

## Understanding Tribal Societies

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### Abstract

Philosophically understanding and not just explaining forms of life, which we frequently, unthinkingly designate as indigenous or tribal, needs serious effort. What makes it even more complex is the absence of a written intellectual tradition. However, this should not falsely lead us to the conclusion that they lacked a complex system of rules of behaviour, of rights and duties. With the advent of postmodernism, the absolutist and universalist claims have been challenged, and we have started taking cultures other than our own more seriously. The tribal culture represents a vision which sees god, wo/man and nature as inextricably linked. "It is the same 'I' which reverberates in 'all'". In general, the tribal worldviews emphasise the sameness (qualitative) of wo/man, god and nature. It is this that we need to acknowledge for the sake of the whole world. The story of the fight between two mountain gods vividly illustrates the tribal theme of the unity of the great community of beings - human, god, trees, mountains and so on.

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I have been concerned in my philosophical work over the past few decades, with issues relating to understanding and not just explaining forms of life which we frequently, unthinkingly designate as indigenous or tribal.

While in the case of the more complex or the so-called civilised societies, there is available for the social scientist to study their traditional sacred texts along with their hermeneutical interpretations, the same is not true for most of the so-called primitive societies. The absence of a written intellectual tradition should not lead us to the conclusion that they lacked a complex system of rules of behaviour, of rights and duties.

Modern rationality demands unificatory epistemologies and homogenisation of evidence it hopes will one day lead automatically to the unification of the world.

Undoubtedly universalism of any kind attempts to dispel the threat of cognitive anarchy but there are underlying problems associated with it. No matter how attractive this conception is, it just so happens that there is such a variety of cultural systems in the world that anthropologists and others despaired of ever finding any universal traits. They found the cognitive equipment of other cultures, especially, folk, tribal or indigenous cultures, as at best incomplete, if not totally erroneous. With the arrival of postmodernism we have started taking cultures other than our own more seriously. Prior to this academic journey, we have the tribal identified as an animist simply because s/he 'sees spirits everywhere' believes in ghosts and generally lives in a world of fear and suspicion.

The source of this misunderstanding is the failure to identify the vision of life that tribal culture represents. I call it the traditional vision which sees god,wo/man and nature as inextricably linked. "It is the same 'I' which reverberates in 'all'". All living creatures are animated by a common indwelling spirit.



The first point of agreement in different tribal worldviews is the emphasis on the sameness (qualitative) of wo/man, god and nature. Indeed the myths of creation speak of the love between the pairs of sky-god and earth-goddess, (*Sitking-Kedding* and *Peddo-Dodum*).



They (*Sitking-Kedding* and *Peddo-Dodum*) voluntarily decided to separate from each other so that there shall be room for others to grow and flourish.



Other legends describe mountains, rivers and clouds as beings who were felt, perceived and deliberated as persons.

Wo/man can talk to the mountain or to any object of nature who may also be a god. For instance, a Naga princess falls in love with a tree god and she weaves a shawl for him as a token of her love.



Similarly, there is a depiction of a Naga girl falling in love with the river god.



The story of the fight between two mountain gods illustrates the tribal theme of the unity of the great community of beings - man, god, trees, mountains and so on. There are two mountain peaks *U Symper Nongsynrih* and *U Symper Kmawan* situated in the North-west Hills and West Khasi Hills respectively. Tradition regards both these as two of the chief gods of the Khasis.

Now being similar in shape, size, height, nature, etc. the two were said to have been great friends always facing each other with a smile.



As time passed, *U Kmawan* felt the need to get married and his father realising his loneliness arranged a match between *U Kmawan* and the daughter of *Kyllai Lyngun*, called *Kalewma*.

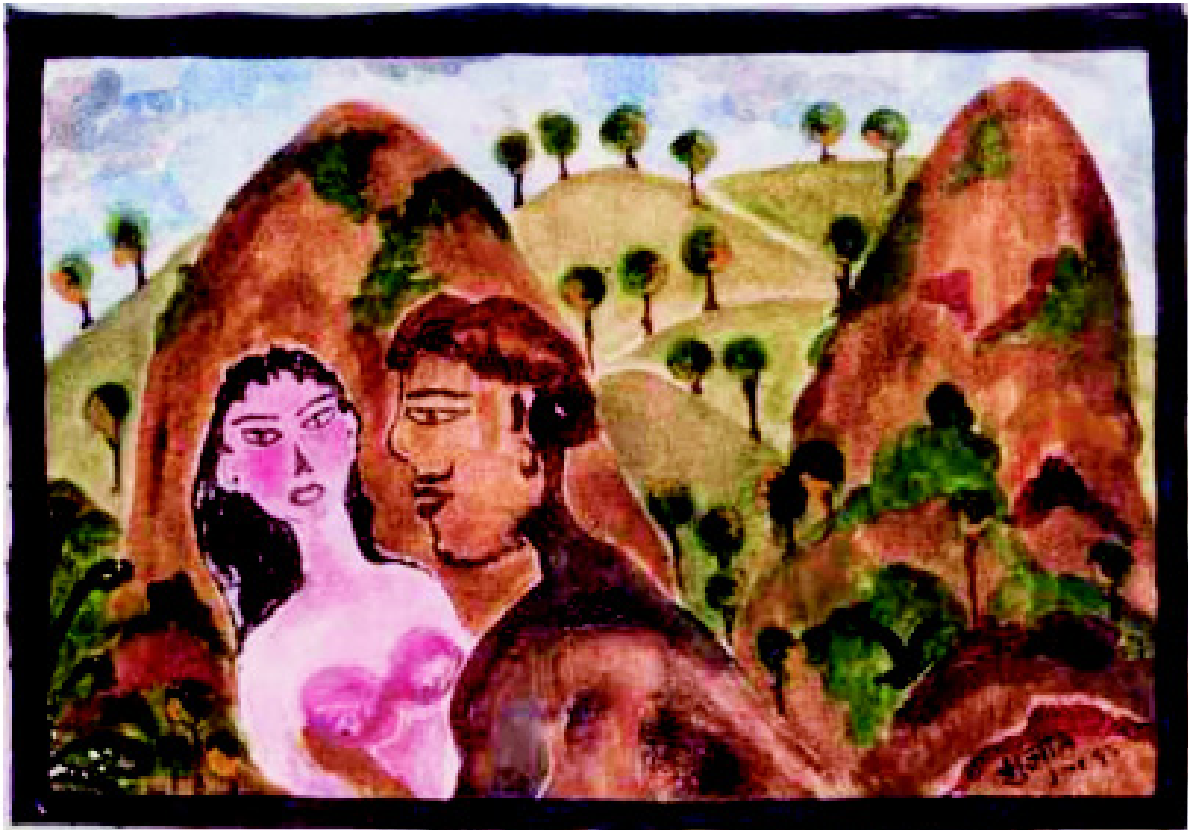


After the marriage rituals, *U Kmawan* led his beautiful bride from her father's place to Nonglang village near Mawkyrwat. They lived there happily and earned the respect of all mankind. They helped the people of the area by protecting them from invaders and other evil forces.

One day *U Kmawan* had to rush to his father's bedside having got news of his ill-health. He did not take his wife with him since she had to look after their home. But before leaving he advised *Iewma* to behave in a proper manner and not allow anybody to visit her when she was alone. *Iewma*, always obedient, promised to heed his advice.

*U Kmawan* found his father on his death bed and within a few days he departed from this world. Being the only son, *U Kmawan* had to perform the funeral ceremonies and other rituals so he had to extend his stay.

In the absence of his good friend, *U Nongsynrih* used the opportunity to visit *Iewma* at Nonglang. In no time he fell passionately in love with her for she was as beautiful as the full-moon (*Naikhadsaw Synia*). Remembering the warning of her husband, at first she did not allow him inside the house. But as days passed, *U Nongsynrih* succeeded in gaining entrance to her house. He tempted her by suggesting that he would tell her secrets about her husband's past. Being after all a woman she fell in his trap and allowed him to enter her house.



One day *U Nongsynrih* gave her the false news that *U Kmawan* had caught the infection from his father and he too had died. When *Iewma* started crying he put his arms around her as if to comfort her, soon he successfully seduced her and had her acceptance to his marriage proposal.

When *U Kmawan* came back home and found *U Nongsynrih* there, he knew at the first glance that they had committed adultery. In his anger he kicked *U Nongsynrih* on his hip so hard that he landed at his own place. Thus the fight between the two began. They fought one another with bows and arrows. The struggle continued for nine days and nine nights without a break.



At last *U Kmawan* was victorious over *U Nongsynrih*. Victory was his because his cause was just while *U Nongsynrih* was on the wrong side. Accordingly *U Nongsynrih* lies today fallen down, cut in two, at the foot of the hill. A reminder of this story is the fact of the shameful fallen state of the *Nongsynrih* boulder which lies at the foot of the once proud hill.

In the above narration we find the Khasi elders seeing *U Kmawan* as hero. He is exemplar in action because he successfully knocks down *U Nongsynrih*. But he is hero for a more important reason and that is, he is a man of right conduct. *Nongsynrih* is guilty of immoral behaviour, namely adultery, and he meets a sorry end.