendar is determined by elaborate ceremonies of libation and offering, without which no agricultural activity is taken up. The ceremonies have continued through generations of practice, and the roles of the key players are handed down from maternal uncle to nephew, brother to brother, sister to sister and mother to daughter. The close-knit structure of the clans, often means that villages are populated exclusively by certain clans whose beliefs are rooted in traditions practised since time immemorial. The clans are the Marin, Lyngdoh, Lapang, Nongkoum, Makri and Nongshli. Marin is the chief's clan, Lyngdoh the priest clan, Lapang, Nongkoum and Nongshli the clans representing village elders and the Makri, the herald and master of ceremonies clan. The social and religious functions of the clans are clearly defined and strictly observed during ceremonies conducted for the times of community or village.

However, each clan has its own set of belief systems when the performances of clan ceremonies are contingent.

In my twelve years of work in and around Pahambir, I have collected innumerable stories and songs, information about clan and community religious practices, traditional healing and medicine and assorted knowledge systems. But what has fascinated me endlessly is the belief, in and practice of, a particular tradition striking and powerful for the simple reason that the people impose such enormous faith in it—the tigerman or the weretiger tradition. Among tribals, the belief in the soul is paramount, since it is deemed far stronger than an individual's will power. In the remote villages everything from rocks to rice, flora and fauna have one or more souls. Not too long ago this belief was widely prevalent among the Khasis, and is still quite common place in remote pockets of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The soul, as understood in this context, represents the Khasi belief in *Ka Rngiew*, one of the components that go into making a being completely human. No person is completely human merely with *Ka Met* or the body, *Ka mynsiem* or the soul and the *Ka Rngiew*, each of which have an equal part in the making of a man. *Ka Rngiew* is the essence, the power that shapes and determines man's action, thought and motivation. It gives shape to his dreams and visions, and charts the course of his life, is imperishable and immutable. During the course of my work in the remote jungle villages of the North Khasi Hills, I have come across men and women who are reputed to have tiger power, an attribute of their *Rngiew*. These men and women are known as *Khla Phuli*—human being who transform into tigers, 'weretigers' as it were. Sometimes these *weretigers* are referred to as *San saram* meaning 'five clawed' as different from *ryngkew* tigers, or real tigers, which are called the *Saw saram* or 'four clawed'. Villagers are adept at distinguishing the footmarks of the *weretiger* from the real tiger should they chance to see them on the grounds in and around the villages. I reproduce here excerpts from interviews with informants and weretigers of the Bhoi area to substantiate these points:

QUESTION: How does a real tiger differ from man who transforms into tiger?

INFORMANT: Legend has it that *phuli* – tigers...

QUESTION: What do you mean – *phuli*-tigers?

INFORMANT: It means man who transforms into a tiger, who has five fingers and five toes. People can make out even by studying footprints whether the paw-marks belong to the four-clawed creature of the jungle or whether it is the *phuli*-tiger with five claws that has passed by.<sup>2</sup>

How is this transformation from human to tiger possible? In the case of the werewolf, that figures in greater European folklore, there is a widespread belief that one became a werewolf by putting on a magic girdle made of wolf skin. Suggestive of a state of bewitchment, perhaps! However, the Khasi weretiger tradition is not so simplistic, and this I say after having spent

countless days with them in their villages trying to learn their ways, and recording numerous interviews with U Dising Marin, U Joid Makri and the late U Sarot Maji, three of the best-known weretigers of the villages of Pahamshken, Pahambir and Mawphrew respectively. There is one key aspect, which struck me as being directly connected to the transformation. All three weretigers I interviewed are in agreement that when they sleep, the *rngiew* goes to the *ramia*. *Ramia* is the Khasi word associated with dream, illusion and hallucination, but in the context of the weretigers it means much more—it means going to the world of the tiger, and sometime, the world of the ancestors. An excerpt from the interview:

DISING: At that time—at the time of sleep, after I have eaten – as soon as the *rngiew* goes there, I start to roar. Says the mother of my children: ‘Oh you! Your *rngiew* has gone that side. You are starting to roar. Don’t disturb him. Let him sleep peacefully. When his *rngiew* comes back – give water. As soon as he asks for water – give him water! Three or five vesselfull’. After drinking water, I feel a little rested. I sweat profusely. Have to change blankets. When the *rngiew* begins to leave, I begin by yawning. Sleepless or sleepiness lasts for about an hour. Then sleep comes. Then roar. YAAH! After waking up – I ask for water. Sweat pours out. Then I have *kwai*. And my experience is finished. In that way....<sup>3</sup> There are religious connotations to the experience.

QUESTION: What is the reason for turning into tigers?

MAJI: For the reason of clinging, holding.

QUESTION: Clinging to what?

MAJI: To religion. Matriliney, with its *Iawbei* or ancestress and *Suidnia* or first maternal uncle associations, is central to Khasi religion, and is reflected very clearly in the weretiger tradition which is essentially a clan-based one. When a person is said to have the power to become a weretiger, he is garbed, and this act of garbing is attributed to *ka long kur* or the being (as essence) of the clan, the *Lyngdoh* (the maternal uncle) and the *ryngkew*. *Ryngkew* is usually might be a tutelary deity of a village, a particular spot, or a rock and even a river. In the context of the weretiger it is something close to the structure of the clan. I have already mentioned that the weretiger is differentiated from the *ryngkew* or real tiger by number of digits virtue of the toes. Although the *ryngkew* is spoken of as a real tiger, there is a subtle implication that it is more than mere creature—a deity. Similarly, the *long kur* or the ‘being’ of the clan is not simply an ordinary human social organization. It is a vital, almost personified entity, a living force of unique identity which carries ontological significance. Dising spoke about garbing being quintessential to the transformation into a weretiger. ‘At the very beginning—to become a tiger’ it starts with the garbing.

QUESTION: What do you mean ‘garbing’?

DISING: They give us clothes and wraps.

QUESTION: Do you have to strip naked?

DISING: Yes. These clothes are discarded, new ones given.

QUESTION: Who garbs you?

DISING: The *ryngkew* garbs us. He who clings and holds. And wherever they take us we have to go. Our bodies are no longer there. We feel light. Cannot even work, can't plough. When the *rngiew* comes back from there, man becomes strong again. The tiger is widely regarded as a deity among the Khasis, the guardian spirit of all sacred forests, all the places where ceremonies are performed, and is often a clan deity. The Makdoh clan is one of the more prominent ones having the tiger for a deity. It can be seen, if not sitting under the stilted floor of the house, at least prowling close to the village. There are clans that have the python, bear and boar as clan deities as well. The Khyndeit clan has the river Umiam as its deity, while the Pathaw clan considers the pumpkin its deity. These associations are connected with taboos and totemism. This then, was the world of Dorbar Nongkoun. A report I recently saw on a local cable network in Shillong would have saddened him greatly. The Makri clan worships Pdah Kyndeng, a deity who resides in a huge cave a few hours walk from Pahambir. It is home to thousands of bats and, I am told, huge serpents. I have visited the cave and it was a powerful experience. Two weeks ago, the aforementioned cable network of Shillong did a story on government plans to convert the Pdah Kyndeng cave and its vicinity into a tourist spot. What will become of this sacred place so important to the weretigers of the Makri clan? What will become of the Ryngkew who resides in the cave? What of the bats that are thought to be the fowls and pigeons of the Pdah Kyndeng Ryngkew? Dorbar Nongkoun's stones have crumbled alright, bringing the old ways to an end. The imminent defilement of Pdah Kyndeng cave by asinine tourism will bring the legend and tradition of the tigerman of Pahambir to a tragic close. But are the powers that be listening?

*Lecturer, Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies,  
North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India*

## Notes

1. Karew – Khasis living on the northern slopes of the Khasi Hills.
2. 'In Search of Tigermen' (Manuscript): Kaiser T, Kharmawphlang DL, Laloo Dt.
3. 'In Search of Tigermen' (Manuscript): Kaiser T, Kharmawphlang DL, Laloo Dt.