

# From a profane to a sacred landscape: The Ethno archeology of Sohpet Bneng Hill, Khasi Hills Meghalaya

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## ABSTRACT

*The Khasi community inhabiting the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya is one of the earliest inhabitants of North East India. The people were ignorant to the art writing till the British Christian missionary provided them with Roman scripts during the period of colonization of the hills in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. Although devoid of written sources about their history and culture, the Khasis possessed a fairly rich and eclectic repository of folk narratives, which are the treasure-house that have attracted researchers' right from the colonial period till today. Some of folk stories have tenaciously survived from very remote period of prehistory and they are properly encased in the folk belief system of people. Transcending beyond mere "folk stories", some of the folk stories are literal enough to provide a comprehensible picture of the people's history and culture.*

*The current paper will delve into folk story of U Sohpet Bneng hill which is associated with the landscape that is attached to the origin myth of the Khasi community. The aim of this paper is to highlight the major factor which helped to propel the construction of such narrative about the particular landscape and the mechanism which the preliterate society developed for its preservation in the people's memory.*

*The present paper will be provided with additional input from archaeological evidences, emphasizing especially on the prehistoric settlement system. The latest archaeological excavation which was conducted in one the hills ancestral site at Lum Sohpet Bneng will form the most important evidence for an archaeological analogy on folk narratives. The archaeological evidences unearthed from the small scale excavation along with the AMS dates are expected to provide strong analogy on the temporal and spatial context of the folk narrative of U Sohpet Bneng.*

## **From a profane to a sacred landscape: The Ethno archeology of Sohpet Bneng Hill, Khasi Hills Meghalaya**

Sohpet Bneng peak<sup>1</sup> (Lum=peak Sopet Bneng=navel string of Heaven) in Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya, assumed a very significant position among the cultural landscapes of Khasi-Jaintia hills owing to the symbolic processes engaging with the Khasi community' sense of the place in their memory and legends. Accounted through the myth of creation, the landscape where the peak stands is therefore installed with strong cultural and human meaning which over time, was attached with layers of sedimented-past and created boundary of the sacred among the Khasis.

The cultural embodiment of the peak's landscape can be observed through an annual thanksgiving procession to the apex of the peak, an act which recently revived by the *Seng Khasi*; socio-cultural organization, to recapitulate

<sup>1</sup> Located at 25°42'26"N Latitude and 91°55'40" E Longitude at 1350 M above Sea level is geomorphologically flanked by the Umroi Valley on the east, the Sumer valley on the west and the Umiam valley in the south

the ancient aura and ideals of their ancestors as preserved in the oral narrative of the mythological *Khathynriew Trep*<sup>2</sup>, or the sixteen huts. The folk narrative which stands above others, reminded the Khasi-Pnar community of the ‘golden vine’; the passageway between heaven and earth and the preserved state of bliss of their ancestors. Sohpet Bneng peak and its surrounding landscape became culturally transformed through the mythical story, giving strength to the spirit of animism and the unspoilt state happiness and beauty where the mythological sixteen huts once lived.



### **Thanksgiving Ceremony at Sohpet Bneng Peak**

Inspired by the folk narrative, a systematic archaeological survey and exploration of the entire hill range around the areas close to Sohpet Bneng peak was conducted to gain empirical data from the area. During the course of exploration, started a decade back, the archaeological site of Lawnongthroh<sup>3</sup> which lies at the foot of the peak and along the ridge of Sohpet Bneng hill was discovered. Archaeological evidences of different cultural periods are observed at the site which stretches to almost a kilometer along the ridge. The Archaeological findings from this area surely revealed the continuous occupation of the entire ridge at different cultural periods in the past. According to living ethnographic sources, the last occupants of the site was abandon about 200 years ago and was re-occupied only 30 years back by new occupants who came at different times from other nearby villages to establish the present village. The re-occupation of the site after a long interval of abandonment is an important feature about the settlement system on this hill which can provide strong analogy in understanding the settlement system of the area during the

<sup>2</sup> “In the ancient times when the Earth was ideal and peaceful, the Khasis were in the beginning composed of U *Hynniewtrep* and Khyndaiksum (lit. the seven Huts and Nine Nests or huts) and lived in the abode of God. Gradually, seven of the sixteen huts began to learn how to cultivate crops and came down to this earth for cultivation after which they would returned back to their dwellings through the tree which served as a ladder to heaven. The peaceful life continued until one day when the humans chopped off the tree that served as a ladder. From that time the seven huts were stranded in this earth and the nine huts on Heaven. God however had pity on the seven huts and he taught them the art of sowing crops according to seasons, and showed them how to sow the right crop for a good harvest. In the same way God also taught the humans about the rules and regulation to be followed in their life time until they return back to His abode. God finally disappeared from the sight of his people and begin to on speak to them only through signs and symbols”.

<sup>3</sup> The site of Lawnongthroh is named after one of the villages clustering around the hill.



archaeological past, a trait that may well go back to a very remote time period, consider the unique position assumed by this hill among the cultural landscapes of Khasi-Jaintia hills.

### **The Archaeological remains on the Ridge**

#### The Megalithic monuments:

The most prominent archaeological feature observed on the ridge, are the Megalithic monuments standing stones (*Maw Bynna/ Maw Nam*) and flat table stones like the Dolmens (*Maw Khythei*). Small burial cists of individuals (*Maw Shyieng*) and larger cists of family/clan<sup>4</sup> are also found in large numbers along the site.



**Clan Cist Burial at Lawnongthroh**

#### Rectangular Mound

Another spectacular remain on the ridge, are the rectangular funeral mounds locally known as *Kpep*, each measuring roughly 6x3x1meter. These rectangular earth mounds are raised to a meter in height above the ground and supported on all sides by stone walls. Ethnographic parallel generally associated these raised platforms with the mortuary practice of the traditional Khasi-Pnar people, the raised ground were being used as cremation platform.<sup>5</sup>



**Raised Earth mound at Lawnongthroh**

<sup>4</sup> In the Khasi and Jaintia hills traditional funerary practice, the post cremated bones are deposited in these cist.

<sup>5</sup> Such mounds are also found in other parts of Khasi hills especially in Cherrapunjee.

## Iron Smelting

In the southern part of the ridge and very close to the standing stones are traces of an old Iron smelting area where debris of iron slag. This particular smelting area spread about 20 sqM in dimension and was encircled by big stones, perhaps forming the base where the superstructure or an ancient iron smelting hut was constructed.



**Iron Slag from lawnongthroh**

## Objects from a deserted Settlement

On the western slope of the ridge, household artifacts are recovered from an area which ethnographic sources claimed to be the deserted settlement called 'Mawbuh'. These items comprise of a large number of scattered potsherds, most of which are wheel-made variety having fine texture and slipped with ochre colour on their exterior surface, and also the ones with coarser texture devoid of any slip or coating.

Rusted iron implements were also recovered from the settlement area, comprising of: parts of an iron chopper (*Wait Lyngut*), front part of a knife, a bill hooked blade (*Wait Bnoh*) and cultivating hoes (*Mohkhiew*). All these iron implements are in a corroded condition. These evidences suggest that this particular area, was certainly an ancient village which spread along the entire western slopes of the ridge and whose inhabitants were probably the author of the Megalithic and funerary monuments recorded on the ridge-top.



### Iron Objects from deserted settlement

#### Neolithic Evidences

The exploration of area besides yielding above evidences also produce archaeological evidences which are more primitive and remoter in time comprises of stone tools and ceramics of Neolithic origin. These artifacts are recorded from the site close to the ridge top and approximately 200 meters above the mentioned deserted Mawbuh settlement. The Neolithic materials collected from this particular spot during the early stages of exploration are those which are exposed to the surface.

Encouraged by the surface finds, two season's archaeological excavation was undertaken at the site and the findings from the excavation clearly attested the presence of a pre-historic settlement on the ridge below the Megalithic layer. The excavation which was dug to a maximum 70cm depth from the surface produces varied objects of stone and iron. The earliest occupation of the excavated site has been dated to 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>6</sup> and with intervening layer the site was occupied till 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> AMS C<sup>14</sup> Result Received from Beta Analytic, Inc. | 4985 S.W. 74th Court. Miami, Florida, USA 33155

<sup>7</sup> Dates received from the same lab above



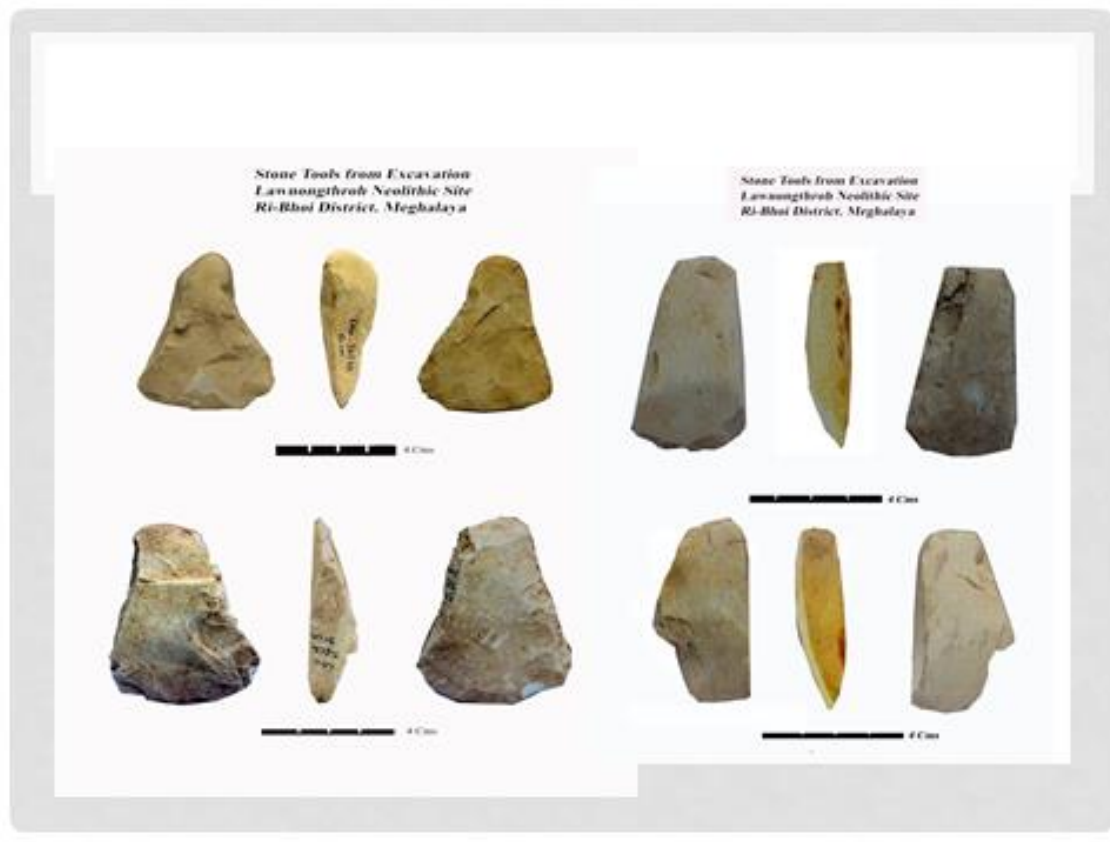
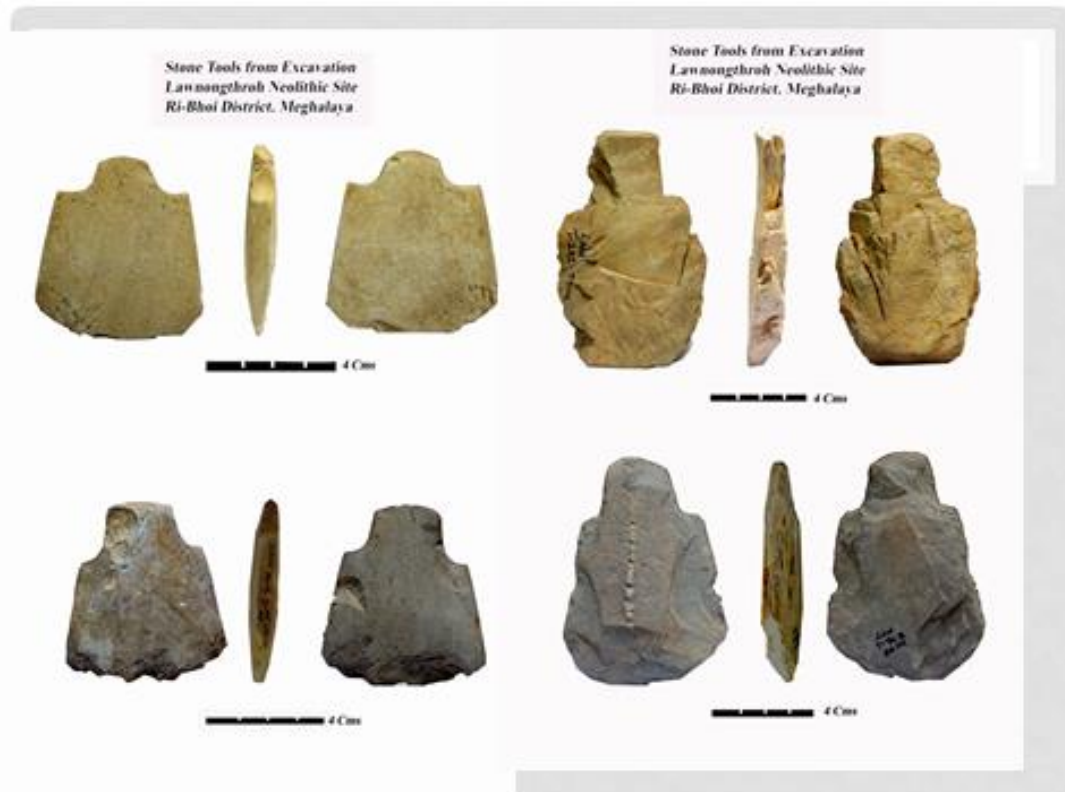


### **Excavated site**

Stone Tools from Surface: A total of 11 finished stone tools were collected from the surface of the site during the earlier exploration. The provenance of the stone tools including detail description each tool is included in the classification table.

Stone Tools from Excavated section: A total of 53 finished stone tools with intact and slightly broken were recovered from the excavated layers of the site. Besides the above, there are more than 70 broken stone tools and also fragments and small flakes detached from stone tools also recovered from the excavation. These flakes and fragments are detached from the finished tools probably that the same ones that are tools which are intact recovered from the excavation. The provenance of the stone tools including detail description of each fragment/ flake is included in the classification table.





Potsherds:

A total of 2058 number of hand-made potsherds were recovered and classify from the excavated trenches of the site. The potteries recovered from the site of Lamnongthroh are of different varieties in terms of their sizes, thickness,

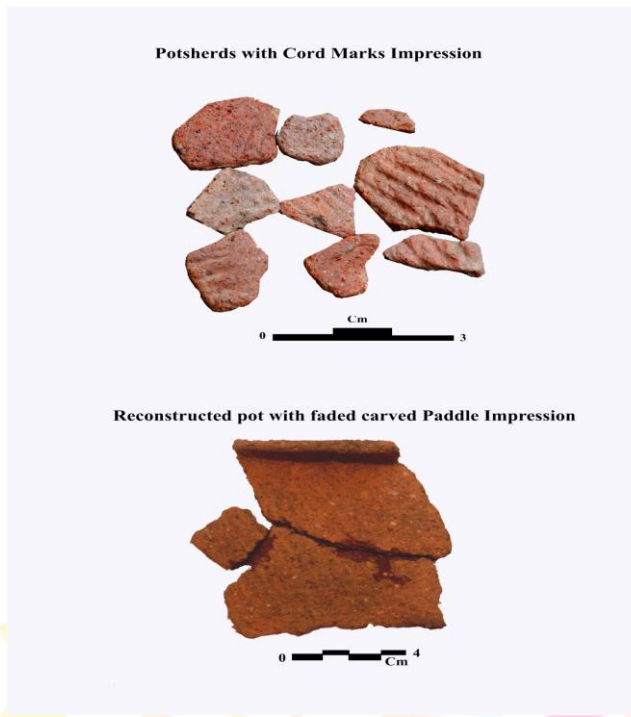
types and exterior design patterns. The paddle groove potteries are recorded to be the most dominant types from the site. These types are identified by the distinct variety of grooves on the surface of the exterior body of the potsherds which bears different patterns and the sizes. The patterns on the exterior potteries clearly show that these are decorative designs on the surface of the pot after the potter had already achieved the desired shape and size of the pot. A deliberately carved-paddle with a respective design was used in the final stage to create these impression on the exterior surface of the pot before drying. In addition there are also few typical cord-mark potsherds which have been recorded from the site. The ceramic materials are analyzed for trace and chemical elements<sup>8</sup>.

Potsherds with Carved Paddle Impression  
(big size grooves)



<sup>8</sup> Chemical and trace element study of the potsherds from surface and excavation site was conducted by Dr.Sukanya Sharma and Shri. Pankaj Singh, at IIT Guwahati.

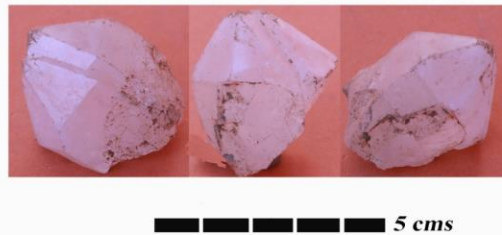




### Other artefacts of stone

- **Grinding Stone/Polishers:** From the depth 25-50 cms, a number of broken parts of grinding stones which are made from sandstone material and with varying texture were recovered from the excavation. These grind stones were used for grinding and sharpening of the stone tools and also for polishing rough surfaces of softer material like leather and hides of animal skin.
- **Spindle Whorl:** A typical small size spindlewhorl with a hole in the middle measuring 0.5cm in diameter was recovered at the depth of 35 cms.
- **Stone Handknife:** An interesting specimen which is shape like a leaf. The upper side curves convexly and lower side curves concavely both narrowing at the tip measuring 1cm in length (similar to an apex of a leaf) that is again curve like a beak shape hook. This object illustrates the fine workmanship in stone in the production of proto-type knife.
- **Ring-stones:** Broken parts of ringstones were recovered from 35-50 cms. Considering their wear marks these must have been used for adding weight to a spear.
- **Fire lighter:** At 35 cms depth, a front part of a broken hexagonal bar shape flint used for making fire was recovered. The body of the object has six faces and the faces continue right to the narrow tip which is arrow pointed. These faces were artificially formed due to constant striking of the object to another object for producing sparks. The object was certainly used for producing spark to light a fire. The pointed faceted tip is evident of the regular use of this object for the purpose of making fire.

**Artifacts from Excavation  
Lawnongthroh Neolithic Site  
Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya**



**Organic remains from the excavation**

**Iron Objects:** Few Iron objects were also recovered at different depths of the excavation therefore revealing an interesting material culture of the site. An abstract of the iron objects are as follows: .

- At 35 cms depth, piece of broken iron tube with a hole measuring 0.2 cm bore through the middle was recovered. The piece appeared to be a broken part of a neckband or bracelet or an armband or anklet.
- At 35 cms a small iron piece which is highly corroded. The object is like the shape of a ring but square in shape has a gap between. This object may have been a a clamp to tightened a handle or locking of a strap.
- At the depth of 57 cms an iron implement which is highly corroded was recovered. It a rod shape object, probably hand-held with spiral carvings all over its body. It also has a tenon which has distinctively spiral carvings. This object was probably used for drilling purposes and could have been used as a bow drill.
- At 60 cms a flat piece of iron strip in a highly corroded stage was also recovered.

#### Macro seeds remains:

The following charred seeds were recovered from floated sediments of the excavation site. These findings have helped in the understanding of the kind of food and grains consumed by the inhabitants of the site.

- ***Oryza sp. (cf. officinalis)***: A wild variety of rice which is today in the Red List among endangered plants and endemic to the region usually grows in wild swampy environment. This is found in all the samples at different level of the site suggesting that it is an important food grain of the people at the site, probably foraging these seeds from the long stretch valleys on both sides of the hill. The absence of domesticated rice at the site indicates an interesting subject of debate since archaeo-botanical literature has tried to associate rice domestication with the Austro-Asiatic speaking population. If such finding continues in other sites of Khasi-Jaintia hills, then the theory could be refuted easily.
- ***Ziziphus sp***: A common fruit also known as Jujube and locally called *sohbroi*. These are most abundant in annual average temperatures between 12° and 35°C, minimum winter temperatures not lower than -2 °C. Thus the fruit is endemic to the tropical parts of the region
- ***Embica officinalis***: Commonly known as Indian gooseberry and locally called *sohmylleng*, which grows abundantly in this region.
- ***Coix sp***: Also commonly known as Job's tears and locally called *sohriew* (also called *tdong sier* for a different variety)/. This grain was eaten by people of the region as a substitute food



- ***Echinochloa sp.***: Also known as barnyard millet locally called *krai shan/ krai troh* . This plant grows in tropical Asia, Africa and is naturalised in America. The selection we offer grows in a short growing season and produces plentiful seed. It has strong plump black upright seed heads about 10cm long and 2cm round. This seed is very high in protein, approx. 11%. It is important because it is gluten free, The grain can be used as a Quinoa substitute boiled in water and cooked until soft and creamy like a rice cereal, or ground into a flour. There are very few references directed toward use as a food crop. In fact, millet was always considered as an important staple food grain of the people of Khasi-Jaintia hills in the past and is still used today in the rural areas both for consumption and for brewing country liquor.
- ***Gossypium sp.***: Common name cotton. This is an interesting find from the site and with the presence of spindle whorl, cotton fibre wa now to the people of the site which therefore takes back the knowledge of weaving to a very long in the region. The used of cotton for weaving as an industry in these hills is still active in the remote corners and villages of Ri-Bhoi and Jaintia hill district.

### The Archaeological references

With the background of the archaeological site and its surrounding areas being well placed in the ethnographic milieu, the site becomes more interesting and worthwhile for study, allowing scope for debates and conjectures within the realm of archeological science. But despite this statement, it is generally not so easy to draw a direct analogy on the relationship between oral narration and archaeological finds since what comes from the past is always clouded with overlapping elements of truth and fiction. Affirming to its ethic as a science, archaeology does however, depended on ethnographic parallels to interpret past remains. Taking into consideration the space of the geographical context (?) of the folk narrative and the archaeological evidences, juxtaposition of their relationship is highly plausible.

How far back can the oral tradition be traced back? And how much interpolation was there in documented folk tale?, are issues for interesting debates and conjectures. However, in the light of the above story, with its embedded cultural elements, it becomes apparent that the background of the story falls within certain cultural horizons along the lines of human cultural evolution pattern, which is uniformly witnessed worldwide. The beginning of sedentary lifestyle comes in as a very crucial point of reference, since the cultural phase brought in new development and transformation which created lasting impact on preliterate human societies world-wide. The driving factor which sets the tone for such changes was “the shift in the mode of subsistence to agro-pastoral farming, the only process which is relatively closely defined, geographically widespread and sufficiently archeologically detectable<sup>9</sup> and generally referred to as the ‘Neolithic’ period. The ‘Neolithic’ assumed the suffix, ‘Revolution’, witnessed the period when people were *being tamed* and *domesticated*, not only mechanically, but metaphorically<sup>10</sup> impacted due to the conceptual separation of the house from the untamed world<sup>11</sup>. Thus the ‘Neolithic’ period, with its coherent entity determined by a single historical or evolutionary process, serve as the datum point, which can be appropriated with

<sup>9</sup> (Zvelebil M. 1996. The Agricultural frontier and the transition to farming n the Circum-Baltic region. In D.Harris (ed) *The Origins and the spread of agriculture and pastoralism in Eurasia*. London University pp. 323-325. 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Ian Hodder (ed), “The Domestication of Europe”. *Theory and Practice in Archaeology* (Blackwell London,1996), pp.243.

the folk tale of Sohpet Bneng Hill, a narrative which visibly conceals an event of transformation leading development of agriculture, expansion and radiation of sedentary lifestyle. With the archaeological findings from the site of Lawnongthroh within the vicinity of the peak, there is so much to accept that the entire folk story is a compressed narration of the transformation undergoing the society that once flourished on the hill. Observe through the different archaic elements of culture present in the narrative, a very remote time period could be assigned for the kernel of this story.

### **Cultural Transformation of Sohpet Bneng Hill**

The cultural transformation of the hill and its surrounding landscape which include the archaeological site of Lawnongthroh<sup>12</sup> is seen by the new socio-cultural movement within the community which got crystallized through *Ka Kiew Eh Rngiew*, the annual thank giving festival at Sohpet Bneng peak. Lingered only in latent folk tradition, the festival was revived through the initiative of the *Seng Khasi*, a socio-cultural organisation of traditional Khasi-Pnar people. Cutting across all religious background, *Ka Kiew Eh Rngiew* festival is actually a pilgrimage procession from all from the corners of *Ka Ri-Hynniewtrep* or Khasi-Pnar inhabited areas of the central Meghalaya plateau to the top of the peak. As the name of the festival denote, this pilgrimage is a symbolic act of reviving the essence of spiritual strength which the people need to imbibe from time to time. The festival as it is practice today is purely religious and ritualistic in content and traditional dances tough performed at the end of the ceremony are only for entertainment purposes having no cultural significance. The festival over the years have grown in stature and attracted the attention of the traditional Khasi-Pnar population. Like-wise, the hill flanked by fertile valleys on its sides, had continuously attracted ancient settlement right from the Neolithic period till today also got culturally transformed. Sohpet Bneng peak, protruding at 1350M AML highest point in the landscape became a vantage point for living cultures to interact with their past. In the process time, through radiation of population and settlement from the ridge to other parts of Khasi-Jaintia hills, the landscape continue lived in the people's memory as a 'cradle' of their culture. Gradually this landscape assumed the status of 'identity' among the intellectual and a symbol of 'sacred' for the masses. Owing to this reason the folk tale has always attracted attention from local scholars, and using ranges of approaches attempt to comprehend this narrative in their own literary styles and hermeneutics.

<sup>12</sup> Before the festival at the peak's top, initiation religious ritual started at Lawnongthroh, a practiced conducted by the inhabitants of the ancient *Mawbuh* settlement which according to the ethnographic source are the first people responsible for the religious ceremonies at the *Lum Sohpet Bneng* peak in the past.

**THE HERITAGE GATE BELOW AT THE FOOT OF THE HILL  
CONSTRUCTED BY THE SENG-KHASI ORGANIZATION**



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