

Place Names in the Khasi Hills District

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THE KHASIS ARE ONE OF SEVERAL TRIBES living in the hilly section of Assam in eastern India. Politically they are Indians, but their physical characteristics are more those of the Southeast Asian and Pacific Ocean peoples, their traditional religion is animistic, and their village organization is based on matrilineal descent from a great ancestress.

The Khasi language with its four dialects, Lngngam, Synteng or Pnar, War, and Khasi proper, is classified as one of the six major Mon-Khmer languages. There is no written Khasi literature.

When around 1835 British missionaries first came to the Khasi Hills, they established an alphabet in Roman characters, translated the Gospels and some English poetry, and wrote several prescriptive grammars fitting this analytic and isolating language into the categories of traditional Latin grammar. One native Khasi grammarian, U Nissor Singh, has written an excellent Khasi-English dictionary which has been of invaluable help to me.

My own knowledge of Khasi stems from a year's fieldwork with two native speakers who happened to be students in Berkeley, California. My descriptive grammar of Khasi was prepared as a doctoral dissertation in 1957 and, it is hoped, will soon be published.

1. Most of the geographical names discussed in the following are taken from the World Aeronautical Chart, Number 554, Brahmaputra River Section, 1954 Edition. A small number occurred in stories told by my informant Berkeley Pugh.

1.1 The traditional British spellings on the map permit easy transferral into phonemic writing. In two cases a Khasi speaker commented on apparent misspellings. However, a word of caution is necessary: without personal investigation in the field, the etymologies here presented must be considered strictly tentative.

2. Many Khasi place names are compounds whose constituents refer to physical features of nature: /[?]um/ 'water,' /wa[?]/ 'river, stream,' /maaw/ 'stone,' /khlaaw/ 'forest.'

2.1 A suburb of Shillong, the capital of Assam, is called *Wahrisaw*¹ = /wa^ʔ/ + /rii-saaw/² ‘small bamboo cane for making arrows,’ and can be translated by ‘Bamboo River.’ /rii-saaw/ itself is a compound of /thrii/³ ‘cane’ and /saaw/ ‘to be red, to be not quite ripe.’ It should be mentioned here that /saaw/ also means ‘four’ and that /rii-saaw/ is also the name for the month of October. We may, however, assume that the /saaw/ in the name for October does not contain the numeral ‘four’ since another month, /yayon/ ‘April,’ contains another color-word, namely /yon/ ‘to be black.’

Another ‘water’ compound is *Wahmluh* = /wa^ʔ/ + /mlu^ʔ/ ‘salt,’ ‘Salt River.’

2.2 In the north of Shillong /^ʔum/ ‘water’ compounds predominate:

Umran = /^ʔum/ + /ran/ ‘to shrink’ = ‘shrinking river.’

Umswai = /^ʔum/ + /swaay/ ‘to be restless’ = ‘restless river.’

Umsning = /^ʔum/ + /sniəŋ/ ‘pig’ = ‘pig river.’ The country dialect around Shillong uses /sniŋ/ for /sniəŋ/.

Umlaiteng = /^ʔum/ + /laay-teŋ/ ‘three fathoms deep.’ A /bteŋ/³ is a bamboo stick used to measure the depth of water; /laay/ is the numeral ‘three.’ This place then, is called ‘deep river.’

2.3 West of Shillong /maaw/ ‘stone’ names predominate:

Mawiong = /maaw/ + /yon/ ‘to be black’ = ‘Blackstone’

Mawdem = /maaw/ + /dem/ ‘to yield’ = ‘surrendered stone’

Mawmluh = /maaw/ + /mlu^ʔ/ ‘salt’ = ‘Saltstone’

Mawkarah = /maaw/ + /kara^ʔ/ ‘to dig up’ = ‘unearthed stone’

Mawphlang = /maaw/ + /phlaŋ/ ‘grass’ = ‘grass stone’ = ‘moss’

2.31 *Mawsmi* = /maaw/ + /smaay/ ‘to swear’ = ‘Swearstone.’ The story behind this village is the following: There once was a quarrel between the chiefs of two neighboring villages; they were uncle and nephew and the feud had been lasting for a long time. The nephew finally said: “I swear that I shall never set foot in your village again, not even for a drink of water.” He then erected a memorial stone to commemorate his oath for all times.

¹ The traditional missionary alphabet used for writing Khasi since the middle of the 19th century renders the final glottal stop /ʔ/ by *h*.

² Hyphens are used for easier reading of Khasi compounds.

³ In compounds some initial consonant clusters lose their first consonant.

2.32 In *Mawliba* and *Mawmarin* the meanings of the second constituents could, unfortunately, not be ascertained. It is possible that they are both verbs, but it is also possible that *-liba* is a compound of /liʔ/ 'to be white' and /baʔ/ 'to be big.' In this case *Mawliba* would mean 'big white stone.'

2.4 Southwest of Cherrapunjee lies *Lawbah* = /khlaaw/³ 'forest' + /baʔ/ 'to be big' = 'big forest.'

2.5 In the western part of the Hills District many place names begin with /šnoŋ/³, the word for 'village':

*Nongkynshi*⁴ = /šnoŋ/ + /knšii/ 'to admonish' = 'forbidden city'

Nongkhlaow = /šnoŋ/ + /khlaaw/ 'forest' = 'forest village'

*Nongtyrkhang*⁴ = /šnoŋ/ + /trkhaŋ/ 'fern' = 'fern village'

*Nongpoh*¹ = /šnoŋ/ + /poʔ/ 'to be low' = low-lying village'

Nongjri = /šnoŋ/ + /jrii/ 'rubber' = 'rubber village'

Nongkrem = /šnoŋ/ + /krem/ 'cave' = 'cave village'

Nongspung = /šnoŋ/ + an unidentified morpheme

Nongsawlia = /šnoŋ/ + /saaw-lia/ 'to be reddish and very tender' = is perhaps 'village of the young bamboo.'

Nongthymmai = /šnoŋ/ + /thmmaay/ 'to be fresh, new' = the new village.' A part of Shillong is also called by that name.

2.6 *Rangshken* is supposed to be a misspelling for *Nongshken* = /šnoŋ/ + /šken/ 'a thin bamboo' = bamboo village.

3. The etymologies of the following nine village names are not based on information from informants and must therefore be considered as unreliable.

3.1 *Shaitdainthlen* is probably 'a waterfall near which the Thlen, a demon, was cut,' i.e. killed: /kšaaŋ/³ 'waterfall' + /dañ/ 'to cut' + /thlen/ 'the evil snake demon.'

3.2 *Pynursla* south of Shillong may be 'the village of fallen leaves': /ʔur/ 'to fall' with the prefix /pn-/ means 'to cause to fall,' while /sla/ means 'leaf.'

3.3 *Laitmawsiang*. /laj/ means either 'to be free, to escape' or 'to have just cleared'; /siaŋ/ is a rock and a /maaw-siaŋ/ is a 'fallen rock.' This village would then have the name 'escaped from stones'

⁴ The missionary alphabet uses *y* before liquids and nasals which in phonemic writing have syllabic qualities.

falling from the sky.' Another village south of Shillong, *Laitmaupan*, cannot be identified at all since the meaning of /pan/ or /maaw-pan/ is unknown.

Laitumkrah = /laj/ 'to be free' + /[?]um/ 'water' + /khra[?]/ 'water vessel.' This village name could be translated by 'empty water jug' or 'water jug without water in it.'

3.4 *Dingpasoh* is probably a compound of /dieŋ/ 'tree' and /paso[?]/ 'to be fleshy, muscular,' so that /dieŋ-paso[?]/ means 'a thick tree.'

3.5 *Lumding* is probably a compound of /luom/ 'hill, mountain' and /diŋ/ 'fire,' so that /luom-diŋ/ means 'fire hill.'

3.6 *Jarain* to the east of Shillong could be identical with /jarañ/ a vegetable of sour taste, but more likely it is a Synteng⁵ name.

3.7 The first constituent of *Langpa* in the extreme southwest of the Hills District could be /blaŋ/ 'goat' or /phlaŋ/ 'grass,' and the second constituent could be /kpa/ 'father,' but more likely this is a Lyngngam⁶ word.

3.8 *Pambriew* could mean 'fallen man,' since /pam/ means 'to cut, to fell' and /briw/ is the word for 'man.'

3.9 *Pomsohmen* is supposed to be the name of a man who was beheaded in a massacre below Mawsmi /2.31/. This man's name is probably a compound of /pom/ 'to cut,' i.e., 'to behead' and /so[?]-men/, a certain fruit. Neither the dictionary nor my informant knew what kind of fruit this could be.

4. *Shillong*, the capital of the Khasi Hills is called /laban/ by the natives. No etymology comes to mind readily, and none of my informants could associate this name with any meaning known to them. /laban/ is therefore probably the Khasi version of an Asamese word. *Cherrapunjee*, the city famous for its record rainfalls, is called /so[?]ra/ by the Khasis. Although there is a verb /so[?]ra/ 'to bear scanty fruit,' it is unlikely that there is a relationship between this verb and the city.

5. Other Khasi place names appearing on maps of India represent probably "khasifications" of non-Khasi names.

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⁵ The inhabitants of the Jaintia Hills are also called Syntengs.

⁶ The Lyngngams are a hill tribe living in the northwest of the Khasi Hills.