

Translation as Intellectual and Cultural Mediation in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century Khasi Hills

Dr. Hakani SP Laloo

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Shillong College, Meghalaya.

Email: hakani.laloo@gmail.com | Orcid Id: [0009-0007-9982-4729](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9982-4729)

Abstract

The Khasis are one of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. The Khasi society prior to the colonial encounter was an oral society. They recorded events and captured the essence of their ideas by weaving them into stories. This gradually changed with the arrival of the missionaries in the Khasi hills. The introduction of the Roman script gave rise to a plethora of translated texts both vernacular and Christian in nature. Translation played a crucial role in the construction of public opinion and facilitation of cross cultural communication. The aim of this paper is to examine the pivotal role of translation as a tool of intellectual and cultural mediation in the Khasi Hills, analyzing how it shaped local consciousness and literary production during the late 19th to the early 20th century. By incorporating an array of theoretical perspectives from Itamar Even Zohar, Susan Bassnett, Tejaswini Niranjana, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha this paper will also focus on the politics of translation in the late 19th and early 20th century Khasi hills.

Keywords: *Translation, Colonialism, Khasi Culture, Cultural Mediation, Indian Literature*

The Khasi Hills, situated within the Northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, encompass a geographical expanse of 22,547 square kilometers and serve as the ancestral homeland of the Khasi people, one of Meghalaya's three principal tribal groups. The Khasis call themselves *Hynñiewtrep* as they believe that their ancestors were the seven clans or *Hynñiewtrep* who came down from heaven to reside on this earth. The term Khasi has a particular significance as 'Kha' means born of and 'Si' refers to an ancient mother and therefore Khasi means born of a mother (Bareh 10). Prior to the mid-19th century, Khasi cultural transmission relied predominantly on oral tradition. The arrival of Thomas Jones, a Welsh missionary, and the subsequent adoption of the Roman script in 1841, are conventionally recognized as pivotal events in the genesis of written Khasi literature. However, scholarly discourse acknowledges alternative perspectives, suggesting the potential existence of a pre-1841 Khasi script, thereby challenging the singular attribution of literary origins to the Roman script's introduction.

The formal adoption and implementation of the Roman script enabled the dissemination of literary texts throughout the Khasi hills. The early publications after this adoption of the Roman script were mainly translations from the Bible and other Christian writings which were predominantly projects undertaken by the missionaries. Translation has always played an important role in the building of the British Empire across its global colonies. This phenomenon was also mirrored in the Khasi Hills. Tejaswini Niranjana in her article "Translation, colonialism and the Rise of English" argues that translation participated in the fixing of colonized cultures,

making them seem static and unchanging (Niranjana 773). Employed in the different kinds of discourses like missionary writing, historiography or education it also produced strategies of containment by employing certain modes of representing the other (773). This framework can also be observed in the missionary translations of the late nineteenth century Khasi hills. The central argument of this paper is that translation played a crucial role in the construction of public opinion and facilitation of cross cultural communication. It aims to look at the role of translation as a tool of intellectual and cultural mediation in the Khasi Hills. This paper is divided into three sections to elucidate the argument: Translation and Education, Translation and Religion, Translation and Identity.

Translation and Education

As noted earlier, the transition from an exclusively oral tradition to a written literary corpus among the Khasi people commenced in 1841 with the introduction of the Roman script. The establishment of a printing press in Sohra by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission in 1861 further catalyzed this literary development, facilitating the production of both mission-related and governmental publications. While some of these publications were secular in nature others had mostly Christian values embedded in them. One of the leading missionary writers of the time was John Roberts. His books titled *Khasi Third Reader* (1891¹) and *Khasi Fourth Reader* (1895²) included translated excerpts from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Longfellow's poem "A Psalm of Life", Joseph Addison's "A Vision of Mirza". These narratives aimed to impart moral instruction to the Khasi children. By featuring Biblical characters like Moses, Adam and Abraham, Roberts wanted to instil in them theological concepts such as sin, heaven and salvation. Roberts believed in the missionary impulse therefore most of his books were included in the syllabus of the missionary schools. The inclusion of these books into the curriculum disturbed the Khasis. However, the precipitating factor that led to the intellectual strain between the Khasis and the missionaries was Dr Roberts speech at Oswestry (Wales) where he said (as printed in Britain's Anglo-Indian 50 years report of 1902), "We make no distinction between the day school and the Sunday school; the only difference is, seeing that our education is that of the nature I have pointed out, that we have a Sunday school, not on one day, but on seven days of the week" ("Skul ha" 3). This clearly showed the underlying principles of the missionaries who were mostly driven by the missionary impulse or the need to convert the natives. It was this desire for proselytization that led to the attempts of translating the Bible into Khasi language. These divergent perspectives led to a debate between the missionary educators and the Khasi intelligentsia. The missionaries justified the inclusion of these translated Christian texts citing their ubiquity while the Khasi intelligentsia advocated for Khasi-authored texts to promote indigenous cultural values among students thereby challenging the dominance of foreign cultural content ("Skul ha" 3).

These contrasting viewpoints led to the rise of many Khasi- authored texts in the Khasi hills. Translation became a site of negotiation and resistance for the Khasis (Bassnett and Trivedi 3). Along with various missionary activities in the late nineteenth century, this period also saw the emergence of the Khasi intelligentsia. The establishment of the Ri Khasi Printing press by Jeebon Roy in 1896 facilitated the printing of Khasi books and pamphlets that were secular in nature.

¹This book is probably written before 1895/1896 even though the exact year is not known.

² There is uncertainty in the year of publication of this book as some writers are of the opinion that it was written in 1896 and not 1895

Jeebon Roy, a learned Khasi writer, produced numerous translations and contributed to the documentation of Khasi religion. His notable works include *Ka Kitab Chaitanya* (1900), *Buddha Deb Charitra* (1901), and the *Hitupodesa* series (1899). Roy was a central figure in the Khasi cultural and religious revival, advocating for the preservation of indigenous traditions, as seen in *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1897). He also emphasized strengthening Khasi connections with the broader Indian community. The late nineteenth century witnessed a surge in publications by Khasi intellectuals, shifting the focus from foreign cultural content in missionary texts to indigenous Khasi values. Works like Jeebon Roy's *Ka Kot Pule Khasi* (1899), S.M. Amjad Ali's *Ka Myntoi* (1888), and Radhon Singh Berry's *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen I and II* (1902-1903) served to educate Khasi children about their own culture. These books bridged the gap between oral and written Khasi traditions, integrating informal and formal learning. Radhon Singh Berry's works, presented in oral forms, effectively combined indigenous and Western educational practices, serving as repositories of Khasi cultural knowledge.

Translation and Religion

The publications of the late nineteenth century also illuminated the divergent religious perspectives in the Khasi hills. While the Khasi people possessed an indigenous religious framework, colonizers and missionaries operated with contrasting, externally constructed definitions of 'religion.' P. R. T. Gurdon's *The Khasis* (1907), authored by a British administrator serving as Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam, illustrates this divergence. Gurdon described the religion of the Khasis as animism or evil worship. According to him, the Khasis did not believe in the concept of heaven or hell neither did they believe in punishment after death. Gurdon, in the preface, declares his intent to offer a systematic description of the Khasi people, covering their cultural practices, ethnological connections, legal systems, religious beliefs, folklore, origin stories, and language (Gurdon V). While the work provides significant anthropological and statistical information, the manner in which the Khasi people are presented warrants critical scrutiny.

Dr. John Roberts, a missionary, and Miss Williams, a church worker, contributed to the colonial construction of Khasi religious identity. In a sermon delivered at Oswestry, Wales, Dr. Roberts characterized the Khasis as lacking a developed conscience and possessing an impaired capacity for moral discernment. Similarly, Miss Williams employed the term 'heathen society' to critique Khasi social structures. Dr. Roberts' speech, which critiqued Khasi culture, provoked strong reactions from the Khasi intelligentsia. In response, they utilized the monthly newspapers *U Khasi Mynta* and *U Nongphira* to publish critical rebuttals, challenging Dr. Roberts' perceived disregard for Khasi cultural practices and beliefs.

The Khasi intelligentsia understood Dr. Roberts' and Miss Williams' portrayal as a product of Eurocentric perspectives. Their 'tribal' categorization reflects typical self-conscious missionary narratives, which positioned Europeans and natives along moral and colonial hierarchies. The emphasis on 'conscience' reveals a moralistic worldview. The Khasis need for constant rebuttal is indicative of colonial representational burdens. The stereotypical gaze of Dr. Roberts and Miss Williams, which suggested a Khasi 'lack,' reinforced the 'savagery-civilization' dichotomy. One of the Khasi writers who responded and challenged this Eurocentric view was Jeebon Roy. He wrote the book titled *Ka Kitab Ba Pynshynna Shaphang U Wei U Blei* (1900) for the Khasis, particularly members of the Seng Khasi, an organization dedicated to the preservation of the

indigenous Khasi religion. In his book, Roy argued that religious understanding and love for the creator are essential for spiritual development within the Khasi people. Jeebon Roy also authored *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1897), a work that elucidates the fundamental tenets of the Khasi religion. In addition to Roy's publications, numerous articles concerning Khasi religious practices were disseminated through the monthly newspapers *U Khasi Mynta* and *U Nongphira*. The publication of these religious articles contributed to the documentation of both Khasi religious practices and the broader Khasi culture.

Translation and Identity

Gurdon's text provides not only a description of Khasi religion but also a portrayal of their physical characteristics and social customs. A prominent feature of his narrative is an emphasis on cleanliness (Gurdon 6). He draws a stark contrast between converted Khasis, whom he characterizes as clean, and those who maintained indigenous practices. He further posits that converted women displayed improved attire and demeanor, while Christian villages exhibited superior housing (6). This delineation underscores Gurdon's role in establishing a social hierarchy based on religious conversion. J.B. Shadwell, in his note on the Khasis titled "The Inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1871" described the Khasis as a group of people who were filthy. According to him, they hardly washed themselves and were content with only a pair of clothing which they wore for an infinite number of times. He was also of the opinion that the Khasis liked drinking, were treacherous, revengeful and suspicious all the time. Dr. Roberts' statement, claiming the Khasis lacked a conscience, illustrates the colonial practice of dehumanizing the native people, effectively equating them with brutes and savages.

This discussion demonstrates a consistent objectification of the Khasis by colonial and missionary forces. This 'dehumanization' (Smith 39) forced the Khasis to constantly redefine their humanity against the implication of 'savagery' (Smith 25). Gurdon's perspective exemplifies Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, wherein the West justified its colonial expansion by asserting the need to 'civilize' the East, masking its imperial ambitions. Gurdon's and Miss Williams' viewpoints encapsulate the prevailing colonial ideology, which posited a hierarchical and supremacist relationship between colonizer and colonized (Kortright 4). This colonial conception of identity, rooted in the colonizer's homeland model, as demonstrated by Gurdon's administrative actions, constructs a binary opposition between the metropole and the Khasi Hills (Memmi 104). This extends beyond physical landscapes to encompass the imposition of English morals, customs, and lifestyles. Consequently, the colonized Khasis are depicted as 'wretched souls,' subject to a systemic devaluation that permeates all aspects of their existence (Memmi 111). Anthony P. Cohen (1993) identifies British cultural blindness, arguing that ignorance of culture is ignorance of integrity (199, 205). Gurdon's portrayal of Khasi culture exemplifies this prejudice. This aligns with the colonial refusal to acknowledge the colonized, as discussed by Albert Memmi, who highlights the denial of indigenous traditions and the colonizer's disavowal of their social integration.

Dr. Roberts' statements stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of the differing conceptions of God between Christianity and Khasi religion, a blindness shared by colonizers. Memmi argues that colonizers sought to rapidly transform the colonized, rejecting their existing cultures. This is evident in missionary-Khasi relations. Dr. Roberts' statements, portraying the Khasis as backward and lacking conscience, justified missionary intervention. Both the British

colonizers and missionaries failed to understand Khasi religion and culture, imposing Western religious paradigms. Christianity served as the norm, justifying a 'civilizing mission.' Gurdon's work, despite anthropological claims, reveals ethnocentric bias. Both Gurdon and Dr. Roberts defined Khasi religion through a Western lens, creating a binary between Christianity and indigenous practices. Drawing on Said, the colonizers stereotyped the Khasis, standardizing culture. Dr. Roberts' discourse exemplifies this superiority. As the Comaroffs (2009) argue, this involved colonizing consciousness, creating a boundary between colonizer and colonized.

The Khasis hence negotiated their identity through counter-writings, asserting their humanity against these colonial narratives. A comprehensive understanding of Khasi culture and Khasi identity necessitates an examination of its three foundational principles: *Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei* (knowledge of man and God), *Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha* (knowledge of one's kinsmen), and *Ka Kamai ia ka hok* (earning righteousness on earth). Amjad Ali's *Ka Myntoi* (1888) features poetry on life, knowledge, and truth, including works dedicated to Khasi dance festivals and the Khasi people. The poem "Synshar 'Riw Khasi'" is significant for its call to courage and the pursuit of knowledge as essential for a modern society. Moreover, it addresses socio-political concerns, urging the Khasis to liberate themselves from a form of oppression through divine assistance, knowledge, and education. The monthly Khasi newspapers, Jeebon Roy's texts along with Radhon Singh Berry's *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen I* (1902) and *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen II* (1903) collectively address themes of Khasi identity and belief systems.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrates the dual nature of translation as a tool of colonial power and a catalyst for indigenous cultural expression. While translation was employed to spread colonial ideology, manipulate information, and suppress local languages and cultures, it also facilitated the documentation and reclamation of Khasi cultural heritage. The late nineteenth-century Khasi Hills witnessed a significant power shift in literary production, revealing the intricate politics of translation. The missionaries' monopolization of biblical translations fostered discontent among the Khasis, whose subsequent counter-narratives and cultural documentation enriched Khasi literature. Thus, translation profoundly shaped the political, religious, and cultural narratives of the Khasi people.

References

- Ali, S.M. Amjad. *Ka Myntoi*. Baptist Mission Press, 1888.
- Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-Colonial Transformation*. Routledge, 2001.
- . *The Empire Writes Back Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge, 2004.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, editors. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1995.
- Berry, Radhon Singh. *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen Shaphang Ka Akor Khasi Ha Ka Rukom Rwai Phawar Part I*. 1902. Ri Khasi Press, 2012.
- . *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen Shaphang Ka Akor Khasi Ha Ka Rukom Rwai Phawar Part II*. 1903. Ri Khasi Press, 1997.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond "identity"." *Theory and society*, vol. 29, no.1, 2000, pp. 1-47.
- Cohen, Anthony P. "Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's view." *New Literary History*, vol. 24, no.1, 1993, pp.195-209.

- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. *Of revelation and revolution, volume 1: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa*. Vol. 1. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- . *Of revelation and revolution, Volume 2: The dialectics of modernity on a South African frontier*. Vol. 2. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Gurdon, P.R.T. *The Khasis*. 1903. Akansha Publishing House, 2012.
- Grierson, George. "The Khasis." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1907, pp. 700-706.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural identity and diaspora." *Diaspora and visual culture*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, 2000, pp. 21-34.
- "Ka Jingiatai ia – Ka Ethnographical Brief Note – Ka Jingthoh Lyngkot (U Major Gurdon) shaphang ka Jaidbynrieu." *U Nongphira*, July 1904, pp. 95-96.
- "Ka Jingiatai ia – Ka Ethnographical Brief Note – Ka Jingthoh Lyngkot (U Major Gurdon) shaphang ka Jaidbynrieu." *U Nongphira*, August 1904, pp. 103-105.
- "Ka jingkyonoh khlem ai nia ne da tip ei ei ka Report 50 snem ki Bilatti-ri-India (Anglo-Indian) ia ki Khasi." *U Nongphira*, February 1904, pp. 25-28.
- "Ka Ri Khasi Bad Ri Synteng Bad Ka Church Of England." *U Khasi Mynta*, 1 July 1901, p. 3.
- "Ka Seng Khasi." *U Khasi Mynta*, 1 January 1901, pp. 4-5.
- "Ki Skul ha Ri Khasi." *U Khasi Mynta*, June 1904, pp.3-4.
- Kortright, Chris. "Colonization and Identity." 2014.
- Lyngdoh, Myngngorsing L. "Ka Kam Pynthoh Kurim Hapdeng Ki Kristan Khasi." *U Khasi Mynta*, November 1904, p. 5.
- "Matibadam." *U Khasi Mynta*, 1 October 1900, p. 3.
- Memmi, Albert. *The colonizer and the colonized*. Earth scan Publications, 2003.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. "Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 15, 1990, pp.773-779.
- Roberts, John. *Khasi Second Reader*. The Welsh Mission,
- . *Khasi Third Reader*. The Welsh Mission, 1953.
- . *Khasi Fourth Reader*. 1895. Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod, 1995.
- Roberts, John. "Ki Khasi Bad Ka Church of England." *U Khasi Mynta*, January 1902, pp. 8-10.
- Roy, Jeebon. *Ka Kitab Ba Batai Pynshynna Shaphang U Wei U Blei*. 1900. Ri Khasi Press, 1979.
- . *Ka Kot Pule Khasi*. 1899. Ri Khasi Press, 1990.
- . *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi*. 1897. Ri Khasi Press, 2009.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 2003.
- Shadwell, J.B. "The Inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1871." CONYNHHAM, 1900.
- Shilee, Shubhra, and Shubhra Shailee. "Indigenous Identity of Tribals in Jharkhand." *Indian Anthropologist*, vol. 32, no. ½, 2002, pp. 75-86.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*. University of Otago Press, 1999.
- Stephens, C.L. "Ha U Editor U Khasi Mynta." *U Khasi Mynta*, August 1901, p. 1.
- Syiem, Esther. *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative*. EBH Publishers, 2011.
- Tedla, Elleni. "Indigenous African Education as a Means for Understanding the Fullness of Life: Amara Traditional Education." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1992, pp. 7-26.
- "The Khasi and Jaintia Hill Tribes and the Church of England." *The Harvest Field*, Jan-Dec. 1901, p. 194-195.
- "U Jisu Krist Bad ki Khasi Kylla." *U Nongphira*, September 1905, p. 87.
- U Khasi Mynta*, August 1902, pp. 4-6.
- U Khasi Mynta*, August 1902, p. 8.
- U Khasi Mynta*, July 1903, pp. 3-4.
- U Khasi Mynta*, September 1903, pp. 4-5.
- Vishwanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. Faber and Faber, 1990.
- Williams, Emma. *U Khasi Mynta*, August 1902, pp. 3-4.

Author Bio:

Dr. Hakani S.P. Laloo (Ph.D., University of Hyderabad) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Shillong College, Shillong. Her research areas include Northeast Indian Literary History (Late 19th and Early 20th Century), Indigenous Print Cultures, and Film Adaptation Studies, with a specific theoretical focus on decoloniality and intersemiotic Translation in Khasi cultural narratives. Her publications focus on Khasi literature from its roots in oral folklore and early writings to contemporary cinema.