CHAPTER II
PRE-COLONIAL KHASI SOCIETY

An understanding of the winds of change that came with the British and those that blew across from the plains, and how these winds of innovation mingled with tradition and heralded a new order - a most spectacular transformation of the Khasi society, involves some discussion on the salient features of the pre-colonial Khasi society. The sources are unfortunately extremely meagre for the study of this particular period of the Khasi history, as there was no written language, not to speak of local literature, before the advent of the British. Nevertheless early British records and the studies made subsequently, provide us with some tools. The tradition current among the people also give us enough insight into the growth and evolution of the Khasi society. Moreover, in spite of the political change, and the onslaught of modernity, the tribal society has not changed much in respect of its basic tenets, and a close look still enables one to understand what the age-old indigenous
In spite of the fact that the origin of the Khasis had been studied and discussed by many scholars, the question is still interwoven with controversies. There is no doubt that the Khasis have inhabited their present abode, at any rate, for a considerable period of time, yet there seems to be a fairly general belief amongst them that they originally came from elsewhere. Contradictory and diversified views drawn from traditions and legends, anthropological findings, linguistic affinities, as well as affinities in the use of weapons, tools and memorial stones, and even similarities in the social customs, diet and dress, coloured the work of many researchers and thus left the question unanswered. B.C. Allen, is of the opinion that the Khasis are Indo-Chinese, speaking the Mon-Khmer language used by various tribes in Anam and Cambodia. He believes the Khasis to be one of the earliest band of immigrants from North Western China, and while the rest of the horde pressed onwards towards the sea, the Khasis remained behind. Rev. H. Roberts, suggested that according to tradition, the Khasis were connected

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1 P.R.T. Gurdon, The Khasis, p.10.
2 B.C. Allen, Imperial Gazetteer, p.485.
politically with the Burmese. S.K. Chatterjee observed that the Khasis appear to be Mongoloid and have adopted the Austric language while in Burma. Roy supported this view by suggesting that the language indicated that the Khasis belong to the family of the powerful Mongoloid invaders of India. From anthropological point of view, Bareh stated that the Khasis are traced to what was called the Blachycephalic Platyrhine racial type which forms the stratum among the population of southern China and much of South-Eastern Asia and the Malay Archipelago. This view, however, was disagreed by author like Roy Chaudhari and Dixon. Much that had been said on the various different theories regarding the origin of the Khasis, in view of the anthropological and linguistic proofs, the most accepted theory, supported by many authors, is that the Khasis belong to the old Austric Mon-Khmer tribe in Burma, of which a group moved westward and came to Assam. According to Bareh, they are culturally and linguistically related to the Palaung-Riang-Wa-Lemet-Mon-Bahnar alliance, which form a group of the most original and oldest people among the Austrics.

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3 Nalini Natarajan, Missionary among the Khasis, p.10.
6 Hamlet Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, p.30.
7 Nalini Natarajan, op.cit., p.10.
opines that a series of racial contacts between the earliest Austrics and the Mongoloid family, resulted in the formation of various sections of the Mon-Khmer speaking people like the Rmen or Rman or Mons of central and Southern Burma, Palaungs and was of Upper Burma, and the Khmers and other Austric speaking people of Siam and Indo-China. Other representatives of this Austro-Asiatic stock, are the Ho-Mundas of Central India, whose language is very similar with that of the Khasis.

MIGRATION

Regarding the migration of the Khasis, many supported the theory that their route was from East to West. Judging by the many affinities that can be traced among the Khasis and the people of the Far-East, particularly the Mon-Anams, Gurdon, was convinced that the Khasis came from the East. Hutton pointed out the similarities among the Khasis and the Mon-Khmers of the East, and thus supported the same view that the Khasis migrated from the East. According to a tradition which holds this view, the Amwi-Khasis came from the East and were originally connected with the Mekong river. H. Lyngdoh, in agreement with this view, further locates the original

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10 Banikanta Kakati, Assamese, its formation and development, p.32.
place somewhere in Western Cambodia, Burma and other regions in the East. Yet there is one tradition which points out the North as the direction from which they migrated, and Sylhet as the terminus of their wanderings, from which they were driven back to their present home by a great flood, on which occasion, the Khasis lost their script. Probably, this tradition is in accordance with H. Lyngdoh's view that the Khasis entered their present land from a North-Eastern direction through Nowgong, Lumding and Halflong areas and across the Kupli river.

THE TERM 'KHASI'

Khasi is a word that many authors tried to interpret. Bareh feels that this word has a particular significance, as Kha means born of and Si refers to an ancient mother. Thus Khasi means born of the mother. Another view points out that this word has been derived from the word Khas, which in the language of the plains, means wasteland or land not under the jurisdiction of any Zamindar or landlord. According to Pandit Lakshmi Narayan Sastri, in his first message of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, the Khasis were also known as Khos and Khasi Hills as Khos Parbat to the aryans as found in the Shastras.

13 H. Lyngdoh, Ka Niam Khasi, p.II(Introduction).
14 Ibid.
and Purana (Khos derived from the Sanskrit word kho which means power to understand, and so which means as seen. Thus Khos means people with the power to understand.) Rev. T. Rodborne suggested another three interpretations of this word, and one of them is that the people of the neighbouring plains often called the Hills people Khai Manus, which means cannibals, so it is quite probable that the word Khasi has its origin there. He also states that this word might have taken roots from Cassia, the name of one particular type of bay leaves found in abundance in the Khasi Hills. Yet he feels that this word might also have sprung from the word Ghas, which means grass in the language of the neighbouring plains, as the hills are covered with greenery and grass. Probably the plains people might have referred to the hills people as Ghasia, which later became Khasi. R.M. Nath, has another opinion that Kha means water course and Chai-kha or Kha-Chai means bloody water. The people living by the side of the spring from which reddish water oozed out were the kha-chais and they were later known as Khasias or the Khasis. Father G. Costa, stated that the Khasis were once badly oppressed by the Thlen (a man-eating serpent) and just

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17T. Rodborne, U Khasi, pp.4-11.
when the people were about to give up hope, a redeemer was sent down from heaven by God. The name of that redeemer is Khasi and his father Thawlang, and mother, Iawbei. Considering these various interpretations, it is rather difficult to ascertain the real origin of the word Khasi. However, it should be remembered that Khasi is a generic term of the various sub-tribes inhabiting the Khasi as well as the Jaintia Hills.

RACIAL TRAITS

The Khasis have mongolian features - oblique eyes, low nasal index and high cheek bones. The nostrils are large and prominent, though the nose is somewhat depressed. They have medium sized eyes and the pupils are either black or brown. They are short and sturdy with muscular legs. Joseph Dalton Hooker described them as short, very stout, muscular with enormous calves and knees, rather narrow eyes, little beard, broad and high cheekbones, flat noses and open nostrils. Their average cephalic index is 77. Their mouth is large and lips are often thick. Their hair is black and generally straight, though some have curly hair too. Their complexion varies from dark to a light yellowish brown. On the whole, they have a medium

21 P. R. T. Gurdon, op. cit., p. 3.
tan complexion. The men are muscular, while women are comely.

The Khasis in general, are lively, cheerful and light hearted. They are more industrious than the Assamese, according to Gurdon, but William Robinson described them as though labourious when actually engaged in work, yet they are a slothful people, like most mountaineers. Hooker described their character as sulky intractable fellows, wanting in quickness, frankness and desire to please. They are also subject to sudden ebullitions of feelings. All the same, much that has been said by various authors regarding their character, the Khasis have a very independent nature and are straightforward and simple. Chewing a lot of pan or betelnuts is part of their custom and habit. They indulge themselves in liquor and are hard drinkers. They are also fond of gambling. But in spite of these bad habits, they are still above their neighbours in the scale of moral worth. They have a democratic nature, and they reflect it in their social, political and religious organisations. This democratic momentum has carried them on and on from time immemorial, from fear and ignorance to a larger understanding of

22 P. R. T. Gurdon, op. cit., p. 4.
23 William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, p. 411.
24 J. D. Hooker, op. cit., p. 274.
themselves and the Universe.\textsuperscript{27}

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The social structure of the Khasis originated from the clans that came into being during the period of migration, but the origin of many clans are still clouded by myths and legends. These legends, however, throw some light into the evolution of their social structure. All clans traced their descent from their ancient ancestress called Ka Iawbej tynrai. Some clans adopted the mother's and father's names, for example the Sawian, Ngap Kynta, Phanbuh and Wanlang clans.\textsuperscript{28} Sa, Ngap, Phan, and Wan, were names of their respective female ancestress, the mothers, while Wian, Kynta, Buh and Lang, were that of the fathers respectively. Clans like Khonglah took the name of the place they dwelt. Other clans claimed a totemic origin like the Tham and Shyrieh clans, which traced their ancestry to a crab and a monkey (Tham means crab and Shyrieh means monkey). Likewise, the Diengdoh clan traced its origin to a tree by that name.\textsuperscript{29} Yet other clans like the Dkhar clan, traced their origin to the plains.

\textsuperscript{27} Hipshon Roy, "The Khasi Heritage - their religion and Culture," Khasi Heritage, p.18.
\textsuperscript{28} H. Bareh, op.cit., p.316.
\textsuperscript{29} P.R.T. Gurdon, op.cit., p.64.
mother's clan. However, in some areas like the war area, the children could also adopt that of the father's. There are some clans that are looked upon by another, as members of the same kith and kin, and this was mostly due to their same ancestry or to an allegiance of kinship which was formulated for security or protection, or in recognition of common interests. (Khasi system of kinship was exogamous and marriage of members inside the same clan was considered a sinful act — shong sang. If this happens, the couple became exiled and thus became outcasts. Polygamy was prohibited according to Khasi custom and so was re-marriage before divorce. Adultery was regarded a sin. Although the clans were exogamous, yet the tribe as a whole was endogamous.) J.N. Chowdhury feels that this was advantageous for a man who continued to live and work under familiar environment. The proximity of his mother's house was also a constant reminder as to where his roots lay, as well as a source of strength, in view of his own position as an outsider — u khun ki briew, in his mother-in-law's or wife's house. 

Tribal endogamy was, however, not very strictly

30 J.N. Chowdhury, The Khasi Canvas, p.137.
followed, and a non-Khasi married to a Khasi woman was accepted and assimilated in the society, provided he followed the Khasi ways of life. Similarly, when a Khasi man married a non-Khasi woman, the woman was not only accepted and assimilated in the society if she had adopted the Khasi customs and religious traditions, but she also naturally became a progenitrix of a new clan, as she could not take that of her husband. Often a new name to such a clan was given and thus the evolution of clans like the Dkhar Clan as mentioned. Productivity in a Khasi society was regarded a necessity not only to increase the family, but the clan as a whole - Ke Kur ka Jaid.

The Khasi society was unique for its matrilineal system, and the most important feature in the family organisation was reverence of the ancient female progenitrix. As has already been referred, the mother's clan was adopted by her children. As the children belonged to the mother, the mother also belonged to her mother. In this way, no Khasi child could be an illegitimate child whether the mother bore that child from a husband with whom she had gone through a formal ceremony or not. Such a

child had a claim on that family to which the mother belonged. Women amongst the Khasis enjoyed an unusual dignity and importance, and this was shown by the fact that the mother was always a person entrusted with important duties of performing family rites and ceremonies. For generations, Khasi women had been custodians of property in whose strength of life and character, the men of their clans confided their life's earnings and the hope of the peaceful resting of their souls. Yet, though the mother was the sole keeper of the house, all in all in matters of the family with an authority over property, and a priestess of family religious rites, she still had to be guided by the counsel of her uncles and brothers. Even the actual task of sacrifice and other religious celebrations of the family, were done by them. Her brothers, that is uncles of her children, and the father, were as much respected as the mother by the descendants, and were often held sacred by them. This was shown by the fact that the mother, the maternal uncle and the father were religiously linked in a triangular manner. Ka Iawbei, the ancestress U Suidnia, representing a maternal uncle, and U Thawlang, the

32 David Roy, op.cit., p.87.
father were revered as ancestors from whom all the Khasi clans descended.

The youngest daughter of the family usually enjoyed the privilege of inheriting, not only the residential house of her parents, but also a lion's share of the family property. The Ling Seng, or the house of her parents was always inherited by the Khadduh or youngest daughter. Her sisters were only entitled to a smaller share of the family property, as the Khadduh was the one responsible for all family religious rites. She was the one who had to bear the expenses of these rites and of the funeral ceremonies of her parents, including the important feature of Khasi religious custom of placing the bones of the dead under a family cairn, Mawshyieng, and finally to transfer them to the clan cromlech, the Mawbah. The other children of the deceased, contributed if able, but ka Khadduh of the family was responsible for all these. The youngest daughter also had to fulfill her duty as the keeper of the house, by helping and gathering under her wings, her brothers or sisters or any other family members, whoever might need her help in case of misfortune. Thus, she was known as Nongri-ling or keeper of the
house, and her brothers and sisters were known as Nongmih-jing, as they usually set up their own respective home after their marriage. In spite of the high status of women in Khasi society, the men too had their own role of importance to play. In fact, theirs was a double role, as in his parents' house, he was not only a son, but a maternal uncle to his sisters' children, and he acted as a counsellor and guardian to his nephews and nieces. Again, in his wife's house, he was a husband and a father, who played his part in bringing up his children. However, his role as an uncle was more important, as though the father was respected by his wife and children, yet his position was still next to that of the maternal uncle, as in matters concerning his wife's family and even his children, the maternal uncle had more say. But this did not make the father's position weak or awkward. In fact, Khasis often say U Kpa uba ai ia ka long rynieng (It is the father who gives them their life and stature), and Gurdon has rightly observed by saying, "It is the father who faces the danger of the jungles and risks his life for his wife and children. The maternal uncle only comes when it is a question of life and death." Indeed, even the

34 P.R.T. Gurdon, op.cit., pp.78-79.
mother of the father was respected and revered like a goddess, as the Khasis believed that their father's mother too, had given them their being.

In the social structure of the Khasis, the family, called Ka Iing was the first unit, and a number of these Iings belonging to the same ancestry - Ka Iawbei tymmen formed Ka Kpoh, Ka Kur ka Jaid was formed by a number of these Kpohs belonging to the same root ancestress, Ka Iawbei tynrai. Those that had a direct lineage to the father's side were called Ki Kha Ki Man. All Khasi clans shared the same basic structure, but they possessed distinctive religious rites. The supreme duty of the clan was to place the bones of a deceased member, under a clan stone, Mawbah, as has been referred. Stratification in early Khasi society was not rigid, though social hierarchy did exist. The Syiems, that is the royal clans, held the top-most position in the society. Next to them were the Lyngdohs which formed the priestly clan. The clans of Myntries and Bakhraws, which were the ministers who advised the Syiem, occupied a position next to the Lyngdohs; Then the clans of common citizens and workers, that is the middle class. The last position was shared by bondsmen who were sold in slavery or criminals who

35 Nalini Natarajan, op.cit., p.17.
were made outcasts.

'CIVIL ORGANISATION

The political culture of the Khasis, emerged from within its social structure. Lack of security of life and property compelled the people to live in large villages. However, as in the case of other tribes, they had a tendency to split up into numerous petty communities, each under its own head. From time to time, some ambitious chief would conquer and absorb some of the adjoining communities, but it again disintegrated into small independent communities once the ruler or his successors became weak. The Khasi state was usually formed by the voluntary association of villages and communes. Several villages often joined together to constitute a commune, and several communes joined together and constitute a state, which was administered by a Chief called U Syiem, aided by a durbar or an assembly of elected representatives of the people called Ki Myntri. In the opinion of H.O. Mawrie, Khasi democracy was founded on the Dorbar Raid, or a durbar of the communes, and the Dorbar Shnong, a village durbar. These two durbars had an elected headman each at the top. A Khasi state though it consisted of a well-developed central authority, which exercised

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36 B.C. Allen, op. cit., p. 488.
37 E. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 312.
38 Kamaleshwar Sinha, Meghalaya - Triumph of Tribal Genius, pp. 254-256.
39 H.O. Mawrie, Ka pyrkhat U Khasi, p. 69.
fiscal, legal, administrative and military power, yet the Sylems had very limited powers. Indeed the ruler had combined in himself the duties of a judge, military general and chief executive councillor, yet for every decision, he had to obtain the approval of his dorbar, or assembly of ministers elected by the people. This assembly, known as Dorbar Hima, or the State Durbar, was also often called Dorbar Blei (Durbar of God), as it was so much respected and held sacred. The sovereign will of the people was considered supreme and the people at large or the subjects, held the highest position or rank in their political set up. Thus the Khasi state was truly democratic, and Robinson wrote,

"The Khasias present the appearance of a congregation of little oligarchical republics, subject to no common superior, yet of which, each member is amenable to some degree, to the control of his confederates."  

The number of sylemship before the advent of the British is unknown, but later, after the British had established their power and consolidated their position, they had set up and recognised 16 sylemships, 3 Lyngdohships, 5 Sirdarship and 1 Wahadadarship, of which the most important sylemships were Khyrim, Mylliem, Cherra, Nongstoi and Nongkhlaw. All decisions

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in all the Syiemships, Lyngdohships and Wahadadarship, were worked out in strict accordance with the Riti, or an unwritten constitution which grew out of past usages and practices. Regarding their military organisation, the Khasi chiefs had no armed forces, but in times of war and trouble, it was the people themselves who rose as one man to defend their hearths and homes.\(^4\) They also went to conquer and annex territories outside their homeland. This showed a strong bond between the people at large and their rulers. Indeed, a Khasi state was like a family which consisted of the king who was like a father and mother to his subjects and the elders of the state, which represented the uncles of that family. This close bond of relationship between the Syiem and his riots, could be clearly seen from the way the people sometimes addressed their Syiems as Pa-iem (Father-King) and Mei-iem (mother-Queen) and in return the Syiems referred to their subjects as ki khun ki hajar (children).\(^4\)

The institution of sylemship was as old as the community itself, and its origin was believed to be divine and totemic. Some syiems, however, traced their ancestry to the plains. H. Lyngdoh

\(^4\) Ibid., p.1.

\(^4\) H. Lyngdoh, *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng*, p.viii (Intro.)
opines that according to traditions, the first Khasi syiems were Ki Syiem Madur-Maskut, Ki Syiem Synteng and Ki Syiem Shillong. These three royal clans traced their ancestry from a divine and totemic origin, as the first traced its origin to the pig, the second to a fish, and the third to a goddess (puri). Other royal clans which came after them, descended either from other Khasi clans or Dkhar clans (clans whose ancestry was from the plains). The Syiem was entitled to an income, which was mainly a toll levied from those who sold at the markets in his territory and also from the state lands, as there was no land revenue system. He also received a state subscription or pynak, which was voluntary and meant for the expenses of the state ceremonies. Judicial fines were shared by the members of the durbar too. The Syiem was usually appointed by the Council of Ministers from the royal family or clan, and in the same way, the members of the Council were elected from certain selected clans. Though descent was always through the female line, the office of Syiemship could not be held by a woman. The customary line of succession was from uncle to nephew, usually the eldest son of the eldest sister of the Syiem. In the absence of male heirs from the eldest sister,

the succession passed to the male children of the next eldest sister. However, in case of total absence of male heirs from the particular royal clan, a female could also succeed to that position, and such a case was seen in the Nobosohphoh Syiemship, where a female by the name of Ka Lar had been able to obtain the seat of the Syiem. 47 The Syiem's family also acted as the keepers of the religion of the state, and the income or the possessions of the Syiem was taken by the Syiem's maternal house. In some states, the Syiem Sad, the mother or the eldest sister, or the eldest niece of the Syiem acted as the keeper of his income and possessions, and distributed them among the family members, including his wife and children. 48 However, some royal families followed the common Khasi rule of inheritance. Although Khasi society was matri-centred, yet women had no rights in the political and administrative spheres. They were excluded in the processes of legislation, administration and judiciary.

JUSTICE

The Khasi judiciary consisted of elders and the heads of the state. It was often the village headman who settled disputes, with the help of the

48 H. Lyngdoh, Ka Niam Khasi, p.167.
elders of that village. But in case of a major dispute which could not be settled, the Syiem and his council of ministers took over the case. Such a case was usually decided by the Dorbar Pyllun, which consisted of elders, village headmen, ministers and the Syiem. This durbar acted as the jury, and the Syiem as the judge, and they tried both criminal and civil cases. Thus the Durbar and the Syiem combined in themselves both administrative and judicial powers. Taboos, ancient moral codes and precepts, fables, durbar's resolutions and antecedents, concepts and instructions laid down in the ancient covenants and agreements, were the various sources from which Khasi law had been derived. Crimes were of very rare occurrence, yet whenever they occurred, judicial fines and sometimes life imprisonment and death sentences were imposed. Land disputes were common and in case of some unsolvable disputes, a most remarkable trial was resorted to. This was the trial by water ordeal or the immersion in water. Whoever could stay longer in water was the winner. Sometimes this was done by putting two earthen pots in the water, one containing gold and the other silver.

49 G. Costa, op. cit., p.2.
50 H. Bareh, op. cit., p.291.
Whoever could get hold of the pot with gold in it was considered the winner. Among other punishments, expatriation and keeping in stocks, pyndait diangsong were also practised. Murderers were often given life imprisonment and sometimes beaten to death. All these laws to punish wrong doers, were made by Syems and their ministers, together with the elders of the state and with the consent of the subjects.

LAND OWNING PATTERN

(There were two main classes of land, namely, (1) Ri Raid or public lands, and (2) Ri-Kynti or private lands. Under each class, there were a number of sub-classes. The Ri Raid and Ri Kynti together formed Ka It Ka Hima, which means a state within its border and extent. In the Khasi Hills, there was no land revenue, as the chief was only a democratic ruler who had no right to levy a land tax from the people. The land was the absolute property of different clans, villages and private owners.) Thus J.N. Choudhury wrote

"In order to understand the principle of Khasi land ownership, we have to approach the question first from a historical perspective. We can, for instance, imagine a stage in the dim past of the

52 Rabon Singh, Ka Kitab Niam Khein Ki Khasi, p.51.
53 David Roy, "Land Tenure in the Khasi States" in Keith Centlie's Notes on Khasi Law, p.118.
Khasti history, when groups of people roamed about in the interior of the hills in search of suitable lands for settlement and cultivation. In course of time, by virtue of continued possession or cultivation, these families claimed absolute rights of ownership over the lands which consequently formed their Ri-kyntis.\textsuperscript{54}

Ri Raid or public lands were land set apart for the community, which any individual had the right to use and occupy but had no heritable or transferable rights. Even the right to use and occupy these lands reverted to the community, once that individual ceased to occupy or use the land for three consecutive years.\textsuperscript{55} Ri raid lands fall under different categories. One was the Ri Bam Syiem, or Raid Hima which were the Syiem’s or Crown lands. These lands were intended for the support of the Syiem’s family, and they could not be alienated. A land tax was levied by the Syiems on persons who cultivated such lands. Another class of Ri raids were Ri Lyngdoh, meant for the use and support of the Lyngdohs or priests of the state. Ri Shnong or village lands were the property of the village, and they were to provide a supply of firewood, thatching grass etc. for the use of the village. Among Ri Raid lands, there were sacred grooves too called Law kytang.

\textsuperscript{54} J.N. Chowdhury, \textit{op. cit.}, p.156.
\textsuperscript{55} Report of Land Reforms Commission for Khasti Hills, p.16.
which were held sacred and cutting of timber from these grooves was considered an offence, except if they were for religious purposes, as these were specially reserved for the religious ceremonies of the people. Other different classes of Ri Raid, are Lawniam or religious lands, Law Adong reserved for crematory use or the use of timber for building purposes, and many others by whose names, the purpose or the idea for which they were held or maintained was indicated.

Ri Kynti were lands whose owners were in absolute possession. They could sell, mortgage, lease and dispose of it in any manner that they deemed fit. Ri Kur, which falls under the same category, were lands owned by a clan as a whole. Ri Kynti land was also known by different names such as Ri Khurid, which were bought; Ri Nongtymmen, which was of ancestry. Ri Iapduh, which were owned by a family which had become extinct and thus lapsed to the state, etc. However, according to Maham Singh, individual ownership of property among the Khasis, was not present previously, as there was such a close bondage between every person and the clan to which he belonged. This made a separate and individual
existence impossible; thus all ancestral pro
was jointly owned by the members of the clan
Kur, of which the eldest maternal uncle or eldest
male member was generally the head. This is to
say that there were only Ri Kur.

INHERITANCE

(In strict accordance with the matrilineal
system prevailing in the Khasi Hills, inheritance
was from the mother to daughters, except in the war
area, where the system was both matrilineal and
patrilineal.) According to Bareh, property was
of two kinds - inalienable and alienable. The
first type was a legacy, an ancestral property, which
could not be disposed of without the general con­
sent of the whole clan or family concerned. The
second type of property consisted only of the earn­
ing of the present members.

Property in a Khasi society, both alienable
and inalienable, was usually inherited by the young­
est daughter of the family and most often, she
enjoyed only the major share of it and not the
whole, for her sisters were also entitled to a
smaller portion of it. This was so, as the youngest
daughter or Ka Khadduh of the family, had to bear.

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56 Maham Singh, op. cit., p. 2.
57 H. Bareh, op. cit., p. 329.
the family's expensive ceremonies like Thep Mawbah, the placing of the bones of the deceased members of that family under the Mawbah or clan cromlech. The socio-economic religious institution of the Khasis was also one wherein the ancestral house was held a sacred ground of the family rituals and also a meeting place of her brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces. And, the duty of the Khadduh was to keep the house and to make all arrangements for the performance of religious rites and ceremonies of the family or clan. It was usually the Long khi or the males of a maternal descent that performed the ceremonies. This type of property was considered inalienable, and the youngest daughter, though she was the rightful owner, had no right to dispose of it without the consent of her uncles, brothers and sisters. Her brothers, sisters and other family members also had a right to stay in this ancestral house for as long a period as they wanted and could even occupy a portion of the family land as co-parceners. It was usually the mother who divided her share of ancestral property in her life time in consultation with her brothers or uncles. There were cases however, of the youngest daughter being expelled

58 Keith Cantlie, Notes on Khasi Law, p.12.  
or excommunicated for some unpardonable transgressions, and thereby lost the right of inheritance.

In case of acquired property, the youngest daughter inherited the house where her parents must live and die in her care. She also got the bigger share of both movable and immovable properties, but her sisters also shared the lesser part of these. However, even in the inheritance of this type of property, the youngest daughter had to play her part as the keeper of the family rites and to look after her brothers, sisters and other family members in times of misfortune, failing which, she could be superseded by others of her sisters or in the absence of sisters, by other females who was next of kin.\textsuperscript{60} Wills and Gifts did not exist, but there was a custom in respecting the wishes of the parents or grand parents, who sometimes said their wishes as to what should be done after their death and even named property which should be given to a certain child.\textsuperscript{61}

According to custom, the earnings of a man before his marriage, went to his family, which later might become part of the ancestral property. After

\textsuperscript{60}Report of Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills, p.36.
\textsuperscript{61}David Roy, "Principles of Khasi Custom" in Keith Cantlie's Notes on Khasi Law, p.95.
his death, his wife and children often returned his bones and belongings to his mother's family, as a Khasi man belonged to his own family and clan. Regarding properties belonging to the clan as a whole, division of such properties among separate families belonging to that clan, was more frequent than continuance in joint possession. However, undivided clan properties were managed by the youngest daughters of the different families of that clan, as representative of each family.

MARRIAGE

(Marriage, or Ka Poi Kha Poi Man, was considered a sacred tie by the Khasis. Ceremonies connected with marriage, the avoidance rules, their attitude to divination and consultation of omens, all strengthen the fact that marriage was held sacred.\(^{62}\) Kynpham Singh also supported this view by writing, "marriage is a sacred tie, to fulfil one of the purposes of life on earth - to multiply and expand the clan. Sex is not a past-time nor a means of gaining wealth."\(^{63}\) However, authors like Hooker,\(^{64}\) was of the opinion that it was not sacred, as wife swapping was practised. Gurdon, also quoted Shadwell, the oldest living authority on the Khasis,


\(^{64}\) J.D. Hooker, *op.cit.*, p.486.
that Khasi marriage was a purely civil contract, but Gurdon himself disagreed to this, by pointing out the fact that the presence of an elaborate religious ceremony at which God the Creator, the Goddess of state, 'Ka Lei Synshar and also the triad of ancestors, worshipped and revered by the Khasis, were invoked, was far from being just a civil contract. Love marriage was the most prevalent, though arranged marriages were also present. Couples who failed to obtain their parents' consent, often eloped and stayed together without any formal ceremony. Yet such a public living of a man and a woman without any ceremony also constituted a valid marriage, and such a union was regarded indissoluble. An engagement known as Ka Pynhiam Synja (putting on of a ring) or Lamdoh (engagement without the ring) was a pre-marriage requisite. No religious ceremonies were performed in marriage if a woman was no longer a virgin. Adultery and prostitution were regarded unpardonable sins, but they were tolerated as human weaknesses. The Khasis, although they were endogamous as a tribe, they were very much exogamous as a clan. Thus marriage within the same clan and with those clans

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65 P.R.T. Gurdon, op.cit., p.127.
66 Kynpham Singh, op.cit., p.102.
that were considered kith and kin was prohibited. Among the many taboos in marriage, the violation of which, the marriage was considered Shong-Sang, was marriage to one's sister-in-law or mother-in-law, which they termed it as Shong Sang Synri. 67 A Khasi could marry his own Bakha, that is cousin, a daughter of his uncle or daughter of his father's sister, but not in his uncle's or father's lifetime. However, to marry his other cousins or Parakha, that is, daughters of his father's brother, was not permitted. Such a taboo was known as Sang Sohpet Kha. A man could not also marry his father's sisters or their grand-children, and divorced persons could not re-marry one another nor could they marry again into the family of one another. Couples who married in spite of the presence of any kind of taboo or Shong Sang were usually excommunicated and on death, their bones could not be buried with those of the clan. Most Khasis feared to Shong Sang, as they believed that such a union was unlucky and would render them helpless to the claws of misfortunes like the striking of thunder, devouring by wild animals like the tiger, fatal accidents etc. 68 Khasi marriage was monogamous in nature, though


68 C. Costa, op. cit., p.29.
sometimes concubinage was tolerated. Yet children of such extra-marital affairs, had no rights to the self-acquired property of their father. This right belonged to the first wife, ka tnga trai and their children. Polyandry was absent and the matri-centred system was unfavourable to polygamy. The matrilineal system also demanded the husband to live with his wife in his mother-in-law's house. However, in most cases, except in the case of the youngest daughter, after the birth of one or two children, the couple usually moved out to start a home of their own.

The Khasi marriage ceremony was short and simple, and it consisted mainly of the citations of marriage addresses between representatives of the two parties. When proposals were reported, negotiations between the elders of the two houses started. Enquiry regarding the presence of taboos or blood relations was made, and if none was found, an engagement, usually in the girl's residence, followed. In this ceremony, the male handed over a ring to the girl, but in some cases, it was an exchange of rings. An engagement was a strengthening of ties before the actual marriage, and thus sometimes
no ring was given or exchanged. Once the date of the marriage was fixed, divination by breaking an egg was performed, and omens were consulted. If favourable, it started with the setting out of the bridegroom, accompanied by male relatives and friends, to go to the bride's house. On arriving there, a cordial welcome address was cited by the uncles of the bride. This was followed by an exchange of betel nuts between the two parties. Then uncles or spokesmen known as Ksionsg, again exchanged addresses, which, in turn, was followed by another exchange of rings between the couple and citations of a marriage contract. As a token of this marriage link, a priest or sacrificer, mixed libations from the two respective vessels, one belonging to the male and the other to the female, and having mixed, poured the libation as a symbol of strengthening the marriage tie. Then with three pieces of dried fish in his hand, he first addressed God the Creator and Goddess Synshar, to bless and guide the couple. Next he called on the ancestors to give strength and spirit to the pair and to cast a happy look on this solemnisation. Then he turned upon the audience to bear witness to this union. Libations were again poured
as before, and the dried fish was placed upwards on the roof to be removed only after the birth of their first child. The expense of the feast was partly borne by the bridegroom. Excluding other details, the marriage ceremony can be said to have both religious and socio-civil significance. The religious side was indicated by the presence of a priest and the part played by him, accompanied by prayers. The exchange of addresses by the representative family spokesmen and their attempts to establish cordial and mutual understanding between the two sides, presented the social significance of a Khasi marriage.

DIVORCE

(In spite of the fact that marriage was based on a spiritual and religious footing, divorce was unavoidable, and their ceremony for divorce was known as ka ia lait san shyieng, which literally means the severance of the five bones.) The presence of the senior members of the community and preferably the presence of the Ksiangs or spokesmen of the marriage ceremony, was required for the performance of this simple ceremony. In this ceremony, all that the couple did was, to hold five pieces of cowries or pice each in their hands. The woman gave her five cowries

to the man, and the man gave her ten cowries. She returned them to him and he threw them away. This action was supposed to symbolise their separation and the five cowries symbolised the five important parts of the body, 1) the head, 2) the body, 3) the hands, 4) the stomach, and 5) the feet. This separation was usually followed by a public declaration and drumbeats to mark the end of the ceremony. Once this ceremony was performed, the couple became free and were then allowed to choose any other partner for re-marriage. Sometimes, the defensive side of a divorce claimed a compensatory sum of money from the other side that requested the divorce against their wishes. This sort of a compensation, was for the humiliation of the divorce they had to go through. Adultery, incompatibility, ill-treatment by husband and barrenness, were usual grounds for a divorce. The children of the divorced couple often lived with the mother and the mother's family.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Agriculture was the mainstay of Khasi economy in the pre-colonial days. By jhumming, the people raised their basic requirements and the festivities and ceremonies connected with jhumming, formed part
of their social and religious culture. Apart from rice, they also grew millet, maize, mustard, bay leaves, lemon, job's tears, pineapples, turmeric, onions, ginger, gourd, pumpkin, sugarcane etc. Lac was also cultivated. Apiculture was also practised, and pigs, cows, sheep and goats were among their livestock. The Khasi were also craftsmen at leisure, and their arts and crafts including weaving, iron-smelting, gold-washing, basketry, carpentry and other handicrafts were based on indigenous raw materials. The dress of Khasi women had a unique character and weaving and embroidery formed part of the household activities. Music and dances played an important role in their social life and were connected with colourful festivals and religious ceremonies. Thus R.T. Rymbai commented on this saying,

"As one would not be able to keep a beautiful fabric intact by separating the weft from the woof, so would it be impossible to view that life of a Khasi, fully lived, if torn away from his festivals."70

Shad Suk Mynsiem and the Nongkrem dance were some of the well known festivals where music and dance blended together. Musical instruments were manufactured

locally, and they include the harp, drums, pipes etc.. Apart from music and dance, their most interesting amusement was archery. Bird catching, fishing, hunting and gambling also occupied no small portion of their leisure time.

The Khasis had a long trading tradition with the neighbouring plains, particularly with Sylhet in Bengal, wherein they bartered their surplus products to balance the deficit in the hills. They also carried on a large trade with the plains of Assam. Oranges, iron-ore, honey, wax, ivory, betel leaf etc. were often bartered for salt, tobacco, rice, fish, silk cloth and cotton. They also supplied the plains with lime and coal. Their trade relations with the plains, provided an important channel for the exchange of culture. The Khasi dress underwent changes and so did the dialects. The dhoti and turban used by the men-folks were similar to their counterpart in the plains, and innumerable words of the plains were also incorporated in the language of the Khasis. Influence of Hinduism on Khasi religion could also be marked.

Khasi Niam or religion played a very important
role in the Khasi way of life. It regulated all Khasi thoughts and activities and in fact, Khasi culture itself revolved around it. Indeed the Khasis had thought out their own systems of philosophy and religion, by believing in what life showed them and experience confirmed. They worshipped all that could inspire awe and admiration in them, and despised anything that hurt them. But the essence of Khasi Niam, was the belief in one supreme God, the Creator and sole ruler of this earth.) It was a generally accepted opinion of many authors, (especially those who do not belong to the Khasi community), that Khasi religion was theistic and animistic. Yet this view had been contradicted by many local authors like Rabon Singh, H. Lyngdoh, H.O. Mawrie, Sib Charan Roy Dkhar etc., by saying that God, the Supreme One, was omni-present, omni-potent and omni-scient. He was known by different names and He could be addressed to in many different ways, in order to signify the different forms in which He manifested Himself. His different relations with men, and a source of all powers that could affect human beings. He also manifested Himself in different places, in a

71 Kamaleshwar Sinha, op.cit., pp.87-89.
72 Rabon Singh, op.cit., p.11.
73 H. Lyngdoh, Ka Niam Khasi, p.5.
75 Sib Charan Roy Dkhar, Ka Niam ki Khasi - Ka Niam Tip Blei, Tip Brie, pp.4-6.
number of grooves, forests, hillocks, peaks and rivers, and these became places of worship. In this manner, Khasi religion seemed to have a pantheon of gods which confused other writers who held that Khasi religion was theistic and animistic, but in reality, the Khasi Niam was basically monotheistic. The existence of monotheism among the Khasis was supported by British authors like Robinson and Gurdon, but again like many other authors they also supported the view that Khasi religion was monotheistic only in the beginning, but later fell from this position and came to be animistic as well. Natural phenomena, which had a tremendous influence upon the primitive minds of the Khasis and their inherent fear of ghosts and evil spirits, had been attributed to be the causes of their animistic rites and beliefs found in Khasi religion. Khasis believed in the worship of nature and in the power of numerous water and mountain spirits to guard people from epidemics, bad harvests and foreign invasions. All afflictions and misfortunes were attributed to the wrath of evil spirits and ghosts, which could be pacified and propitiated by the sacrifice of a fowl or other animals. Thus

Khasis, divided the realm of spirits into two categories - 1) Good spirits, which were regarded as godlings like U Lei Longspah, the God of Wealth, Ka Lei Long Kur, ka Lei Long Jaid, the clan goddess, etc., and 2) Evil spirits which afflicted man with sickness and other calamities. Of these, U Rih, a mountain spirit of malaria, Ka Niangriang, a river spirit that caused ear infection, U Trang U Rwaibah, spirit of the air which caused fever etc. can be mentioned. Apart from the belief in mountain and river spirits, among other rites of the Khasi religion, which could be considered animistic, were the cult of fertility, associated with cultivation; worship of household-deities; and ancestor worship, which probably was the outcome of that human need for the strength and guidance of their ancestors. Khasi religion could also be conveniently divided into three main concepts which were interlinked with each other - 1) Divination, 2) Religion for the living, 3) Religion for the dead.

Khasi religion was also called Ka Niam Khein or Ka Khein Ka Bishar, which means the search of that truth, for the goal of every Khasi was to find that

78 N. Natarajan, op.cit., p.43.
ultimate truth.\textsuperscript{79} The Khasis believed in a reason behind everything, and they did not believe in fate or luck or even in astronomy.\textsuperscript{80} Thus all that happened, be it a natural calamity, accident or sickness was always believed to be the result of one's own errors. In finding out this reason, divination by the breaking of an egg, or the casting of rice grains, or the use of a Shanam or lime case, or even the use of a cock, played an important role.

Khasi religion comprised of that fundamental belief that man came to this world to earn the truth, Kamai ja Ka Hok, and a Khasi believed that his actions and deeds here on earth, would be judged when that judgement day would come, Akher ka Sngi, as they said. Khasi religion could be divided into two parts - 1) Ka Niam tip briew, tip Blei, knowledge of God and man, and 2) Ka Niam tip Kur, tip kha, knowledge of one's own clan and that of the father's.

In order to enable himself before his Creator, man must learn to love and respect his fellowmen and follow strictly the precepts of Kur and Kha in acceptance of the Khasi matrilineal system.\textsuperscript{81} It

\textsuperscript{79}Rabon Singh, \textit{op.cit.}, p.44.
\textsuperscript{80}H.O. Mawrie, \textit{op.cit.}, p.32.
\textsuperscript{81}Kynpham Singh, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.95-96.
was also desirable for man to know and love God, who, in turn, knows and loves him as one of His creations. Khasis believed that their religion was a God-given one. According to a Khasi legend which formed the source of Khasi religion, there was no such thing as sin in the very beginning and heaven and earth were both connected by an exceptionally tall tree which acted like a golden ladder, situated on a peak called U Lum Sohpet Bneng. In the heavenly abode, there were nine celestial families, and they were known as the Khyndai Skum Khyndai Trep. Seven families which were the kiths and kins of these nine families inhabited the earth, and these were the Hynniew Skum Hynniew Trep. The nine celestial families used to come down to visit the earth by means of that tree, but later on, by a sin committed by the seven families on earth, that connection with heaven was severed. Accordingly, the sun disappeared from the face of the earth and darkness enveloped the earth. The seven families were at a loss, and a need of a mediator who would act as a go-between man and God was felt necessary. It was then that the cock offered himself to be given as a sacrifice and thus fulfilled its mission
by obtaining God's forgiveness for mankind, accompanied by a religion which God Himself instructed man to follow thenceforth. Sunshine was then restored and henceforth the cock became the symbol of a saviour and liberator of mankind. It was for this reason that the cock came to be the foundation of the Khasi religion.

In relation to this legend, all that the Khasis did by way of religious rites, that is, divination, sacrifice, prayer, naming of a child, cremation of the deed, boneburial, ancestor worship etc. was just an attempt to find that way to God, as anything wrong or un-godly always keep a man away from God. Thus like the Jews, the Khasis believed that their religion was God-given, but unlike other religions, they had no churches, temples, pagodas, mosques or synagogues, as to them, God was omni-present, and each family or clan had their own distinctive religious rites and ceremonies, which they performed at the youngest daughter's house — Ka Iing Seng, Iing Khadduh. The Khasis neither had any dogmatic principles to determine the nature of God, soul, universal and their mutual relationship.  

Thus they possessed no religious book or scripture.  

82 Hipshon Roy, *op.cit.*, p.16.
Religious and moral precepts were just handed down from generation to generation by way of mouth. Khiasi religion had no missionary intention either, and tolerance was its core, as it did not believe in the monopoly of religious ceremonies by any one, nor did it look down on other religions or denounced them. There were no fixed days of worship either, and there was no idol worship, as unlike other religions which worship an unknown God or idols, the Khiasi religion worshipped a God who was very well known to them and who knew them well.

In their ancestor worship, each clan had its triad - Ka Iawbei, the ancestral mother, the progenitrix, U Thawlang, the progenitor, and U Suidnia, the maternal uncle of the clan. This tripersonal concept and the fear of Ka Byrsieh or a taint on the family, caused by crimes and transgressions committed, served as a link within the clan and between clans, maintaining a spirit of mutual love and respect. The Khasis had a strong belief in life after death too, as to them death was the end of life in this earth and the beginning of that life yonder. Thus, while addressing the dead before the cremation ceremony, they used to say "To khie leit

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85 H.O. Mawrie, U.Khasi Bad La Ka'Niam, p.33.
86 Kynpham Singh, op.cit., p.103.
ha kaba suk ban bam kwai ha jing U Blei," which literally means go in peace and eat betelnuts in the house of God. Likewise, the Khasis, by custom, always addressed, said prayers or invoked the dead person and not God, and this custom, must have sprung up from their belief that a man was responsible for his own action, and no other person could share his burden of sins for him. Bone-burial ceremony too had its origin in their belief of a life after death. In this ceremony, the bones of the dead were collected and kept first in a family cairn, or Mawshyieng, which acted as a temporary resting place, and later on, these bones were transferred to a Mawbah, which was a clan ossuary and a permanent place of rest. This action was to signify the belief that as the dead had been one family or clan here on earth, in the same way, they should remain as members of that same family and clan in their life ha jing U Blei (in the house of God) too. However, the bones of persons who had led a life of sin and whose sacrificial and religious rites had not been performed, were never kept in these Mawniam (religious stones), and the spirits of such people were believed to just wander in this earth in the form of ghosts, as they could not find their
resting place. Even the cairns where such bones were kept were known as Mawlum suid-iap, signifying the ghosts and spirits. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons which led Khasis to believe in the presence of Suid lum (mountain spirits) and Suid wah (river spirits). The Khasis also had a belief in hell, and they termed it as Khyndai Pateng Niamra, Nurok ka Ksew or Mynkoi u Jom. All these names showed that according to their imagination, hell was like a cave or pit, which was as deep as nine generations, or a hell where only dogs were fit to live, or a pool (umkoi) where the Khasis normally washed the bones of those who died in accidents before keeping them in the Mawshyieng and Jom was supposed to be the king of this pond.  

This belief in hell, however, was not in accordance with the Khasi way of thinking and belief. Thus, H. Lyngdoh was of the opinion that this was an adoption from other religious beliefs of the neighbouring people, like the Miris, who believed that there was an underworld from which a certain person by the name of Jom came. Hindus too, believed in the presence of a place of punishment for those who had lived an evil life, and this place was known as Norak or Dujak, (in Khasi, Nurok, and Dujok).

87 H. Lyngdoh, Ka Niam Khasi, p.13.
89 Ibid., p.15.
Influence of other religions, particularly Hinduism, on Khasi religion, can also be marked by the presence of deities like Biskorom, which the Hindus termed it as Viswakarma. In the Bhoi area, offerings were also made to the goddess Lukhimai, and the image of the goddess Chandi was worshipped by people at Shealla. Gurdon too found resemblances between the Khasi ceremony of Ai Bam, or offering of rice and eatables to their ancestors, and the Hindu ceremony of offering Pinda or rice cake to the nine generations of ancestors. The worship of several deities which bore resemblance to the Hindu deities, and other resemblances in the way of worship, laid open the fact that early Khasi contact with the neighbouring plains had resulted in the influence of the religion of the plains on the Khasi Niam. However, in spite of the fact that Hindu influence had caused a dent in the religion of the Khasis, idol worship was still absent.

The presence of exorcism among the Khasis, had led to the misinterpretation of the Khasi Niam by many authors like John Hughes Morris, who described it as a crude form of demonology. In fact,

91 N. Natarajan, op.cit., p.48.
92 P.R.T. Gurdon, op.cit., p.110.
Mawrie claimed that there was no other being on earth as scared of ghosts as the Khasis, and their worst fear was of any form of witchcraft. It was also this fear that led them to propitiate evil spirits in order to avoid their wrath. Rabon Singh also pointed out the fact that by Khein Ksuid (believing in evil spirits and demons), the Khasis only tried to find the reason that had caused the displeasure of God, because there was but one source that could issue orders, Ka 'Lei Hukum; without whose permission no evil spirits could afflict man with sickness or misfortune. If by his own deeds, he caused the wrath and displeasure of God, evil spirits were than permitted to punish man. Thus in trying to find out the reason, as well as to obtain God's forgiveness, ki phan ki kyrpad, or prayers were offered, followed by other sacrificial rites. Thus rites connected with this belief could in no way be interpreted as demonology. To say that Khasi Niam was both theistic and animistic could also be contradicted by the fact that the monotheistic trend was more prominent and the claim made by many Khasi authors that all the animistic rites observed by the Khasis only pointed to that

94 H.O. Mawrie, Ka pyrkhat U Khasi, p.15.
95 Rabon Singh, Ka Kitab Jingphawar, p.29.
one way to God, the Supreme Being alone. Thus Khasi religion could be considered monotheistic in nature. The fact that religion dominated every sphere of Khasi social life led Natarajan to conclude that "Khasi religion mirrors a fair image of the early Khasi life." 96

96 N. Natarajan, op. cit., p. 55.