

Indigenous Futurity in the Living Root Bridges of the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills of India: A Documentary Essay

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Abstract

The Living Root Bridges found in the southern valleys of the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills of Meghalaya, India, attract tourists from all over the world to admire nature's extravagance. Apart from the attraction of these natural entities, the underlying values and principles that nature has to offer lays out a comprehensive understanding of an Indigenous futurism in the mountainous landscape of this wet tropical region. This paper is based on the documentary film *Ki Thied Ka Lawei* (Roots of Sustainability), directed by the author. The documentary depicts the ongoing practice of constructing and reconstructing a bamboo bridge in the village of Shiliang Jashar yearly since 1988. The bamboo bridge is used by locals to commute over the Wah Jashar river, and simultaneously acts as a scaffold for the formation of a living root bridge into the future. Another semi-formed root bridge in a neighbouring village of Mawkyrnot, gives a clear insight into the growth of these root bridge formations. This essay exhibits stills from the documentary and describes and analyses the ensuing bridge-making, rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems of nature-culture relationality passed on by the Khasi ancestors in an act of Indigenous futurity.

Keywords: living root bridges, Indigenous Futurity, Khasi-Jaiñtia, Indigenous Indian community, tropical sustainability, film documentary

Introduction

The title of the documentary film, *Ki Thied Ka Lawei*, refers to the roots of a future. It exhibits the ongoing practice of constructing and reconstructing an arched bridge made out of bamboo materials and local trees at Wah¹ Jashar, a river in the village of Shiliang Jashar, East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya, India. The film captures this task that the local community diligently and ethically adheres to. The yearly bridge making encapsulates a responsibility which will eventually culminate in the growth of a living root bridge. This practice was passed on by the Khasi ancestors for futurity. The bamboo-bridge which is used to commute across the river also acts as a scaffold for the aerial roots of the fig tree² to be woven into a root bridge. Thus, the film, which focuses on the construction of the bamboo-bridge at Shiliang Jashar, provides a glimpse into the formation of the living root bridges found across the southern valleys. These southern valleys of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills are known locally as the War region and the people, who are referred to as the War(s),³ are part of the Khasi Indigenous tribal group. This essay, through documentary still images, description, and analysis argues that the building of the bamboo bridges which facilitate the eventual growth of living root bridges are a form of Indigenous futurity.

The Khasi Indigenous tribe inhabit the eastern half of the state of Meghalaya in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Rich in biodiversity with a rugged landscape, these hills and valleys are the wettest region on earth and home to Mawsynram, the wettest place on earth. Coupled with a mountainous terrain of cascading waterfalls, precipices, escarpments, and raging waters, landslides along the banks of the rivers pose a danger during the annual monsoon period which usually occurs from the month of April through to October. The challenges of the terrain have rendered the War people, in a custom handed down from their ancestors, to grow the root bridges⁴ over streams and rivers. Within this challenging topography, the living root bridges provide strength and durability to the terrain.

“Naei phi ioh ia ka lawei?”

—Ka mynta ka thaw ia ka lawei”.

—Late (L) Jerin Sawian (2016, personal communication)

¹ Wah means river

² ficus elastica

³ I will be using the terms War and Wars interchangeably in this paper to refer to the region and the people of the area in general.

⁴ Used interchangeably with living root bridges in this paper.

The documentary film begins with the quotation above by (L) Jerin Sawian, an elder of the Khasi community from Sohra township of East Khasi Hills District. The quotation in translation reads, "Where is the future? The present begets and creates the future". (L) Jerin Sawian's words convey a view of a future embraced by the actions of the present. For the Khasis, the idea of a past is encapsulated in the actions of the present, through the knowledge learnt and derived from the ancestors. Since time immemorial, the Khasi ancestors through the formation of living root bridges, have passed on their knowledge. Wiak Khongtiang, from Shiliang Jashar, is an elder being interviewed in the documentary film who emphasises that the community has followed what the ancestors have taught. This notion of the present enfolding the past and the future is metaphorically understood in the creation story of the Khasis. In the story, the Creator sent *Ki Khun U Hynñiew-trep Hynñiew-skum*⁵ to descend to earth via *Ka Jingkieng Ksiar* [a golden ladder] from *Ki Khadhynriew-trep Ki Khadhynriew-skum*⁶, leaving *Ki Khyndai-trep Khyndai-skum*⁷ above and *Ki Khun U Hynñiew-trep Hynñiew-skum* below. *Ki Hynñiew-trep Hynñiew-skum* is metaphorically synonymous with humans and *Ki Khyndai-trep Khyndai-skum* refers to the ancestors, the divine. *Ki Hynñiew-trep Hynñiew-skum* descended when *Ka Jingkieng Ksiar* was severed or snapped by the Creator. This happened at U Lum Sohpet-bneng, a hill in East Khasi Hills. As Khongjee (2024) elucidates:

Ka Jingkieng Ksiar [the legend of the golden ladder]...reminds [us] of the consummation of the cosmic/divine plan for the continuation of [the] life cycle. If the mother carries the young forever, the whole design would have been defeated; the cosmic consciousness (God, or other names of God) wouldn't allow that. *Sohpet bneng-Sohpet Blei* (divine navel); *Sohpet* (the navel) connecting the mother and the young.

Sohpet-bneng is also referred to as *sohpet-blei*—the umbilical cord of the mother to child at birth. By divine sanction, the umbilical cord at birth must be severed for the offspring to survive. In the worldview of the Khasis, the creation of humans is an ongoing phenomenon which is referred to through the birth of a child. The creation story for the Khasis is a metaphor where creation is continuity, an Indigenous futurity rooted in the present. The term *ka lawei*, which forms a part of the title of the documentary, is thus profound. It portrays the future generations, that which is to come. An analysis of the relevant aspects of the Khasi community and their worldview concerning the root bridges in the film *Ki Thied Ka Lawei* simultaneously documents this future-making and lays out a comprehensive understanding of an Indigenous

⁵ literally means the seven huts

⁶ literally means the sixteen huts

⁷ nine huts

futurism. Grace Dillon first coined the term Indigenous futurisms in 2003, seeking to describe a movement of art, literature, games, and other forms of media which express Indigenous perspectives on the future, present, and past by recovering ancestral traditions (Vowel, 2022). *Ki Thied Ka Lawei* thus is conceptualised within a worldview of the Khasis, where the bamboo bridge being built and rebuilt every year at Shiliang Jashar exhibits an embodiment of ‘what was’ and ‘what is to come’, viewed through a phenomenon popularly known as living root bridges or *Ki Jingkieng Jri* amongst the Indigenous Khasis.⁸

Figure 1. Fig tree (*ficus elastica*)



Aerial roots of fig trees

Bamboo-Bridge as a Scaffold

In Shiliang Jashar village, which is about 61 km from the capital city of Shillong, Meghalaya, the bamboo bridge has been built and rebuilt every year since 1988. It conveys an ongoing practice of tropical futurism where specific types of bamboo, along with a few species of trees, are used to build the bridge before the onset of the monsoon. With a representative from each household of the village, the community fixes a particular day to carry out this annual task.

⁸ A literary form of Indigenous futuring can be found in the recent re-articulation of local legends as exemplified through the short stories of Khasi author Janice Pariat, which explore ancestral animist philosophy. See Swaraj and Mishra (2023).

Figure 2. Bamboo bridge construction by the inhabitants of Shiliang Jashar village



Construction of bamboo bridge

The different types of bamboo used in the bridge are *u ñiai*, *u skong* and *u skhen*—as they are known locally. *U ñiai* is used to build the deck of the bamboo-bridge *u thri* is carved out from *u ñiai* to be used as ropes.

Figure 3. *U ñiai*



Deck of the bamboo bridge using bamboo ties

Figure 4. *U thri*



Strips of bamboo used as ropes

U skhen as a fencing on the deck of the bridge. *U skong* is a bigger species of bamboo used as suspensions to structurally hold the deck of the bridge.

Figure 5. *U skhen*



'u skhen' is used for fencing.

Fencing on the deck

Figure 6. *U skong*



Suspensions to hold the deck of the bridge

These suspensions are held by an anchor in the branches of trees on both sides of the river bank. The anchors are called *u bniah*. Together with the suspensions called *u skong*, they prevent the deck from collapsing when faced with monsoon storms and strong winds.

Figure 7. *U bniah*



Anchors

For the foundations or pillars supporting the deck of the bamboo bridge, the trunks of the various types of trees known locally as *u dieng sohum*, *u 'tiew diengngai*, *u dieng shyrngan* or *u dieng sohphan* are used. It takes decades for the aerial roots of fig trees to grow and spread across the river. For this reason, to ensure availability of the resources required for the annual construction of the bamboo bridge, these bamboos and trees are specifically planted, grown and preserved by the community.

Figure 8. *U dieng sohum*

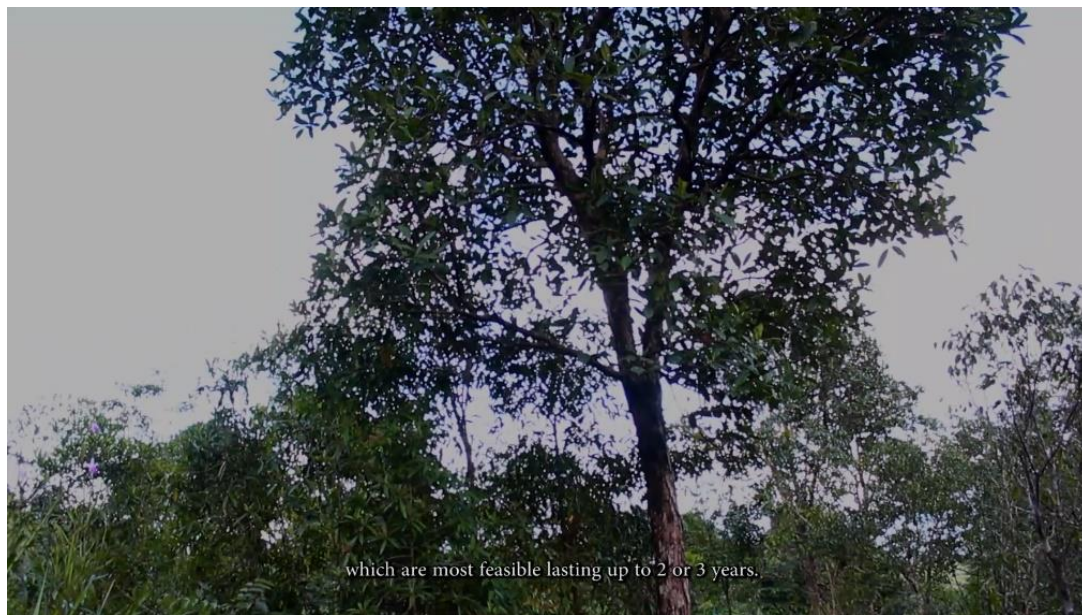


Figure 9. *U 'tiew diengngai*



The Khasis universally designate forest areas preserved for the future use of their natural resources, commonly known as *ki law-adong*.⁹ There are also village forests reserved by the local villagers so that any member can obtain timber or firewood for personal needs or for use as water catchment areas (Shangpliang, 2021. p. 35). These are known as *ki law-shnong*.¹⁰

Figure 10. *U dieng shyrgan*



Figure 11. *U dieng sohphan*



⁹ literally forbidden forests

¹⁰ village forests

Fig trees too are planted on both sides of river banks where a bamboo bridge is undoing yearly construction. The intention being that as the aerial roots grow, gradually they will be trained along the bamboo bridge, weaving across the river chasm over many years, the roots intertwining with each other into ropes to gain strength. In Mawkyrnot village, a young resident, Wanbha Khongwet, explains this scenario. The suspension of the aerial roots holding the deck take shape. Below the deck, the aerial roots also drape down to the earth's surface adding beauty to the design. In the bridge at Mawkyrnot, there is a clear indication of visuals pertaining to the formation of living root bridges and how the bamboo bridge being constructed at Shiliang Jashar will eventually look (Figure 16). The design depends upon the yearning of the local (co)inhabitants, Wiak Khongtiang declares.

Figure 12. Suspensions (the root bridge at Mawkyrnot village)



Aerial root of fig tree as suspension

A Pedagogy of Nature

The opening narration in the documentary translates as, "Nature is the teacher, the guardian, the bearer and guide which bestows upon all its co-existents¹¹ their behavioural abilities in the world we live in" (Langstieh, 2020). The behavioural abilities of the existents are governed by *ki aiñ ka mariang*—a cosmic law embedded in *Ka Hok*. "*Ka Hok* is a cosmic law as well as a moral law" (Ramsiej, 2006, p. xiv). Jerin

¹¹ For the purpose of this paper, the word co-existents (*noun*) is used to refer to the units that constitute the cosmos. The plants, the trees, forests, water, sun, moon, stars, earth, spirits and so on. The word existents (*noun*) is used interchangeably with co-existents.

Sawian (personal communication, 2016) refers to *Ka Hok* as *ka sap blei*—a behavioural ability of the existents bestowed through *Ka Hok*. Amongst a multitude of *ka sap blei* is the ability of humans and animals to move from one place to another for food, shelter, and the sustenance of their survival from one generation to another. This movement is not restricted to humans and animals but is also bestowed upon plants and other co-existents. The roots of plants and trees likewise move and creep in search of food and nutrition on earth, either through growth or reproduction. As co-existents, a Khasi learns from all of the existents in nature within the cosmos. Mawrie, in his monograph *The Khasi Milieu* emphasises, "nature for the Khasi is like a book," they derive from it a teaching and wisdom and observe meticulously with great care what could be of help to their needs (Mawrie, 2006). Furthermore, nature also expresses behavioural characteristics in all its co-existents—like the potential for the fig tree to overcome obstacles. The obstacles posed by the landscape through rivers and precipices challenge the local inhabitants to innovate and create bridges which are alive and encompass several generations. Such a scenario offers an opportunity for humans to showcase their abilities, their *ka sap blei* bestowed by the Creator. Wiak Khongtiang in the documentary narrates that prior to 1988, temporary bridges were built downstream, and whenever the torrential rains occurred, the water raged and destroyed these bridges. This caused the community to rethink and reformulate a plan for the long term. Bridges made out of bamboo materials decay seasonally; therefore, the bamboo bridge is renewed every year with the vision to ultimately create a root bridge. *Ka sap blei* of the Khasi ancestors has descended in present circumstances to ensure continuity of the living root bridges.

Figure 13. Wiak Khongtiang (a village elder from Shiliang Jashar)



Being interviewed in the documentary film

One of the most prevalent and meaningful expressions among the Khasis is the behavioural characteristics of a plant called *u 'tiew dohmaw laiphew na-ar jingmut*. This plant is found scattered among weeds, and its texture is revered by plant lovers. *Laiphew na-ar jingmut* refers to a wise man who does not grossly repress innate wisdom towards the outside world. *Laiphew* for the Khasi literally means “thirty” but meaningfully denotes all co-existential beings, animate and inanimate. *Na-ar* is a shortened expression of *duna-ar*, which means lesser by two. *Jingmut* are the thoughts, the mind, and cognitions. Thus, *laiphew na-ar jingmut* portrays a wise but less than perfect person, one of exceptional wisdom and difficult to find. By blending itself with the environment, the unique plant humbly exists.

Figure 14. *U 'tiew dohmaw laiphew na-ar jingmut* (a wise and humble plant)



The leaves of the plant

Soso Tham, the Khasi poet laureate and philosopher, in his 1976 book *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiewtrep*,¹² in the chapter titled *Ka Persyntiew*,¹³ wrote:

*Pyrthei Mariang baroh ka pher;
Ki Mrad ki kmen, ki Sim ki her;
Ha Rynge ne hapoh syrngiew,
Ki Syntiew ruh ki nang kren briew;
U Tiew Dohmaw hapoh u ñiut
U shong laiphew na-ar jingmut.*

¹² the olden days of the seven huts

¹³ the garden

The verse can be meaningfully translated as: Amidst the diversity of the universe, the birds, the animals, all creatures and all existents under the shadow or the sunshine, flowers too have the ability to talk or communicate with humans, *U 'Tiew Dohmaw* among the weeds, sits *laiphew-na-ar-jingmut*. Referencing the same humble plant, this is a poetic expression of co-existents' communication with humans. Another plant with similar characteristics is *'tiew lyngksiar*, the smell of which can only be understood from afar. On approaching it, we no longer receive its sweet fragrance. As the plant grows under the canopy, its flowers are not clearly distinguishable to the external world. Thus, only its essence is appreciated, which is the main attribute in the name *lyngksiar*. Through these material poetic examples, we come to understand how the Khasis read and learn from natural beings and phenomena.¹⁴

This dialogue with natural entities is a communication that humans have with the co-existents. Humans are inextricably entwined with nature rather than a separate being. Ramsiej (2006, p.viii) declares that "there is no sharp distinction between the world of things and the world of culture among the Khasis", which is why they understand the language of plants, trees, stones, etc. When the co-existents talk to humans, this refers to a communication on a degree of consciousness which is largely understood through their behaviour or characteristics. The fragrance, the features, the colours, for instance, are observed and studied. It is believed that from these unique characteristics, meaningful inferences are drawn and derived, thus providing one form of pedagogy for the Khasis.

Living Root Bridges as Indigenous Futurity

The formation of living root bridges is a century-long process which epitomises the Indigenous futurity of the Khasis. There is an adage in the Khasi tradition which prohibits the young or middle-aged from planting trees. The adage says, "*ia kiba dang shibiat, ym ju long ban thung jri*". This a popular oral narrative reiterated by the elders of the community with specific reference to the fig tree, implies the strong relationship that the elderly have with their co-existents, so much so, that it prevents younger folk from participating in planting trees. When an elder plants a fig tree, they know that they will never see it grow with human care into a root bridge. It is only the next seven to ten generations who may benefit from the planted fig tree when it transforms into a root bridge. Wiak Khongtiang confirms that when they were young, they would observe the elders training the aerial roots across the bamboo scaffolds. At times they would allow the young to lend a helping hand but generally they were taught through observation of their elders.

¹⁴ In this regard, the Khasi engage in an Indigenous futurity based in tropical materialisms. See Benitez and Lundberg (2022).

Almost thirty years have passed since the initiation of the bamboo bridge being built and rebuilt every year at Shiliang Jashar; however, the aerial roots of the fig trees planted on either side of the river bank are yet to emerge amongst the foliage. Wiak Khongtiang states that the aerial roots of the fig trees will perhaps at some future point in time grow and link up to form a root bridge. To augment and visualise his statement, glimpses of another semi-formed root bridge in the neighbouring village of Mawkyrnot are shown in the documentary. Wanbha Khongwet, a young villager, explains further about the root bridge at Mawkyrnot, which is the longest root bridge recorded so far in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Wanbha's knowledge about the semi-formed root bridge exhibits an element of participation among the younger folks who must carry forward the practice into the future, training the aerial roots of the fig trees to ensure the complete formation of the root bridge. The involvement and participation to ensure the complete formation of a root bridge stretches to one or two generations, while the utility of the living root bridge may serve the next seven to ten generations. This lifespan of the root bridge is, in turn, extrapolated from an understanding of the life span of a fig tree.

Figure 15. Wanbha Khongwet (a young villager from Mawkyrnot village)



Interviewee in the documentary film

(L) Ke Khongtiang Ryingka who initiated the construction of the bamboo bridge at Shiliang Jashar, later settled in the adjacent village of Rynger after marriage.¹⁵ He must have felt the need to commute regularly to meet his clan members. He not only initiated the construction of the bamboo bridge but also made it a point to plant a fig

¹⁵ Khasi are matrilineal and upon marriage the husband moves to his wife's residence and village.

tree on the river bank of Wah Jashar. Ke Khongtiang knew that planting a fig tree which will eventually result in the formation of a root bridge, well beyond his lifetime, will be beneficial for usage by the forthcoming generations. The Khasi ancestors, with regards to root bridges, portray themselves as being efficient facilitators in relationship with the longevity of natural entities, to serve generations that follow.

Figure 16. Living Root Bridge at Mawkyrnot village



The fig tree is one of the entities in the environment which ensures longevity. The War people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills utilise its ability to withstand the pressures and challenges of the landscape. It withholds the land from eroding. It is not just a component of the environment but an integral ecological entity. We may never be able to determine or predict the exact time period for the tensile strength of the root bridges in aiding people, but one thing is for sure, we cannot measure its life span within our lifetimes. The tensile strength of root bridges may endure for decades. There must be continuity into the future, which ensures the participation of the generations that follow. The future generation lives in the forbearance of the present generation. The present generation decides how much resources to use and leave for the future. *Ki Thied Ka Lawei* (roots of a future) has improved their lives by implementing and passing on ancestral knowledge with techniques and skills. It weaves perceptions or ideas to adopt and adhere to; while at the same time providing insight into actions necessary for an enduring future. It also tells us how the Khasi forefathers had a vision that provided solutions to the challenges already foreseen. What can also be derived from this annual event of building and rebuilding the bamboo bridge at Shiliang Jashar is a close association with the natural behaviour of their immediate environment, resulting

in deep insights into the idea of a future in the tropics. The inconceivable length of future-time is a repository of knowledge that belongs to the fig tree. The inter-generational participation is fuelled by decades-long perseverance of a work ethic internalised in the worldview of the Khasis where nature and culture are holistically enmeshed (Ramsiej, 2006). There is a vision and an assurance of how the ideal meets reality despite not witnessing it. An Indigenous futurity is exuberantly manifested into practice in this context. Most of the living root bridges which attract tourists from all over the world today were initiated hundreds of years ago. Those who initiated the formation of these bridges never saw their fruition. Their actions were without immediate gratification, the benefits were for the off-springs that followed.

The Sanctity of Participation

The Khasis have a form of administration at the village level known as the *Dorbar*. The *Dorbar* holds firm values of participation and consensual decision-making. With the institutionalisation of Western-inspired democracy in Indian post-independence 1947, these *Dorbars* have changed with time. The village of Shiliang Jashar provides hope for traditional Khasi administrative preservation and more importantly, the values that the village elders adhere to. The *Dorbar* in Shiliang Jashar ensures the participation of at least one older member—usually a male—whenever it convenes. Issues are prioritised occasionally¹⁶ depending on the need. In the construction of the bamboo bridge every year before the monsoon begins, the *Dorbar* decides that one male member from each household must participate. The bamboo bridge serves the villagers for the rest of the year to commute to their fields, the market, or their familial relations and friends across the river in nearby villages. Through this system, the bamboo bridge has been built and rebuilt consistently every year since 1988.

Who initiated or facilitated the old root bridges present all over the valleys of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills is unknown. Such an initiatory act is lost in sacred ancestral tradition, and this is how it should be, for as the village elders of Shiliang Jashar claim, every act in life has a divine sanction. There is a symbiotic relationship where all the existents participate; act and re-act to ensure each other's survival. The cosmic law of *Ka Hok* speaks of a sacred act where the co-existents are considered divine beings. Humans, too, fall within the ambit of this law of nature. They are bound by this natural law to live and move together, moulding characteristics of perseverance, hope, and sincerity in one's work ethic.

In a visit to Nongpriang, a village in the eastern valley of Sohra, provides an unusual scenario of incomplete or unliving root bridges. Bajur Syngai and Teibor Prarian, both elders from the village, could not provide an explanation behind these phenomena. In

¹⁶ usually every month

some instances, they say that the root bridges impacted the nearby stream's course. In another instance, the fig trees planted for the formation of a root bridge died and it had nothing to do with the changing course of the river or stream. However, lasaid Khongjee, a resident of Sohra who has delved more deeply into Khasi philosophy explains how it relates to the Khasis believe in coexistence. This coexistence prevailed in its active state through communication in relation to those components of the environment, especially *Ka Mei-ramew* (Mother Earth) and the spirits of the hills and rivers and streams. Any breakdown in communication could manifest as a breakdown in the life of a living bridge. Rabon Singh Kharsuka (1972, p.53) in his book *Ka Kitab Niam Kheih Ki Khasi*, describes:

Ka Ramew, kane ka ksuid kaba shong hapoh khyndew, kaba long kum ka kynja blei, kaba pynmih ia u symbai u rynai, kaba ai buih ia ki jingthung jingtep baroh, kane ka Ramew kaba long shi tylli bad u Basa, lehse ki ia long shi tnga, namar ki juh kynnoh ka Ramew u Basa ha kaei kaei ba ki kren shaphang ka Ramew, kumne (Ka Ramew U Basa Shnong, Ka Ramew u Basa lyngkha) ia kane ki ju ai jingkhia da ka syiar, haba ka bat jingsngewsih ei ei ia ki brierw.

A translation of the quotation above is indicative of a philosophical conception which exists among the Khasis of the earth as spirit. It reads, "*Ka Ramew*, this spirit dwells in the earth, it is a sort of *ka blei*, which germinates seeds, it nourishes all of the plants. This *Ka Ramew* is one with *U Basa*,¹⁷ possibly they are spouses, because it is spoken in the same breath as *Ka Ramew U Basa* and *Ka Ramew U Basa lyngkha*.¹⁸ For *Ka Ramew*, a fowl is propitiated whenever it displeases and resents human beings." The Khasis are bound by a moral law embedded in *Ka Hok* to live peacefully and harmoniously on earth (Ramsiej, 2006). The earth nurtures and partakes in the moral growth of the Khasis for their sustenance and survival. *Ka Ramew* thus, is a spirit manifested in the physical form of *Ka Mei-ramew* (*Mei* mother, *ramew* earth) which is a vital part of *Ka Hok*. *Ka Mei-ramew* is expressed in superlatives such as the nourisher, the teacher, the caretaker, the protector, the guide, the provider and caterer, the procreator, the mentor, the embracer, who endears and caresses all of the beings. A progenitor and custodian of all beings animate and inanimate.

For example, before clearing the forest for cultivation, the spirits of the forests are informed of such acts in *ka kren ka khana*—a communication with the spirits, to be carried out in propitiation through rites or rituals. It is not a permission-seeking act, rather it is carried out as a mark of respect. Seeking permission to use the land for a living is not wise because it is tantamount to certifying ownership of land to the co-

¹⁷ guardian spirits of a village, commune etc.

¹⁸ The spirit who takes care of the agricultural fields

existents. In this communication, humans would ask the spirits to leave the place since they, by divine sanction, have a right to use the land for their living—though never for ostentatious living. In turn, the spirits also respect their covenant with humans and the Creator from the beginning of creation. They listen and reciprocate without disturbing the activities endorsed by humans. But sometimes a misunderstanding may arise between the two—human and spirits. Such a breakdown in communication perhaps suggests a reason why the fig trees and the root bridges did not live.

Conclusion

Presently, the vision portrayed by the inhabitants of Shiliang Jashar reflects the adoption and continuation of the vision created by the Khasi ancestors. The discussion on the fig tree in developing root bridges highlights a retention of an Indigenous knowledge system. This is witnessed through the knowledge the young villager from Mawkyrnot, Wanbha Khongwet, has learnt and expressed in his explanation of his village's root bridge. Having longer bridges demands the use of technical interventions to the growth process of the root bridges through the application of nutrient rich water to the root systems with the aim of speeding up these natural structures (see Linaraki et al., 2021; Shankar, 2016). Although human-technological practice is possible, divine sanction is ignored in these approaches, thus breaking with the cosmic worldview in which the role of human beings must be understood as merely facilitators to what is already natural and innate; that a fig tree grows roots that will support itself. Therefore, the facilitation of the aerial roots of fig trees into living root bridges can be understood as an adaptation of how to function within the environment and its ecology. If this natural process is enhanced by modern technological intervention such as artificially catalysing its growth, it exhibits a practice not bound by the cosmic law in *Ka Hok*. It does not take into account the relationality aspect of the co-existents who also bear witness or who are inherently involved within the cosmic design. It disrupts the natural process and lacks the agreement of co-existents. In the worldview of the Khasis, all co-existents act and react to any phenomenon in the cosmic scheme of things.

There are few and far remaining indications of the continuing practice in creating such bridges found in the valleys of the War region. Yet there remains hope through the aspirations of the Khasis and as these bridges become well known across the world. However, at the same time, the living root bridges attract tourism throughout the year and the footfall is increasing significantly. The onslaught of tourism has come about as a threat to the durability of these bridges. Longer root bridges such as the bridge at Mawkyrnot are being built to serve the locals. Coupled with rising tourist footfall, such bridges are susceptible to collapse. These instances have led to innovative solutions where suspensions are being formed to support the deck of the bridge at the centre. The semi-formed root bridge at Mawkyrnot is insightful in its structure, as the centre of the deck is held by roots linked with other fig trees, apart from the fig trees used to

link the bridge. Thus, the emergence of new challenges has rendered the locals to find solutions correspondingly.

The living root bridges of Meghalaya are not only symbolic of an extravagant phenomena of an awe-inspiring tribal practice, they are a living example of how the close association of humans and nature reciprocates in a symbiotic relationship to augment one another's survival. The ecological mores upheld by *Ka Hok*, practiced by the inhabitants of Shiliang Jashar and other inhabitants of the southern valleys of the Khasi-Jaiñtia hills, is paving a way and setting up foundations for generations into their local tropical future. The living root bridges epitomise not just utility but are the memories and repositories of a knowledge passed on through generations. The cultural practice where only the elders are permitted to plant fig trees instils a value, an ethical practice where a tree planted now is a gift to the lives of the generations to follow. For the Khasis, the living root bridges reflect a past and a future, and humans are mere facilitators in the present.

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