

## HEAD HUNTER'S TRANSLATION OF 1 SAMUEL 18.7

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### Clarification of the term *head hunter*

*Head hunter* is a term with negative connotations in the present context of Northeast India. It is a name used by outsiders to define in general the hill people living in the northeastern part of India. It is easy for an outsider to place people into such categories. But the people themselves may be very uneasy with the label, when they learn its connotations. In fact it can be extremely hurtful to them, because in reality it describes something that they are not.

We have learned from our cherished traditional history that our forefathers were not the kind of people who loved to kill other people just for pleasure or for fame. Whenever our forefathers went to war, it was customary for each soldier to bring back their enemies' heads when they returned victorious from the battlefield. If that was the practice of our people in the context of their time when war was a reality and each group of people had to defend their territory, can we really categorise them as head hunters? Remember, after David killed Goliath, he also cut off his head and presented it to King Saul, yet no one would refer to him as a head hunter!

The term *head hunter* is therefore used in this paper simply to draw attention to the people themselves, and to stress that the head hunter may have something helpful to offer in translation, especially with regard to literary forms suitable to particular occasions.

### Scope of the paper

I will limit this paper to the Khasi context. The Khasis live in the State of Meghalaya, which is in the northeastern part of India. Khasi is the common name applied to a number of different groups of people living in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, who speak a variety of dialects of one language, depending upon their geographical location. This common language is also known as Khasi. The Khasi land is known in our history as *Ka Ri ki Laiphew Syiem bad Ki Khat-ar Doloï* meaning "a land with many states in it." The head of each of these states is called by different names in different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. These are *Syiem* or *Lyngdoh* or *Sirdar* or *Wahadadar* or *Dolloï*. The last name came into

effect in the Jaintia Hills after the British abolished the office of the *Syiem* in 1835. In those days it was the *Syiem* who marched to war as the head of an army.

It was the custom and practice in those days that whenever men went to war, they had to offer prayer to God the creator, asking for his help. When they won the battle, they returned home rejoicing with their enemies' heads in their hands, dancing and singing a traditional song called *ka phawar*, composed spontaneously on the spot and accompanied by a drum beat. The heads of the enemies were placed on the altar where sacrifices were offered to God the protector.

Getting enemies' heads brought prestige for every person who went to war. The one who got many heads was considered to be a warrior, who in Khasi was called *U Khla ka Wait*. This title was not limited only to one person but was given to others as well who fulfilled the criteria.

The focus of this paper is on the effect produced by the translated text in the receptor language. First Samuel 18.7 is selected as an example to show the possibility of a translation bringing the desired effect upon the readers. Though we do not know exactly how the text affected the first readers, we can make an informed assumption by looking to **the occasion** of the text, and aim to produce a translated text with more or less the same effect on contemporary readers today.

### **The text (1 Sam 18.6-7) in various versions:**

RSV <sup>6</sup> As they were coming home, when David returned from slaying the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music. <sup>7</sup> And the women sang to one another as they made merry,

“Saul has slain his thousands,  
and David his ten thousands.”

GNB (UK) <sup>6</sup> As David was returning after killing Goliath and as the soldiers were coming back home, women from every town in Israel came out to meet King Saul. They were singing joyful songs, dancing, and playing tambourines and lyres. <sup>7</sup> In their celebration the women sang, “Saul has killed thousands, but David tens of thousands.”

NJPS <sup>6</sup> When the *troops* came home *and* David returned from killing the Philistine, the women of all the towns of Israel came out singing and dancing to greet King Saul with timbrels, shouting, and sistrums. <sup>7</sup> The women sang as they danced, and they chanted:

Saul has slain his thousands;  
David, his tens of thousands!

CEV (UK) <sup>6</sup> David had killed Goliath, the battle was over, and the Israelite army set out for home. As the army went along, women came out of each Israelite town to welcome King Saul. They were singing happy songs and dancing to the music of tambourines and harps. <sup>7</sup> They sang:

Saul has killed  
a thousand enemies;  
David has killed  
ten thousand enemies!

NIV <sup>6</sup> When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. <sup>7</sup> As they danced, they sang:

“Saul has slain his thousands,  
and David his tens of thousands.”

REB <sup>6</sup> At the homecoming of the army and the return of David from slaying the Philistine, the women from all the cities and towns of Israel came out singing and dancing to meet King Saul, rejoicing with tambourines and three-stringed instruments. <sup>7</sup> The women as they made merry sang to one another:

“Saul struck down thousands,  
but David tens of thousands.”

### The occasion

In the versions quoted above we can notice that v. 6 sets the occasion. Our concern here is not the impact of the song upon King Saul as the sub-headings in GNB (“Saul Becomes Jealous of David”) and CEV (“Saul becomes David’s enemy”) suggest. Instead we shall focus our attention on the occasion which subsequently had a tremendous effect upon the people, leading them to sing joyfully.

The occasion is a victory march of King Saul, his soldiers, and David from the battlefield after defeating the Philistines. The main character stressed in v. 6 is David, who is the key person famous for killing the Philistine Goliath. We were told in ch. 17 that King Saul and his men were terrified and did not have the courage to face Goliath, whom the Philistines trusted to win the battle against Israel. In such a context, we can understand what it really meant for a person to dare to challenge Goliath. David, himself not a trained soldier, had shown enough courage by trusting God, who was the source of his strength. He marched forward without any armour to challenge Goliath, and killed him. In 17.57 we were told that David brought the head of Goliath to Saul.

Victory in the midst of hopelessness triggered much joy and happiness among those who were at home, especially their womenfolk, who were eagerly awaiting the news from the battlefield. The news of what David had done in bringing victory to the Israelites was so overwhelming that these women could not contain their joy and happiness within themselves. As they welcomed the king, his soldiers, and David marching in from the battlefield, they expressed their joy outwardly through joyful dancing and singing accompanied by beautiful melodies played on various kinds of musical instruments. The joyful songs they sang were not composed beforehand but came out spontaneously, there on the spot.

It is just such an occasion which brings the biblical text closer to us, the hill people of northeastern India, because among the Khasis there is a special traditional song called *ka phawar* which they used to sing during any joyful occasion.

### Ka phawar

Rabon Singh Kharsuka is reputed to be the first Khasi to have written a book. In 1905 he produced a book titled *Ka Kitab Jingphawar*, which is a collection of

many phawar. This is the only book where we can trace the varieties of phawar which our predecessors used to sing. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in his e-article "The Birth Pangs of a Poet: The Early Works of Soso Tham, Chief Bard of the Khasis" ([http://www.kritya.in/0209/En/name\\_of\\_poetry.html](http://www.kritya.in/0209/En/name_of_poetry.html)) described phawar as "traditional gnomic verses." This explanation does not give the overall picture of what phawar is all about. Rabon Singh Kharsuka explained it as the type of song which is composed right on the spot on any joyful occasion. Phawar was spontaneously composed and sung during the celebration of Khasi festivals, on occasions when the people pulled big stones to be erected as monoliths, during hunting seasons, during the time of victory in war, during the construction of houses, during archery sport, or during any leisure time when the youths gathered together. Bijoya Sawian in the e-article "Ki Hynñiew Trep: An Insider's View of the 'Seven Huts'" (available at <http://www.museindia.com/showcont.asp?id=92>) described phawar in these words:

"Phawar" is, more often than not, spontaneous and impromptu; in this particular aspect it is somewhat reminiscent of qawwali and calypso. Usually the first two lines are merely to set the mood and the rest have rhyme in couplets and rhythm and meaning. There is however no particular formula as such.

Bijoya Sawian's description of phawar is different from that of Rabon Singh Kharsuka as explained in *Ka Kitab Jingphawar*. However, Bijoya Sawian puts it more clearly in the first line of his definition, that "'Phawar' is, more often than not, spontaneous and impromptu; in this particular aspect it is somewhat reminiscent of qawwali and calypso," a definition with which I agree.

Phawar consists of stanzas, each with two lines. The first line does not have any significant meaning related to its context, but it serves the purpose of drawing the attention of the listener. In this line the names of animals or plants or measurements or any other concepts are used in such a way as to produce rhythm and rhyme with the next line. The composer has the freedom to choose anything without any restrictions when he or she composes but should keep in mind that the phawar will exactly match the occasion. The creativity and the talent of the composer are naturally evident here. Such a composer is able to produce a perfect matching pair in these two lines.

The second line in the stanza contains a meaningful expression. Though it is composed in a short form, it is able to communicate the full intended meaning. The number of stanzas depends upon the composer. There are times when it is very long, especially when two groups phawar with each other.

Since phawar are composed on the spot in any occasion, they are difficult to put in writing, except for those which the listeners remember through repetition when they are at home or in the fields. Such phawar we might say are the best composed ones. Rabon Singh Kharsuka collected those cherished phawar and published them in a book titled *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* in 1905. Phawar number seven in that book deals with victory in war where the king and his soldiers return home with their enemies' heads in their hands and throughout their journey back home they dance and phawar joyfully.

### Possibility of using phawar in translation

In the Khasi Bible, both the old version and the common language version, 1 Sam 18.7 was not translated in such a way that it will be obvious to the reader that this is a victory song. The translation of the old version (OV) follows a formal equivalence principle, with the KJV as the base text. The common language version (CL) is presently in the review stage and the manuscript is still to be finalised. The translation is more or less a formal equivalence translation of GNB.

**Khasi OV** <sup>6</sup> Te haba u Dabid u wan phai noh na kaba pyniap ia uta u Philistia, ki kynthei ki la iawan mih na ki nongbah ki Israel baroh, ki da iarwai bad ki da iashad, ban tan ia u Saul syiem, bad ki kanjari, bad ka jingkmien, bad ki kynja jingtem. <sup>7</sup> Te kita ki kynthei katba ki iarwai ki la iakren mar kylliang, bad ki la ia ong, “U Saul u la pyniap ia la ki hajar, te u Dabid ia la ki phew hajar.”

**Back-translation:** Then after he killed that Philistine, David returned back. The women came out from all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to welcome King Saul joyfully with tambourines and some sorts of musical instruments. Then, while those women were singing, they conversed with one another and said, “Saul had killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands.”

**Khasi CL** <sup>6</sup> Katba ki shipai ki dang wan phai sha la iing hadien ba u Dabid u la lah pyniap ia u Koliath, ki kynthei na man la ka shnong ha Israel ki iamih ban leit tan ia u syiem Saul, ki da iarwai ia ki jingrwai kiba pynsgew kmen bad iashad ha ki kanjari bad ki jingput jingtem. <sup>7</sup> Kita ki kynthei katba ki dang ialeh kmen ki iarwai kylliang kylliang, “U Saul u la pyniap da ki hajar, bad u Dabid pat da ki phew hajar.”

**Back-translation:** When the army returned back home after David had killed Goliath, the women from each village in Israel came out to welcome King Saul; they sang delightful songs and danced with tambourines and others musical instruments. While those women were rejoicing they sang to one another, “Saul had killed thousands, and David ten thousands.”

I believe that adapting the form of the Khasi phawar would be the best medium to achieve the desired impact on the audience. Though the form differs greatly from the source text, the impact upon the Khasi reader will be more or less the same, as it would have been upon the people of David’s time.

The issue is highlighted here for two main reasons:

1. As hill people, the Khasis, with advances in civilisation and in many other fields, have developed significantly. One negative outcome of development is that the fading away of some of the things which were part and parcel of the community is possible unless we treasure them. Phawar is one of the things cherished in the Khasi community. In present Khasi society, we rarely hear anyone singing it, but it is not lost altogether because in some functions it is still used. Some of the Khasi singers attempt to put it in their recorded music. Recently it was used too in the church choir during the Khasi Jaintia Synod Sepngi’s public services and the people liked it very much. Therefore, phawar is worth considering in the translation as well.

2. Considering the biblical context where war is a reality, and bringing enemies' heads to the kingdom is accepted practice, it is understandable that the impact of the victory song upon the people would be very great. That too is indeed real amongst the Khasis, at least in their communal memory. Knowing the fact that the Khasis used to phawar when the king and his soldiers returned from the battlefield with enemies' heads in their hands, it is therefore good to consider using phawar in translating this passage. If we do not, then I think the Khasis will not be able to feel the real impact of this passage.

Using the Khasi phawar will neither harm nor destroy the base text. The reason is that in the Khasi phawar the first line of the stanza does not convey any serious meaning that will disturb the real meaning of the stanza which is usually conveyed in the second line. The first line serves the purpose of drawing the attention of the listener. Looking from this angle, there is good reason to positively consider phawar, as the following attempts to do:

### 1 Samuel 18.7

A Khyndew kaba tyrkhong ka ap khmih ia u 'lap praw  
 U Saul *pa'iem* jong ngi u pyniap tang da hajar  
 Hoi! Kiw! Hoi! Kiw!  
 A Sing rangbah u kyrhuh kum Suri ba pynjot phar  
 Dabid *u khla ka wait* u pyniap da phew hajar  
 Hoi! Kiw! Hoi! Kiw!

#### Literal English translation:

Oh! A dry and parched land waits for a shower  
 Saul, our king, killed thousands only  
 Hurray! Hurray!  
 Oh! A matured lion roars like a ravenous wolf  
 David, the warrior, killed tens of thousands  
 Hurray! Hurray!

### Conclusion

The Khasi who defended their territory and who fought against the enemy were called head hunters by those outside the community, just because of the practice of bringing enemies' heads back to the kingdom after they won a battle. This term has unwarranted negative connotations for the people. When they returned, they also danced and sang phawar.

In 1 Sam 17, David decapitated Goliath and took his head to Saul. In 1 Sam 18, when the Israelite army returned victorious over the Philistines, the women met them singing and dancing. It is suggested that translating the victory song of 1 Sam 18.7 in the form of Khasi phawar not only suits the context, but also will have a similar impact on Khasi readers as it did on the people of Old Testament times, while also preserving an ancient Khasi poetic form.