convincing them it would block all sunlight and suffocate Earthly life. With the tree fallen the Earth became bright, ironically good for betel vines, but God's promise was broken.

There are over one million Khasis. Most live India's Meghalaya. Kukijuri is one of 38 punjees in Kulaura, of an estimated 94 in greater Sylhet. The Montri suggests the Khasi population of Bangladesh might reach 35,000.

It is thought the Khasi have been in the region for a long time – longer than most of the other ethnic minorities of Bangladesh. The Khasi language is of the Austroasiatic family thought to have originated in India, passed through the Brahmaputra Valley and into Southeast Asia. Khasi is related to Mon, Vietnamese and Khmer, and to the Munda languages of central India.

spread across a ridgeline. Home to 65 families, Belwa is much younger: a 25-year-old punjee that formerly fell within Konglah's jurisdiction.

But for the last 18 months Belwa has had its own 35-year-old Montri, chosen by the punjee committee. He takes advice from Kukijuri. He's invited us into his home. As is usual in a Khasi house we are offered tea and biscuits, and a little later, a sample of the rice wine called *kyat*. "The best thing about our punjee," says the young Montri, "are the betel gardens. In newer areas the betel grows well."

Yet betel cultivation often brings the Khasis in that area into conflict with mainstream society. There are attempts by influential locals to secure access to hillside land and resources. Forestry officials seek illegal payment. Instances of punjees being attacked and betel vines cut are not uncommon – and a betel vine takes three years to regrow.



Son of Kukijuri's Montri, Henry Talang crosses a bamboo bridge on the way to Belwa Punjee.

Downhill isn't difficult except that the knees start to shake. There's a half-hour walk and five bamboo bridges to cross to reach Belwa Punjee. At a much lower altitude, like Kukijuri it's

Part of the problem is that there is no clarity of land tenure. There is not even consensus among government officials. Local forest officers claim jurisdiction; the Deputy Commissioner says they