CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

The term folklore was suggested by William Thoms, a British Antiquarian, in 1846. Thoms was acutely aware that academic attention has been directed on materials of folkloric nature which was being undertaken under different categories of learning notable among others of which were "Popular Antiquities" and "Popular Literature". He was convinced that a single label of learning be designated to address this domain of knowledge system so that appropriate inquiry could be conducted. Writing a letter to the Athenaeum¹ he suggested "A good Saxon compound Folk-Lore ... the Lore of the people" to replace all other what some cumbersome and even slightly misleading terms.

William Thoms further urges readers of the Athenaeum to collect examples of those "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs etc." many of which "assume a value that he who first recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them".²

In so far as identifying and describing the items that, in his mind, constitute folklore, William Thoms was clear and the fact that he was influenced by what the Grimm brothers did in Germany is evident in the letter:

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² Ibid
"...until some James Grimm shall arise who shall do for the Mythology of the British Island the good service which that profound antiquary and philologist has accomplished for the Mythology of Germany. The present century has scarcely produced a more remarkable book, imperfect as its learned author confesses it to be, than the second edition of the "Deutsche Mythologie" and, what is it? — a mass of minute facts, many of which, when separately considered, appear trifling and insignificant, - but, when taken in connection with the system in to which his master-mind has woven them, assume a value that he who first recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them."3

The spirit of Thoms' exhortation is an obvious reflection of the foreword penned by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm to their Deutshe Sagen:

We recommend our book to devotees of German poesie, history, and language and hope that it will be welcome to all as purely German fare. For it is our firm belief that nothing is as edifying or as likely to bring more joy than the products of the Fatherland. Indeed, an apparently insignificant, self-occasioning discovery and endeavor in the study of our own indigenous culture can in the end bring more fruit than the most brilliant discover and cultivation of foreign fields.4

3 Op cit pp. 862-63
Thoms’ coining of the term folklore, as he himself accepted in the same letter, does not mean, as some people are inclined to believe, that this landmark coinage spurred people’s interest and fired scholar’s imagination to look for and work on materials of folkloric nature. It has to be mentioned again that this undertaking was ably initiated by the Grimm Brothers, particularly of J. Grimm, whose “household tales” appeared in 1812, and was recognized by Thoms himself, and which is very often used as evidence by Western scholars to trace the growth of folkloristic studies. Scholarly collections of folklore materials were done in Asia, particularly India and it is to the credit of the great Indian tradition that highly erudite and illuminating works such as the Kathāsaritsāgara, Pañcatantra or Jākata are extant. Without a doubt, these masterpieces are much older works than Grimms.

William J. Thoms was proud of the term he had coined in this letter written under a *nom de plume*, and with prescience of its future consequence in academic discourses, sought to strongly reiterate his singular achievement and responsibility in coining a name of a branch of knowledge with all its implications - “... remember I claim the honour of introducing the epithet Folk-lore, as Disraeli does of introducing Father-Land, into the literature of this country.”

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5 See Deutsche Kinder Und Hous märchen [Tales for the Children and the Family] (Berlin, 1912)
7 Ibid p. 4.
9 Op cit
The history of folklore tells us how readily the term gained acceptance, not alone in English-speaking countries but everywhere in the world. As Stith Thompson had phrased it, "It is now as ubiquitous as the Ford car and moves uneasily in Russian and Hungarian texts, not to speak of such familiar literatures as French or German." But it is significant that in this initial statement of the objectives of the discipline to which Thoms gave a name and some of the items he had enumerated, lie implicit that fuzziness in types of data, and those implied and resulting problems of terminological acceptance that have troubled folklorists for a long time to come.

Definitions of folklore are many and varied. The difficulties experienced in defining folklore are legitimate and real. They result from the nature of folklore itself and are rooted in the historical development of the concept. Early definitions of folklore compounded the romantic and exotic and added with the notion of "popular antiquities" for good measure. Thoms sought to replace this concept which hinted broadly at a non-serious orientation of the subject to put it mildly. It was, one can aver, be regarded, by many as something to do as a hobby.

It must be pointed out that, in the tradition, early Greek writers notably Herodotus and Hesiod were aware that the myths they dealt with were not instinctive and idiosyncratic productions, but were actually stories that human beings create and others copy through learning and by repetition. Implicit in these definitions are criteria of the
antiquity of the material, the anonymity or collectiveness of composition, and the simplicity of the folk—all of which are circumstantial and not essential to folklore.

The simplest and the easiest way to describe the concept of folklore is to divide the word 'folklore' into 'folk' and 'lore'. According to Alan Dundes: "The term 'folk' can refer to 'any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is — it could be a common occupation, language or religion — but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally, most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity". 11

It is apparent that Thoms while coining the term folklore had a very clear idea in his mind as to what he meant by it but, it must be understood that he did not expect the storm of controversy his coinage would generate. The fact that we still go back to Thoms indicate that he initiated a healthy dialogue, the parallel of which perhaps is unknown in other recognized disciplines, about the definition, scope, academic parameters and concerns of this novel field of inquiry which straddles between the Humanities and Social Sciences. This, however, does not mean that Thoms presented a definition of folklore in the manner we would have expected him to attempt one,

keeping in view our present standards, expectations and controversies. But Thoms
certainly had some kind of an itemized view of folklore in mind. His words and phrases
such as "manners" "customs" "neglected customs" "fading legends" "fragmentary
ballads" etc., do present a rough outline as to what folklore meant to him and also
present a picture of his increasing awareness of folklore, which was "closely associated
with nineteenth century intellectual currents of romanticism and nationalism". 12

William Thoms' contribution in coining and introducing the term "folklore" had
two important consequences for folklore scholarship the world over. It led to the
establishment of an academic discipline known as folklore (or folkloristics) in many
parts of the world. Pioneers who documented and studied folklore were also virtual
pioneering students of culture. They were concerned with phenomena that had the
underpinning of a complex system linked to behaviours of human beings through which
they create, learn from, teach each other and establish collective social identification
commonly called culture. In order to put into perspective the notion of culture as it was
defined and drew the attention of early folklorists, let us turn to Edward B. Tylor who
considered folklore examples as perfect cultural phenomena:

that complex whole which include knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom,

and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. 13

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Against the backdrop of E.B. Tylor's influential and, now, often regarded as sweeping contention, it must be said that folklorists working at that point of time were already conscious of the fact that folklore functions as a reflector of cultural phenomena. Folklorists had, for more than half a century, been offering concrete concepts of folklore examples as aspects of culture while at the same time being aware of the relationships between folklore and cultural phenomena.

They had begun to study the phenomena which they saw had intersections with other aspects of the cultures of which they were a part. Folklore to them provided the key to cultural knowledge and understanding. Thomas Wright writing in 1846, the year marking the watershed in folklore history says:

> In these we trace the early formation of nations, their identity or analogy, their changes, as well as the *inner texture of the national character*, more deeply than in any other circumstances, even in language itself.¹⁴

In the same vein J.F. Campbell, writing in another part of the British Isles commented that the stories he collected in Scotland:

> can teach us ... about the people, their origin, and their habits, past and present.¹⁵

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Folklorists through the quarter century from 1885 to 1910 and after have been testing the conception of folklore as it came to be presented and accepted with the addition and configuration of new information and materials from diverse part of the world as reflected in W.W. Newell, the first editor of the Journal of American Folklore, who said in 1898:

It is not many years since the Folk-lore Society officially defined that word to represent only survival of prehistoric usage and belief among races in and advanced stage of culture. On the other hand, it was pointed out in this JOURNAL that such limited definitions would render the term of very little use to countries possessing a stock of genuinely savage tradition, and that whatever might have been the original significance, common usage has now determined its employment in a wider sense, namely, as coextensive with oral tradition. Circumstances have so far wrought in favor of this contention, that we now see The Folk-lore Society abandoning the restriction itself had created, and issuing the work in which the term “folk-lore is made to include the myths, stories, legends, pious beliefs, and religious practices of the most savage African tribes. This authoritative employment of the word will settle the question, and for the future make it agreed that the study and collection of folk-lore means the study and collection of oral traditions of every sort, in all stages of culture with the enveloping

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atmosphere of usage and conduct. The writer of this notice cannot but take a lively gratification in such issue of the argument". 16

Secondly, it also generated a long and unending controversy, perhaps unknown in the history of any other discipline of equal strength, about the definition and, more often than not, about what should and should not be included in the gamut of this new field of inquiry.

Jawaharlal Handoo has offered what he termed a "working" definition of folklore which has been accepted by scholars in the country and abroad for its usefulness in that it addresses pertinent issues and removes irritants which could seriously dampen the enthusiasm and hinder the progress made in the field of folkloristics especially in India. Handoo points out to the fact that there does exist an internationally accepted format which, when modified, can be followed in respect of each culture or nation. The collection, indexing, archiving and analyzing folklore has consistently followed certain guiding parameters the world over. It follows the assumption that there is no known human society which does not possess folklore. All human societies have myths, legends, folktales, folksongs, proverbs, riddles, folk dances, music, and while these genres do not necessarily exhibit traits that are mutually exclusive, in the sense that what is traditionally regarded as epic in one community is regarded as myth in another. A quote from Handoo will serve to demonstrate this point:

...based on my own observations, the Dravidian cultures of southern India seem very rich in the genres of folk dance and drama than the Indo-Aryans of northern parts of the country who seem to have thrived in narrative forms. Moreover, it is also true that diffusion and diverse dissemination of folklore materials result in the mixing up of certain genres or in other words two or more genres may lose the distinction by which they could be separately recognized. This loss may be functional, structural or even both. For instance, in Tamil and Kannada it seems proverbs and riddles are in free variation in certain situations. 17

In another illuminating statement, Handoo affirms:

A folklorist, on the contrary, studies a given item of folklore for its own sake and in doing so he relates the item to the culture as a whole.

And

...a real folklorist nevertheless makes use of the techniques and methods developed within his own field of inquiry for the study of an item of folklore. For example, a folklorist if he is a narrative specialist, studies the structure, language, motifs and style of a narrative; its problems of diffusion, dissemination, aspects of narration and the narrator, besides the factors other scholars sometimes study. It is precisely at this point that a

17 Handoo, J. Folklore An Introduction, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, 1989, p. 8
folklorist's work becomes different from the work of a literary scholar or a historian. That folklore items need the attention of such scholars as well, besides the folklorist himself, needs hardly to be emphasized. In a country, such as India, this kind of collective scholarly attention gains more prominence in view of the fact that Indian represents the complexities of Indian cultural heritage, history and civilization. This complexity is such that no folklorist can describe it correctly or interpret it accurately without the help of scholars representing other related disciplines.18

This succinctly reflects Alan Dundes' statement about folkloristics "straddling the Humanities and the Social Sciences".19 The simplest and easiest way to describe folklore is to divide the word folklore into folk and lore.

One of the main difficulties of folklore studies is the area to which folkloristics should confine itself. Over the years, a serious overlapping of jurisdiction occurred, which is prompted by an interest of scholars of other disciplines in identical fields of investigation, data and material collection. For instance, literature claims a sizeable portion of folkloristics because the study of texts having folk basis is very much a literary practice. Literary scholars regard the study of epics, ballads, myths, songs etc. as strictly falling within the ambits of literature. In the same way, anthropologists demand

their due when non-literary items of folklore, such as customs, dance, festivals etc. are considered.

This resulted in the serious infringement of area by both literary scholars and the anthropologists. But a boundary to preserve the sovereignty and uniqueness of folklore is difficult to draw, as talking realistically, folklore concerns many disciplines and should be studied across disciplines. And the uniqueness of folklore study is that the scholar works on, largely, his own field data, which would throw up facts related to, or speaking about a living aspect of tradition of which he himself, frequently, is a part of.

This contention would bring in the question of the dynamism of folklore. Is folklore applicable or operative? To provide an answer to this question, we must go back to tradition. Tradition is intrinsically linked with folklore; indeed it spawns folklore. Tradition sustains the culture of a society, and causes fresher traditions to emanate. But that is not all. Folklore is created even in those developed societies which have abandoned tradition altogether. This is because folklore emanates from the very life of man, his activities and occupations, his creativity. Mazharul Islam, in his book *Folklore, the Pulse of the People*\(^{20}\) cites the example of labourers of big industrial units in U.S.A. or the farmers of agricultural farms of the U.S.S.R. who would sit in small groups at dusk after their day’s work and exchange gossip. Such a group, through their banter, creates a new folklore. This is a new trend in folklore and folklorists have willingly conceded to these elements, the right of being called folklore. It can be seen here that a

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\(^{20}\) Islam, Mazharul. *Folklore, the Pulse of the People*, 1985, p. 29-30.
new tradition has been created. Folklore is indeed dynamic, adjusting to new changes to suit new situations. An element of folklore can originate any time, and put to the test of time, will prove its worth. A worthy or real element of folklore will prevail, once it is accepted by the folk, which may be composed of a family, a village community, a tribe or nation.

FIELDS OF FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE:

There are different fields of folklore and folklife. R.M. Dorson classified the fields of folklore and folk life as follows:-

1. Oral literature or verbal art
2. Physical folklife or material culture
3. Social folk customs
4. Performing folk arts

Oral literature or verbal literature includes all the “spoken, sung and vocal forms of traditional utterances”. It includes the folk narratives or tales and songs which circulate by word of mouth. It also includes the proverbs, riddles and charms.

Under physical folklife or material culture is studied the techniques, skills of the folk in building their homes, making clothes, preparing food, tools and implements etc.
Social custom is another branch of folklore which studies the festivals and celebrations involving the participation of the folk in large numbers. These festivals and celebrations may be either religious or secular. Under this rubric also fall folk religion and folk medicine. Performing folk art concerns primarily with traditional music, dance and drama.

The present study however, concerns itself with proverbs as part of oral literature or verbal art.

FUNCTIONS OF FOLKLORE:

According to W.R. Bascom, folklore has many functions. The first function of folklore is amusement, through folktales, folksongs, ballads, dances, dramas, riddles, people find amusement. But folklore cannot be discussed as a form of amusement only. It is apparent that beneath a great deal of humour lies a deeper meaning. Folklore reveals man's frustration and psychological escape from the taboos and repression, not only sexual which society imposes upon the individual. The concept of compensation and escape mechanism are fully suggestive when applied to the Cinderella tale. Folklore also reveals man's attempt to escape in fantasy from the conditions of his geographical environment and from his own biological limitation. The same approach is also suggestive when applied to the psychological identification with a trickster who overcomes his more powerful associates by shrewdness and cunning.

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21 Bascom, W.R. Four Functions of Folklore, 1972, p. 420.
The second function of folklore plays a role in validating culture, by justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them. Myth is not explanatory, observed Malinowski but serves as 'a warrant, a charter and often a practical guide', to magic, ceremony, ritual and social structure. When there arises any doubt or skepticism about an accepted pattern there is usually a myth, legend, explanatory tale, novels or a song to do away with the doubt or skepticism.

The third function of folklore is that it plays a major part in education particularly the non-literate societies. The importance of many forms of folklore as pedagogies devices has been documented in many parts of the world. The Ogre tales like the Bogey Man are used in the discipline of very young children, and lullabies are sung to put them in a good humour. There are different fable for the children to inculcate principle, diligence, piety and ridicule laziness and snobbishness. Proverbs are characterized as the distilled wisdom of past generation, riddles serves as a dialectic devices to sharpen the wit of young children. The dilemma tales for which there is no correct answer do the same for those who are not mature. As oppose to practical instruction in productive techniques folklore appears to be the principal feature in the general education of the child in non literate societies. Throughout the world, folklore provides a medium for the transmission of knowledge, values and attitudes from one generation to another and these contributes to the continuity of culture.

The fourth function of folklore fulfils the important but often over looked functions of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour. Some forms of folklore
are important as means of applying social pressure and excessive social control. It is employed against individuals who attempt to deviate from social conviction with which they are fully familiar.

Folklore also provides a psychological release from the restriction imposed on the individual by society. The other function of folklore is maintaining the continuity and stability of culture. Folklore is related with political field also. So it can be used for the purpose of propaganda and social change.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:**

In this work this scholar has chosen to study Khasi proverbs. The proverb in Khasi tradition occupies an important place in family and social life. The Khasis, whether educated or not are deeply rooted in their tradition; they make use of a large number of proverbs in their day-to-day conversation, contact situation and social gathering. Some of these proverbs have found place in creative writing but as a student of folklore and with some acquaintance with the peoples' oral tradition in general and proverb in particular this scholar feel that no such specific studies from the folklorist point of view has so far been undertaken. It is from this perspective that the proposed study has been undertaken. The scholar has intentionally proposed to conduct this study from the perspective of analyzing the ethnography of speaking folklore with regard to Khasi proverbs because she is convinced that folklore is a system of communication which includes both the study of lore and the study of the folk.
OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The objective of this research is to collect, document and study proverbs that are current in Khasi society and analyzing the ethnography of speaking folklore. Folk media such as proverbs and riddles are valuable treasure for a group of people, because the collected wisdom of the people are expressed and cultivated through these genres of folklore. The dynamics of handing down, perpetuating and fertilizing this legacy in folk and non-folk form are also studied.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY:

This work has made use of primary and secondary data. The primary data has been generated from surveys, conducted through interview schedules and participant interaction. Secondary sources have been drawn from published books, articles appearing in newspapers, magazines.

From the variety of methods available, the scholar has applied particularly the observation method, interview method and participant observation methods to elicit the required data. These methods are used in collecting samples of conversations at different periods of time where the people use proverbs during conversation and also data are collected from published books and articles. The data are collected at four levels that is, the text, texture, context and performance level. The areas in which the research was
conducted are Shillong city and its suburbs, Jowai and the neighbouring areas, Pynursla, Laitlyngkot, Lyngkyrdem and Nongtalang villages.

After collection, arrangements of the collected material according to the reference typologies are arranged and finally materials are analyzed accordingly.

Folklore is an integral part of human existence. Therefore to document folklore and in this case specifically the proverb, the opportunities to observe, elicit and document it are almost limitless. Proverb using individuals are encountered at work, in village circles and on city streets, at social gatherings and family get together. Proverbs are used during casual conversation and formal addresses.

While opportunities to collect proverbs arise sometimes, spontaneously and unexpectedly, whenever and wherever human beings have an interface, they are also generated at predetermined times or sometimes in pre-designated places. This scholar has experienced exchanges of proverbs taking place in diverse circumstances, ranging from intimate family meetings to the highly public political debates. This scholar has also, during pre-field survey, identified places, groups and individuals, events and activities that presented potential for collecting and documenting textual and contextual data of proverbs. During actual field work, with little modification over extensive contact period with informants and tradition bearers, much data was obtained through interview and questioning. This scholar witnessed events and was successful in testing hypotheses about the past proverbs play in their enactment and perpetuation.
A significant part of the study is based on collection of proverbs in context. At the initial stage of the study this scholar collected proverbs from her own recollection and also from proverb bearers in a formal way. This was followed by extensive work in some libraries, notably among them, K.K. Handique Library, Gauhati University Library, the Departmental library of the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, North Eastern-Hill University Central Library and State Central Library, Shillong.

A good part of the research was spent in field work in many villages, small towns, the Shillong suburbs, and within the city itself. The importance of field work in folkloristics cannot be over emphasized as it designate the act of enquiry into the nature of phenomenon by studying them at first hand in the environments in which they naturally exist or occur. This scholar has employed the technique of maintaining written records which as far as possible are verbatim renderings of proverb used and exchanged. As far as possible contextual data has been minutely recorded to provide the very necessary inputs required for this kind of work. The scholar has also made used of the tape recorder as the aural aspects of proverb saying and exchanged can be easily and accurately recorded. Data was collected by employing the participating, observing and interviewing methods, and for this too, the scholar has relied heavily on the tape recorder for documenting the speech-oriented genre of proverbs. In short, inquiry for eliciting information and gathering data was always selective and focus. In certain areas of Khasi Hills and in the villages of Laitlyngkot, Lyngkyrdem and Pynursla specifically, the scholar camped with families for several days in order to conduct
micro-research. This was influenced by the repute of verbosity of the inhabitants of the villages in the exchange of repartees which was a tantalizing piece of information for this scholar. Having been exposed to the art of verbal dueling and the discourse emanating from it, this scholar realized the potential presented by this situation, a situation which could result in a rich harvesting of proverbial nuances of the given dialects used by the village folk.

Clearly, this desired undertaking was not without challenges due to many reasons which are obvious in nature. The initial formal nature of relationship was a major deterrent and the matter was not helped when they realized that their inherent nature of using speech was a subject of curiosity to someone else who would not only record but write about it! Therefore, the scholar had to work in getting accepted by the village community and through several pilot visits, where no documentation was done, she has had to painstakingly explain the importance of the work as a cultural reflector which will only go to illuminate the ingenuity of their age-old and tradition-based skill for specialized verbal usage. Gradually, this scholar was accepted even within family circles and work which began tentatively at first, got better and went on to progress at a very good pace.

Documenting in other areas of Khasi hills and Jaintia hills especially in Jowai town proper was not a major impediment because a good section of the informants were aware of the intentions of this scholar and some of them were actually making small collection efforts themselves. Some of the informants mentioned certain
individuals who were endowed with witticism and who were regarded as originators of the many proverbs and aphorisms that were still being used. Some of these aphorisms bear very close affinities to prophetic sayings that have crystallized into proverbs. This scholar believes that this must have occurred because they were coined by venerable old men who were regarded as having had some rare qualities of perception. This shall be illustrated in full detail later on.

At Nongtalang and the surrounding areas where this scholar is based, documentation was comparatively easy but it must be mentioned here that it was a matter of revelation to this scholar, after years of field work and introspection, that the dialect of Nongtalang and its neighbourhood offered a mine of information about dialectical dynamics and how certain phrases and sayings which would not have been considered as proverbs conventionally, assume a proverb-like dimension when taken in the completeness of the context, especially in its use, application and perception, proving that in folklore the seeming appear obvious and vice versa. These characteristics will be highlighted.

This scholar had started field work from October 2000 and it continued till 2004, December. A few students and relatives helped this scholar in collecting proverbs from their own social situations. People’s understanding and interpretation of the proverbs and the intentions for which these are used have been noted down.

The proverbs analyzed in the study have been collected by the researcher. For
this study, fieldwork has been done in rural areas as it is assumed that villagers use more proverbs. Areas are selected in the places where the researcher is not a stranger to enable her to collect data by making social visits. Six villages were selected initially.

Proverbs were written down without disturbing the social interactions. Detailed ethnographic information were collected and noted down whenever possible. The collection was made mainly by the method of participant observation. Interview method is one of the major means of data collection. At the time of observation different comments on the issue were mentally noted down. Research participants were interviewed on the meaning of proverbs. Some time discussions were held with them on relevant matters.

**SELECTION OF AREA:**

The Khasi community has been taken for this study. A general view of the society as a whole is taken into account for background information. However with a view to obtaining specific information the study gives more emphasis in Shillong, Pynursla, Laitlyngkot and Lyngkyrdem and Nongtalang villages.