

LAW LYNGDOH (SACRED GROVE) AT MAWPHLANG, MEGHALAYA

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ABSTRACT

The MAWPHLANG Sacred Grove, like all sacred groves in Ri Hynniewtrep (Khasi & Jaintia) has existed since time immemorial. There is no greater gift of nature to humanity, than the forest wealth, the flora and fauna, their richness and pristine glory which is still being preserved in these sacred groves. The Mawphlang sacred grove, near Shillong, had existed since the time when the administrative state of Hima Mawphlang was formed, by the twelve clans (Khadar Kur), who were the descendants of **Ka Mei Kmah**, the ancestress, who is still revered till today in the annual religious ceremony of the twelve clans, usually held atop a hillock called Lum Ryngkew Mawlong. The stone relics commemorating the memory of **Ka Mei Kmah**, are to be found near the sacred grove. Similarly, the ancient nature of the sacred grove in other parts of Khasi Hills is emphasised by the outlying numerous tall monoliths erected in memory of the departed Khasi elders. The sacred groves of the Khasi Hills are a typical example of ecosystem conservation comparable with the UNESCO's (MAB) Biosphere Reserve Programme. The Khasis maintain sacred groves in many places. They believe that their *Sylvan deities* live inside the sacred groves and they offer sacrifices to please these deities. It is a sang or taboo for a Khasi to cut any plant or kill animals inside the forests. They believe that the *Sylvan deities* would be offended if any one causes any damage to the plants and animals. Even the fallen branches and fruits are not collected from the forests for firewood or for consumption. In Mawphlang sacred grove, the **Kur lang Blah** clan have been vested with the duties of performing religious rites called **Knia Kynthong**. Such forests are protected by religious sanctions and are guarded by spiritual guardians known as **Ki Ryngkew ki Basa**.

The Mawphlang sacred grove has an amazing life form and it is an island of **Bio-diversity**. The grove can serve as a gene bank to the ecosystem and it is a natural living laboratory. The grove can also generate eco-tourism and environmental education. It is above all a temple of nature to instill the present generation to preserve the rich heritage for posterity. More than a century ago the celebrated English Botanist **Sir J.D. Hooker** who visited the grove had commented on the unusual wealth of species present here. Much later another English Botanist (and a forest officer) **Dr N.L. Bor** studied this and two other sacred groves including that of Shillong peak, and had pleaded for the preservation of these groves in an undisturbed condition, for all to enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the primeval forest.

INTRODUCTION

Mawphlang with its nearby sacred grove lies about 25 km south-east of Shillong and is easily approached by a black-topped road which winds its way through a picturesque landscape of scattered little hamlets and paddy fields in the narrow valleys. The sacred grove occupies the basin of a saucer-shaped depression with the hills slopping all around. A bird's eye view of the entire grove, can be obtained from the approach point along the footpath leading from the village, down to the meandering stream that winds its way into the forest. The vegetation composing this sacred grove is very different from that of the surrounding areas, which are marked by the dominating Khasi pine or **Pinus kesiya**. The dominant trees inside the forests are **Rhododendron arboreum**, **Pyrus pashia**, **Schima khasiana**, **Camellia caduca**, **Myrica esculenta**, **Quercus griffithii**, **Castanopsis kurzii**, etc. The shrub layer is represented by **Berberis wallichiana**, **Mahonia pycnophylla**, **Lyonia ovalifolia**, **Agapetes obovata**, **Sarcandra glabra**, **Daphne bhalua**, **Sarcococca saligna**, **Osbeckia stellata** etc. The trunks and branches of the trees and shrubs are loaded with many ferns, orchids, lichens and mosses and other epiphytes. The common ferns are **Dicranopteris linearis**, **Mecodium javanicum**, **Dryopteris paleacea**, **Lindsaea cultrata**, **Polypodium** spp., **Lycopodium** spp. etc.

The panorama keeps changing with the seasons, and has its attractive features during each season. During spring, in the months of March, April and early May, the entire area is gay with sprinkled bushes of **Rhododendron formosum** all densely covered with large white blooms, and the more flamboyant tree species **Rhododendron arboreum**, many individuals dwarfish and gnarled, and all with globose trusses of fiery red flowers standing out amidst the dark green foliage. Another outstanding tree is **Pyrus pashia** fully enveloped in white blossoms, the young leaves slowly sprouting after the shedding of the flowers. In the fields, amidst grass and scattered little tufts of the tiny herb **Gentiana quadrifaria**, which with their star-like azure-blue flowers attract the eye. More prominent due to their long stalks and golden yellow flower heads are the dandelion-like **Hypochaeris radicata**. The sloping ground is rocky and lateritic with short, much-grazed grass and patches of darker green herbaceous growth of **Swertia** with star-like flowers, **Anemone** with white flowers and smaller herbs of interest like the bladderwort **Utricularia bifida** with yellow flowers and the sundew or **Drosera peltata** with interspersed clumps of sedges and short grass. **Osbeckia crinita** a low undershrub is also prominent due to its foliage marked with 3 equally emphatic nerves and the deep pink-

violet flowers with the contrasting yellow sickle-shaped anthers on short stalks. Here and there can be seen patches of the prostrate Rosaceae plant **Potentilla polyphylla** with yellow flowers.

The Sacred grove is also in sharp contrast to the surrounding low grassland. It is rimmed by a dense growth of **Castanopsis kurzii** trees as if forming a protective hedge, halting the intrusion of the pine, which is present here and there at the edge of the slope. Amongst these trees, with their somewhat glaucous foliage, are scattered trees of **Quercus griffithii**. Only after getting into the forest and walking about on the soft cushion of accumulated humus and looking around, one can see that what appeared at first sight to be a somewhat uniform greenery only, is really composed of many species with much varied foliage and floral display. There are some very ancient, large **Rhododendron arborea** ablaze with their scarlet bouquets of large flowers. Scattered and more modest are the white-flowered shrubs of **Rhododendron formosum**. There are gregarious shrubs of **Daphne cannabina** with sweet smelling white to pinkish flowers. Again white flowered, shrubs to trees of **Symplocos chinensis** easily recognised by their toothed, rough leaves and the much-twisted and grooved branches and trunks. Amongst other trees that can be easily spotted are **Exbucklandia populnea** with heart-shaped leaves and large ovate hoodlike stipules, **Engelhardtia spicata** with bunches of pendant 3-winged fruits and **Elaeocarpus lancifolius** with very young and very old leaves scarlet amidst a generally glossy green foliage of lanceolate leaves. The trees are heavily loaded with epiphytic growth of aroids, pipers, ferns, fern-allies and Orchids. Some of the branches are bent under the pressure of this accumulated epiphytic growth, and often parts of these fallen on the forest floor, and there itself forming a small colony of their own. The most conspicuous of these are the variedly fancy-leaved ferns, and the easily recognised and quite ornamental orchids. In October, the pink coloured large flowers of **Pleione praecox**, solitary or in clumps attract attention, as also the large dangling clumps of semiopen white to cream-coloured flowers of **Cymbidium elegans** from clumps of dense strap shaped leaves and stout rhizomes, tantalizingly perched on top branches of trees. There are also numerous other 'botanical' orchids with small flowers like species of **Oberonia**, **Otochilus**, and **Eria**. Sometimes the long pendant spikes of medium sized white flowers of a **Pholidota** may also catch the eye. On the ground itself, in some shady moist places, one may find the rare jewel orchids **Anoetochilus** with intricate variegated patterns on the leaf (the leaves being ornamental and not the flower) and the close relations of the jewel orchids - **Zeuxine** and **Goodyera**. Occasionally the saprophytic orchid - **Epipogium roseum** can also be seen, in groups of 4 to 8 white sickly looking stems producing white to pink flowers on a long stalk. These are short-lived and sprout up on decaying humus. It is also possible to occasionally discover here another rare flowering plant **Monotropa uniflora** growing in dark moist habitats, very much like that of the orchid **Epipogium**. While one is looking around on the forest floor, depending upon the season, one may stumble upon different kinds of fleshy fungi like **Scleroderma** and **Geaster** or the Earth-star, **Lycoperdon** or the puff balls, **Clavaria** or the coral-fungus, **Dictyophora** or the lacefungus, **Clathrus** or the cage-fungus, **Morchella** or the edible morel or rarely on pieces of decaying wood **Nidularia** or the bird's nest fungus. The most common of the fleshy fungi are **Polyporus** or the bracket fungi responsible for the death of old trees, **Agaricus** or the mushroom forming fairy rings on the forest floor. A touch of beauty can also be seen in the overhanging or sometimes clasping grey-green to ash-brown layers of lichens often a very neglected element in any flora but certainly attention not only as a hardy element in the flora but also for their picturesqueness. It can be appreciated after a second look by the density and pattern of their covering on long neglected rocks or tree-stems or even old stems and branches they add an atmosphere to the ancient nature of these woods. Some of them, which could be recognised even by layman with a little efforts, are fruticose lichens like **Usnea** with long creeping string like thallus freely branching and often ending in flat disc like fertile tips-foliose lichens with leaf-like, lobed to deeply incised thallus, like **Parmelia** with variously sized patches each dotted with large pin-head like fertile points. Another attractive group of plants that would strike the eye, notwithstanding their perpetual greenness is the ferns. The ferns compensate their lack of different colours by the grateful beauty of their young fronds, in various stages of uncoiling and by their infinite variety of lobes of the mature fern leaves and often with the various coloured and textured silky covering of the rhizome and other parts. The pattern of the fertile spots or sori, on the back surface is also greatly varied as also their protective flaps or indusia and helps in distinguishing the different kinds. The most common one is the scented fern used by the Khasi for keeping their wardrobe fresh - **Lindsaea odorata**. Another conspicuous fern is the silver-fern with its back full of silvery scales. The frond leaving a fine pattern of itself, if pressed on the back of one's hand. Other conspicuous ferns are **Botrychium**, **Peranema**, **Dryopteris**, **Polypodium** etc.

The **Mawphlang** sacred grove is saved from biotic factors like fire, grazing, lopping, felling etc., because of the customs connected with the worship of Sylvan deities. It helps in the preservation of many rare plants

like *Taxus baccata* with its two ranked flat leaves and solitary seed, borne in cup-like fleshy aril; *Botrychium lanuginosum* with grape-like globose sori; *Helicia nilagirica*, the only wild species of the family Proteaceae available in India; *Gnetum scandens*, climbing gymnosperm with broad leaves and pendant fruits; *Rauvolfia densiflora* with white flowers; and the endangered plant like *Anoetochilus sikkimensis*, a ground orchid with variegated leaves. The primitive plants like *Exbucklandia populnea* with heart-shaped leaves and large ovate hood-like stipules; *Corylopsis himalayana* with golden yellow drooping catkinlike spikes and *Manglietia insignis* with large white flowers are common in the sacred groves. Saprophytic plants like *Epipogon roseum* with pinkish white flowers; parasitic plants like *Balanophora dioica* with cone-like inflorescence; *Monotropa uniflora* with bluish-white solitary nodding flowers, *Mitrastemon yamamonti* with cup-shaped capsules are also preserved in these natural habitats.

The Khasis (Khasi Hills) and Pnars (Jaintia Hills) tribes of the state of Meghalaya have a tradition that they are the descendants of **Ki Hynniew Trep** (The Seven Huts or Families) sent down by God in the beginning of Time to settle on these hills which have become their homeland since then, and have been called Khasi and Jaintia Hills after their occupation by the British, but which they themselves, call **Ka Bri U Hynniew Trep** (The Home of Hynniew Trep) and also **Ka Ri Laiphew Syiem Ka Ri Khadar Dalois** (The Country of Thirty Syiems and Twelve Dalois). The political system of the Khasi-Pnar is purely democratic. The Syiems and Dalois are nominal heads over their respective jurisdiction. The land, being God-given, belongs to the people. The Chieftains act as instruments to carry out the common will of the people expressed in councils or **dorbars** of elders presided over by the Chieftain for running the day to day administration. The ultimate authority is vested with the General Council or **Dorbar Hima** which every adult male member of the territorial unit under the headship of a chieftain has a right to attend and be heard, but the decision is invariably by consensus, not by counting of votes. The principle on which our ancestors, **Ki Hynniew Trep**, based our land tenure system was that no descendants of theirs should be landless in their own homeland. And so they formulated a system comprising of two main classes of land known generally as (1) **Ri Kynti** and (2) **Ri Raij** (also spelt **Rajd**).

1. **Ri Kynti** lands are those reserved from the time of the founding of a **Hima** (an independent territorial unit of the country) for certain clans upon whom the proprietary, heritable and transferable rights were vested. They are known by different names as **Ri Kur**, **Ri Nongtymmen**, **Ri Seng**, **Ri Khurid** etc.
2. **Ri Raij** lands are community lands comprising of the rest of the territory for the growing population and new settlers. Each family can occupy only so much of this land as it can itself put to use for house and home and cultivation. No one can occupy more than what one can oneself put to use for one's need. A **Ri Raij** property, occupied by any one, if abandoned or left unused for three consecutive years, reverts back to the community for any other family within the **Raij**, a part of the **Hima** having the management and control of the land by customary **chief-in-durbar**. Persons or family occupying **Ri Raij** lands have no rights over them excepting upon the improvements made upon them of which they could not be deprived without due compensation for the same. Such improvements are in the nature of permanent buildings, cultivations like wet paddy fields, permanent plantations like orange orchards, forests like pine groves etc., **Ri Raij** lands are also known by different names, like **Ri Shnong**, **Ri Bamlang**, **Ri Lynter**, etc. with the passage of time, proprietary, heritable and transferable rights have accrued upon **Ri Raij** lands where occupiers have made permanent improvements.

In the light of the foregoing outline of our tradition let us take a close look at the different classes of forests constituted by our ancestors from time immemorial. They had the vision to foresee that with the march of time population would grow and so would proportionately increase the essential need of men for timber and fuel. There must, therefore, be always sufficient green cover of trees for mother earth to maintain the balance of nature in order to provide man with his vital necessities for maintaining life - not only wood for building and domestic use but also for pure air and water. Accordingly they constituted forests known to this day as **Law Kyntang**, **Law Lyngdoh**, **Law Niam**, **Law Adong**, **Law Sang**, **Law Shnong**, **Law Ri Sumar**, and **Law Kynti**.

Law Kyntang (Sacred Forests), **Law Lyngdoh** (Priestly Forests) and **Law Niam** (Religious Forests) are forests constituted in **Ri Raij** lands set apart for certain uses connected with religious ceremonies of **Hima** (State), a **Raij** (a group of villages forming a district unit of the **Hima**) or **Shnong** (Village) forming a distinct part of the **Raij** within their respective jurisdiction assigned when they were originally constituted. These forests are in the nature of the Government Reserve Forests and Game Sanctuaries we know today. The power over these forests and responsibilities for their maintenance vest in the **Syiem**, **Lyngdoh**, **Daloi** or **Sordar** acting in **dorbar** (Council) within whose jurisdiction they situate according to the distribution of such

powers and responsibilities made when they were originally constituted. The felling of any tree or cutting of any branch of it is strictly prohibited; so also is the killing of any bird or beast. The felling of any tree or cutting of any branch of it and its removal from the forest is permissible only with the previous order of the **Syiem, Lyngdoh, Daloi** or **Sordar** or **Rangbah Shnong** acting in **dorbar** as is customary when the **dorbar** is satisfied that the tree is needed for certain religious functions connected with the **Hima, Raij** or **Shnong** as the case may be. In the old days the orders of the **Syiem, Lyngdoh, Daloi, Sordar** or **Rangbah Shnong** as instruments to carry out the common will of the people based on their democratic system of Government were religiously obeyed. People were also God-fearing and were by natural disposition dismayed to displeasing God by any violation of the sanctity of those orders. And so these forests have been standing sentinel of the land for ages.

Law Adong (Protected Forests) **Law Sang** (Prohibited Forests) and **Law Shnong** (Village Forests) are forests constituted in **Ri Raij** lands for the use of the community within the **Hima, Raij** or **Shnong** as may be permitted by the **Syiem, Lyngdoh, Daloi, Sordar** or **Rangbah Shnong** upon whom powers and responsibilities for their control and maintenance were vested from the beginning. Permission to fell and/or remove trees or their branches from **Law Adong** and **Law Sang** is given only in cases where a family falls on evil days deserving the help of the community to rebuild their house or meet some other calamity. The felling and removal of trees from **Law Shnong** is given to every family in the village occasionally for fire wood, and to individual families should a necessary arise. But permission is given only under orders of the Headman acting in **dorbar**. The orders are obeyed by virtue of the common will of the people for the common good of the community. The democratic system of governance of a **Hima, Raij** or **Shnong** depends solely on the will of the people as the system does not provide for the establishment of a law enforcing machinery, like soldiers or policemen.

Law Sumar or privately owned forests in **Ri Raij** lands. They belong to an individual, family, clan or community constituting and maintaining them; and accordingly have proprietary, heritable and transferable rights over them similar to those over the **Ri Raij** lands occupied for homesteads etc. **Law Kynti** are privately owned forests of the clan owning the **Ri Kynti** land where the forest stands. They are also owned by individual families or members of the clan in cases where the heads of the clan have allotted different lots to the separate families or members of the clan.

Till fifty years or so ago, it could very well be said that people in general had profound regard for old values, great respect for law and order, deep reverence for customs and usages. Of course the influence of the administrators and, regrettably enough, that of the missionaries too, had eroded or warped such of the admirable customs and usages of the people as made them a strong and virile nation, and simple believers in their faith in the mysterious power of divine commands that evil would befall him or her, or their beloved ones, kith and kin, the community itself if they violate such commands; for example, the sanctity of Sacred forests, Sacred pools, etc. wherever the lie of the land is such that a mountain range is the source of streams and rivulets near which they could settle or there were already settlements, Sacred or Religious Forests were constituted to be sources for supply of good, clean, pure drinking water and pure air for the people.

The world's limited natural resources are undergoing certain changes due to man's tendency to exploit them to meet his ever-expanding necessities, and if proper measures are not taken to stabilise human population, the ecological balance will be lost. Hence the great danger staring us in the face now in this connection is that unless we turn to that wisdom, vision and foresight of our ancestors about the preservation of ecology and environment, it will not take long for our beautiful land to become a desert. Our Khasi ancestors were divinely inspired to know that no trees can be without land nor life can remain without trees. And so they began with laying down the system of their land tenure, our wonderful heritage the height and depth of its meaning we seem presently to have ignored.

Our Khasi ancestors were unlettered people and so had we remained till the advent of the Missionaries of the Welsh Methodists' Foreign Mission to our Khasi land in the 1840 when **Rev. Thomas Jones** and his young wife was the first Welsh Missionary to come. He sailed from Liverpool on 25.11.1840 and landed in Sohra (Cherrapunji) on 22.6.1841. **Rev. Thomas Jones** mastered Sohra dialect within six months and adapted the Roman script for use as Khasi alphabets to enable the Khasi people to write and read and for Christianising them by establishing schools adapting the Roman alphabets. It was the devotion of the missionaries to their avowed calling to Christianise what they called the pagan world supplemented admirably by their dedication to the work of spreading literacy among the people as a means towards that end which accounted for the fact that barely within a span of one hundred fifty years Christianity has become the major

religion among the hill people of North East India. And this, as they say is because the field is favourable since the hill people are by nature well-disposed and friendly, and their religion is one of tolerance; especially among us the Khasi-Pnars whose very social custom is one where there is no prejudice whatsoever against any creed, caste or sex. Nevertheless the British who completed the conquest and occupation of our land were pleased to describe the Khasi people as savages and blood-thirsty barbarians and they looked down upon as inferior in every respect. This was the impression they had and which guided them in their dealings with the people in the earlier days. It was also in pursuit of their imperialist policy to strengthen their rule, religion and reign over the conquered people by making them lose faith in themselves and in their belief in the beauty, truth and strength of their own culture, customs and traditions.

Not long after independence, with so many concessions and all sorts of preferential treatment as Tribals extended to the people by the Government of India to promote and accelerate their progress and religion having been left severely alone by the British, the spread of education, not only of the elementary and secondary but also of their higher type in the universities, not of humanities only but of science and technology also to broaden their outlook, a change began to enter into their attitude towards life, from the even tenor they were used to from generation to generation, but still bred into them growing disrespect for the sanctity of Sacred forests, etc. as mere superstitions of the benighted, unlettered people and also instilled a kind of disregard for the powers of the traditional and customary Heads acting in council or **dorbar** as ordained by their ancient institutions of indigenous democratic form of government because of certain laxity in Government control itself. This results in what we see today right before our eyes the fast vanishing of forests in other adjoining areas of Mawphlang sacred grove.

There are many sacred groves in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya. The sacred groves at Mawphlang (**Law Lyngdoh**) and that near the Sohra rim village, are still preserved in a comparatively undisturbed condition. The groves near Shillong peak and Mawsmal village are quite disturbed due to biotic factors. These groves are situated in the folds on the hill-slopes and are surrounded by grasslands or pines, while in Mawphlang the vegetation of the **Law Lyngdoh** Sacred grove till date is subjected only to climatic factors. The biotic factors are excluded. Similarly is the case with biotically undisturbed Raliang sacred grove, Jaintia hills, Meghalaya.

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View of "Law Lyngdoh" sacred grove at Mawphlang



Figure-1

A Group of Monoliths in front of the sacred grove



Figure - 2

An open ground for Religious dance and offering sacrifices encircled by the Monoliths (front view)



Figure – 3

Ibid of same (back view) – the "Religious ground"



Figure – 4

View of Sir David Scott's (Who vs. Khasis under Tirot Singh Syiem) road thro which Sir J. D. Hooker visited the sacred grove, short-cut via Cherrapunjee and Dawki up to Sylhet in Bangladesh



Figure – 5

View of indigenous resting place of stones (Kh. – 'Kor') by the side of the Sir David Scott's road



Figure – 6