As pointed out, in the preceding chapter, P.R. Gurdon was a Britisher who came to India as a British Government Officer. He lived and worked in Shillong for some years. He took keen interest in knowing and interacting with the Khasi people especially on the subject of faith and religion. This spirit of curiosity made him to write a book, entitled, *The Khasis* which was published in 1903. Gurdon devoted the whole of the *Section IV* of his book in discussing the different aspects of the Khasi Religion. Since the chief objective in this chapter is to examine the view of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion, it will not be appropriate without discussing his understanding of the Khasi Religion. But, first, let us try to understand the meaning of the term ‘Religion’. Going by the dictionary meaning, the term ‘Religion’ in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* of current English, means a belief in the existence of a god or gods who has/have created the universe and given man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body. It also means a particular system of faith and worship based on such a belief.\(^1\) Paul Edward said, “For most People, belief in God and in an afterlife are the essential ingredients of religion because these are prominent elements in the religions we know best”\(^2\).

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A definition of religion by an anthropologist, Clifford Ceertz, with a symbolic approach has recently made a considerable impression: "Religion is, (i) a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (ii) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (iii) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (iv) the moods and motivations seen uniquely realistic." According to this definition, religion includes many aspects like, the symbol-systems, myths, rituals, and other phenomena associated with religion.

A.R. Mohapatra, in his book, "Philosophy of Religion" says that, etymologically, the word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word ‘religio’ which means ‘to bind’. He further states:

Literally speaking, religion is a principle of unification and harmonisation. Any discipline which binds us all together in a wholesome way is religion. It is not mere belief but behavior; not mere conviction but conduct; not mere faith but functioning. In religion, the whole of the human being’s personality is involved.

According to this understanding it means that, religion has a binding force. It implies that members of a particular religion could come together in the name of the religion which they believe.

The term ‘Religion’ in the Khasi language has a peculiar meaning. The word ‘religion’ is often translated as ‘Niam’ in Khasi language. Thus ‘ka Niam Khasi’ is translated as the Khasi Religion. In this present work, I would like to explore the etymological meaning of the term ‘ka Niam’ (Religion). The word

3. P.S. Daniel (Ed), Religious Traditions of India (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. 23
4. A.R. Mohapatra, Philosophy of Religion (Sterling Publisher Private Limited, New Delhi), p.5
‘ka’ is an article in the Khasi language. Whenever article ‘ka’ is used or inserted, it indicates that an object or thing spoken of, belongs to the feminine gender and its plural form is ‘ki’. On the other hand, the article used for a male object or thing is ‘u’. It is quite peculiar to note here, that the Khasis use the article ‘ka’ in relation to the word ‘Niam’ or Religion. This, either directly or indirectly, shows that according to the Khasi thought and language, ka Niam (the Religion) is grammatically conceived in the feminine gender. In this respect, the word ‘ka’ is a gender-based article.

When we reflect upon the concept ‘Niam’ in the Khasi language, we find that it is a composite concept. It is so, because it is made up of two different concepts. Each concept has its own intrinsic meaning, in the sense that it connotes specific meaning. Rev. I. Kharkongor said that the concept ‘Niam’ is the composite concept. It is made up of the two concepts or words, namely, the word ‘Nia’ which means ‘Reason’ and the word ‘Im’ which means ‘Living’. In this connection, the term ‘Niam’ can be translated meaningfully as ‘Living Reason’\(^5\). This term ‘Living Reason’ can be understood in different senses. In a narrower sense, it can be understood as ‘thought’, ‘reason’ and a ‘logos’. In a broad sense, it can be understood as an essence of things or the substance of all things. In other words, it means a search for the ever living being which is beyond time and space. It will not be fair for the scholars or researchers to class the Khasi Religion (Ka Niam Khasi) as a simple animistic religion. It rather calls for an indepth study. The

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term 'ka Niam' in the Khasi language is a sort of belief system in the one (God) who is immortal and immutable in nature and the source of happiness and perfection. According to William James, religion is not static but it is dynamic, because it grows out of the deep personal experience of the fragmentary or broken character of life, and this awareness leads one to discover a power that can overcome this sense of imcompleteness. In this sense, religion has to do with the power which can lead us to God and the power of God will enable us to overcome the problem of life. This power can make us a complete human or grow in the fullness of being a man or a woman.

P.R. Gurdon in his book entitled "The Khasis" made some attempts to reconstruct the Khasi Religion (Ka Niam Khasi) by making some claims. Another purpose of this chapter is to examine these claims, whether they make sense or not, and also whether they are justifiable or unjustifiable. These claims of P.R. Gurdon which need to be examined are the following:

The Khasis have a vague belief in a God the Creator, U Blei Nongthaw, although this deity, owing, no doubt, to the influence of the matriarchate, is frequently given the attribute to the feminine gender, cf., ka lei synshar.

With reference to the above mentioned lines, first of all, I would like to state that, the word 'vague' may briefly mean that it is not clearly expressed. In the other words, it means that a certain term is ambiguous and it does not connote clearly, certain terms or things. For instance, the word 'U Blei', is a sacred word in the Khasi language, it has been translated into English as

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‘God’. This is the nearest meaning, but it is not an exact meaning. By way of clarification, the word ‘u’ is an article. When an article ‘u’ is used, it indicates that an object or thing or person spoken of, belongs to the masculine gender as far as the Grammar of the Khasi language is concerned. The word ‘Blei’ is a composite term, it is made up of two concepts or terms, that is the word ‘Ba’, ‘lah’ and ‘ei’. The word ‘Ba lah’ means one who is supreme who can do and undo things. He can do things which no one can stop or compel him to do. The word ‘ei’ means a free gift or giving things freely without a price. It cannot be exchanged in term of money. The word ‘Blei’ is a short form of the words ‘U ba lah’ and ‘ei’. In Khasi language, ‘U Blei’ means the Supreme Being who created things seen and unseen by us, out of his free-will and willingness. The Khasi concept of ‘U Blei’ is the concept of the sacred. According to the Khasi conception of God, God has no particular form or shape. Professor Sujata Miri writes:

Since U Blei is regarded as formless, it is impossible adequately to symbolize Him by means of any spatio-temporal object; it may also be improper to do so. Consonant with this idea, Khasis do not have temples, nor is there any iconographic tradition among them. U Blei is the basically unrepresentable source of everything; but everything in the world bears the mark of His greatness.

Perhaps, it is for this reason, the Khasis do not have the image of God. Basically, U Blei (God) is the un-representable source of everything. The world with all its beauty and charm bears the mark of His majestic greatness.

Though *U Blei* (God) is without a human body, yet He is knowable. We cannot perceive God, but we can perceive His manifestations. We can also have our knowledge of God by means of revelation and some other ways as well. The Khasis, since the time immemorial have some knowledge of the nature of God (*U Blei*) as the supreme and ultimate being who is good, merciful, holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent and self-existent, etc. The claim of Gurdon that ‘The Khasis have a vague belief in a God, the Creator’, is quite baseless. The term “vague belief” is actually describing that Gurdon is in the state of unclarity about *U Blei*. The Khasi Religion as it is, has no founder, no scriptures and does not emphasize on the need to have temples or particular places of worship as other religions. Perhaps these things made Gurdon to have an unclear concept of *U Blei*. We should remember that there are many books and articles about the Khasi Religion which have been written by outsiders. In their writings, a number of wrong and derogatory things have been incorporated. This is dangerous because most modern Khasis, especially the Christian Khasis have been led to use the same wrong terms and hold the same ideas. It needs to be corrected and clarified as early as possible. J.N. Chowdhury said:

“Before we attempt an account of the traditional religious belief and practices of the Khasis, we have to examine and dispense with the highly prejudiced views expressed by a few early British writers who referred to the religious ethos of the Khasis from an imperfect and fleeting acquaintance with them”.

Some people of modern society may place little significance on the meaning of a name. For instance, parents usually name their children after their beloved relatives or well-known persons. Sometimes they simply pick up a child’s name merely because it sounds good to them. But seldom, would they give any thought to the meaning of a name. For example, the name Philadelphia means city of brotherly love. It comes from the Greek words phileo which means to love and delphos which means city. Another example, the name Jerusalem means City of Peace being derived from the Hebrew word Shalom” which means ‘peace’. This is also certainly true of God. The Bible which is the sacred Book of the Christians refers to God by many different names and each one of them reveals some aspects of God’s character or His relationship with us. Some of these names are as follows: (a) Yaweh which means the Lord. (ii) Jehovah-Elohim which means the Lord is God. (iii) El-Shaddai which means the Almighty God (iv) Jehovah-Jireh which means the Lord will provide

In a similar same way, different names have been given for U Blei (God) in the Khasi Religion and we may mention a few of them as follows:-

i) U Nongbuh Nongthaw which means the Planner and Creator

ii) U Nongsei U Nongpynlong which means the Giver and Dispenser of life
iii)  *U Nongthaw bynriew u Nongbuh bynriew* which means *the Creator of mankind and the Planner of mankind*

iv)  *U Blei donbor* which means *the Almighty God.*

In all these four names given to God (*U Blei*), the article *u* has been used which shows that *U Blei* is the masculine Supreme Being. Gurdon has some serious problems with regards to the gender of God (*U Blei*). Referring to the name *ka’lei synshar* which means the female God who rules, Gurdon fails to understand the gender of *U Blei*. According to Jeebon Roy, there is only one God (*U Blei*), but it is human beings who have given different names to God according to our human understanding and His relationship with us. According to this opinion, it means that there is a possibility that one and the same God (*U Blei*) can have different names and manifestations. Jeebon Roy holds the view that *ka Niam Khasi* (Khasi Religion) is monotheistic sort of religion. With regard to the gender of *U Blei*, Sujata Miri holds the view that *u Blei* is beyond and above gender. He is not limited to our idea of gender. He is not gender-specific but rather gender-free. It is due to this reason that *U Blei* can be addressed freely by us as ‘*He-god*’ or ‘*She-God*’. To cite the words of Sujata Miri:

> According to Khasi tradition, the highest reality is one supreme being called U Blei, God the creator. He is also the provider (Nongbuh) and the maintainer (Nongsei). However, this God has no form. Sometimes he is addressed as a female deity but very often as U Blei (He-God She-God).

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H.O. Mawrie who is one among the active members of the so-called ka Seng Khasi (Khasi Association) has written some articles with a view to vividly explain the theological understanding of the Khasi conception of *U Blei* (God). It is interesting to note here, that God is above gender and number. This does not mean that there is a unity of gods but it just means that God can be addressed by different names in different events or occasions. It has been almost a common practice among the Khasis, when they address *U Blei* as the supreme Being, the ultimate Being, the Creator of all things and the Lord of all things and the Lord of all, they usually use the capital letter *B* for example (a) *U Blei Nongthaw* which means *the Creator God*, (b) *U Blei Trai Kynrad* which means the Lord God, and so on. When the Khasi refers to the activities or actions of God, very often, they use a shortened form of *U Blei*, that is, they change a bit of the spelling of *U Blei* by giving a spelling without capital letter *B*. In other words, when they address *U Blei* as the universal *God*, they spell with the capital letter *B* as indicated earlier, but when they address *U Blei* with reference to localized activities, they spell *U Blei* without the letter *B*. For example, (a) *U ’lei Muluk* which means *the God of the State*. (b) *U ’lei Shillong* which means *the God of Shillong Peak*. (c) *U ’lei Umtong* which means the God of water. (d) *U ’lei Longspah* which means *the God of wealth*.

From time immemorial, the Khasis made a differentiation between the *God*
universal and the God localized and a detailed discussion of this will be taken up in chapter III.

It would be useful to make an attempt to explain how the Khasis have a belief in God (U Blei). Gurdon and Mawrie do not deny that the Khasis have a belief in God. We need to examine whether they take this belief in God. However, it is an undeniable fact that the belief in God is central to the Khasi Religion. It is a very difficult task to find out and trace the origin of their belief in God, when and how it was originated. However one thing we know, their belief in God is very ancient in the religious life of the Khasi people.

As thinkers and truth-seekers, we use to say that every effect has a cause. So also, the Khasis have some reasons to have a belief in God. In a very brief way, I propose to give some explanations as follows:

1. The Khasis came to believe in God (u Blei) through their reflection on the Universe.

   The Khasis seem to have begun their belief in God through their reflection concerning the universe. When they see the world with their eyes, this made them think and reflect upon. In the course of their thinking process, they ultimately come up with a proposition i.e., there must be a God who created it. On the other hand, what they see, with their naked eyes, presupposes that there was a creator of the universe. In the course of their
reflection that creator is acknowledged to be *u Blei* (God). In other words, the universe must have been originated with God.

In the similar way, they also reflect on the enormity and continuity of the earth and the heavens. In the exercise of their rational power, they come to a point to have thought that there must be someone who looks after it, keeps it and sustains it. This someone is God. Since that time, it became both logical and necessary for the Khasis to hold a belief in God. It probably took a long time before the belief was formulated so clearly.

The Khasi thinkers seem to have used myths and other ideas in their attempts to give rational explanations of the mysteries of the world. In the Khasi worldview, there are many myths and legends which play important role in their narrative methodology to convey some truths and realities. Among them, (1) *U Sohpetbneng* (2) *U Dieng-iei* and (3) *Ka Krem Lamet Latang* are the most popular myths very often referred to by most scholars and researchers. B.L. Swer writes:

Ngi rah la ka khlieh da jingsarong ba ngi don ia *u Sohpetbneng*, *u 'Diengiei', *ka 'Lamet latang ', ka 'Dain thlen' bad kiwei de kiba ngi nud ban kyntur Khnang ban ia aireng bad kiwei pat ki kynhun bynriew Ha ka bor –jabieng bad bor sain –pyrkhath bym bud tyneng Hynrei ba shong tynrai.13

(we are proudly raising our head high for we have myths like *U Sohpetbneng, u 'Diengiei', ka 'Lamet latang ', ka Dainthlen* and other which give us a competitive strength to compete with people of other nations In the areas of reasoning power and the power of Thoughtfulness without being imitated but our own Originality).

2. The Khasis began to believe in God through their realization of their limitations.

Another probable cause of the origin of the Khasi’s belief in God was most probably through realization of their own limitations and weaknesses. As thinking beings, the Khasis, like other people, realized how limited they are in power and knowledge. This was true particularly in the case of facing death, calamity and the forces of nature such as thunderstorms, earthquake, mighty rivers, and the like. In their reflection, they realized that there are so many things which are beyond their control. This makes them to think that there must be another being which is unlimited, and such being must be God.

3. The Khasis also came to believe in God through their observation of the forces of nature.

The Khasi thinkers, right from the days of yore, thought that all events taking place in the phenomenal world must have caused by God who must be the uncaused cause. When they saw the rain, they often thought that there must be a supreme controller who caused and controlled it. In the same way, when they saw the power displaying by the storms, thunder, lightning, etc., all these made them to think that there must be hidden controller who regulated them. Again, they must have observed the rising and setting of the sun, the stars, the moon, etc. Such observations may have presupposed their
understanding to think of the divine being as the controller of all the forces of nature. This divine being must be God who is full of knowledge and wisdom.

It is more befitting to discuss a few lines on the Khasi conception of God before examining the understanding and interpretation of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion. As we know, Gurdon holds a different view regarding the concept of God in the Khasi religion. At this juncture I would like to devote a few lines to show how the Khasis, right from the ancient days conceived God in their religious teachings. Briefly, it may be pointed out as follows:

(i) **Monotheism:** The Khasis conceive *U Blei* (God) as the greatest and the highest Reality. He is the Supreme Being. In this way, we would say that the Khasis have a monotheistic understanding of God. Though God is one, yet He has many manifestations. In fact, this world is created by God for His manifestations. God is both the creator and the preserver of this world. He is controlling the world from within. According to the Khasis, God exists everywhere. He is both transcendental and immanent. Jeebon Roy who is one of the prominent Khasi thinkers, speaking of the nature of God said:

> Ha ha kano kano ka niam, haba phi khmih bniay bha, phin shem khlem artatien ba baroh u khun bynrieg u ia wad ia uta U Blei U ba tang marwey hi

(If we make a thorough study of any religion, we will undoubtedly find that people of any nation are searching for God who is truly one).

(ii) **Infinity:** Right from time immemorial, the Khasi conceived clearly that God is the infinite Being. He is not limited by time and space, because He

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exists at all times and He is not limited by space for He can be anywhere and everywhere. His nature is both immutable and eternal.

According to the Khasi conception of God (U Blei), God does not depend on any one for His existence. He is self-existent. He is not created by any higher being. He himself is the highest and the final Reality. He is the uncaused cause. He is the cause of creation, but He himself could not depend on any cause. He could move things but He himself could not be moved by any one else. In this manner, the Khasis conceive of U Blei (God) as the unmoved mover. Sib Charan Roy writes:

U Blei u long u Trai Kynrad u ba marwei hi, khlem kpa, khlem kmie, khlem khun, khlem tnga, khlem synrap doh ne synrap snam ne synrap mynsiem ei ei napoh ne nabar. U hi U long kham ni ban ia ka mynsiem.\(^{15}\)

(God is alone the Lord God who has no parents, no wife, no children. He does not depend, for his existence, on any one. He himself is the finest spirit).

God is both the soul of the universe and the transcendental Lord. Pascal Malngiang writes:

With regard to the immanence and transcendence of God, the Khasi believes that "God is within and around us". However, though He is close to man, yet He cannot be seen with the human eye, or be heard by the human ear or be felt with the human senses. God is always near to man but it is man who tries to distance himself from God. This immanent God, for the Khasi, is not a cruel task master but a loving, kind and generous God.\(^{16}\)

It is through the religious insights that the Khasi thinkers and leaders have formulated certain ideas about the nature of God. These ideas are concerning the real being of God as (i) God is good, (ii) God is merciful, (iii) God is holy, (iv) God is all-powerful, (v) God is all-knowing, (vi) God is present everywhere, (vii) God is spirit.

It would be necessary to reiterate some of the claims of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion. The first claim of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion is ‘The Khasis have a vague belief in God, the Creator’. Reacting to this claim, Professor Sujata Miri said, “Gurdon is describing his own state of unclarity about U Blei. While this is perfectly understandable, this is, of course, not what he really means. The “vagueness” that he talks about is supposed to be part of the Khasi’s idea of his God. But I think this is both misleading and potentially dangerous” 17.

It appears to be unfair on the part of Gurdon to say that the Khasi’s belief in God is vague without a philosophical debate on the concept. It needs a detailed discussion before drawing any conclusion. Gurdon should show or point out the valid or invalid reasons. This idea of vagueness seems to be in the mind of Gurdon and not in the Khasi conception of God. This may be true because Gurdon was only an observer of the Khasi culture and the Khasi Religion. He was passing a remark as a mere spectator and without entering into the Khasi form of life. Pascal Malngiang writes:

One of the earliest writers on the Khasi, P.R.Gurdon had set a wrong trend when he observed that, “The Khasis have a vague belief in god the Creator, U Blei Nongthaw, matriarchate, is frequently given the attribute of the feminine gender.”

The second claim of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion is the gender of God. Gurdon knew fully well that the Khasis adopted matrilineal system. He thought that the title “Ka 'lei Synshar” given to God (U Blei), is due to the matrilineal influence. It is true that the Khasis have ‘Ka lawbei” who is the first maternal ancestress. But there is no evidence or proof to show the influence of matrilineal system on the Khasis so as to attribute to God the name “ka 'lei Synshar”. Speaking about the origin of Khasi Religion, Pascal Malngiang writes:

It is the belief of the Khasi that his religion which he calls NIAM is directly given by God and it is not something that is invented by man, because of fear or because of his search for the One who is above everything.

Rabon Singh who is one of the earliest writers on Khasi Religion, holds a similar view. It is undeniable that there are several explanations about the origin of Khasi Religion. The different views and opinions held by the different thinkers and writers, only show that the Khasi religion has its beginning. We should remember that historically speaking, the Khasis received the Roman Script just in recent time, which was in 1841. In other words, prior to the year 1841, the Khasi did not know how to read and write due to the absence of alphabets or scripts. The teachings and the history of their Religion were unrecorded before the coming of Christianity in Khasi and

19. Ibid., pp.33 – 34
Jaintia Hills. The interpretation of the Khasi religion, in this way, was all depending on the authority of tradition.

The title *ka 'lei Synshar* given to *U Blei* is vague and not acceptable to Gurdon. According to the Khasi tradition the highest reality is one Supreme Being called *U Blei*, who is God and the Creator of the universe. He is not only the Creator, but also the provider and the maintainer of the universe. It is important for us to remember that the Khasis have different conception of God. According to them, God (*U Blei*) is formless. He does not have any fixed form. In other words, God can take upon Himself any form, according to his needs. Sujata Miri rightly pointed out:

> However this God has no form. Sometimes he is addressed as a female deity very often as *U Blei*, *ka Blei* (He-God, She-God). Since *U Blei* is formless. It is impossible adequately to symbolize him by means of any spatio-temporal object; ... Consonant with this idea, the Khasis do not have temples; nor is there any iconographic tradition among them. *U Blei* is the basically un-representable source of everything; but everything in the world bears the mark of His greatness.  

In order to get a clear understanding of the Khasi conception of God (*U Blei*) we shall see and study some authoritative writers on the Khasi Religious belief who have expressed their views. One of the prominent writers is Fr. G. Costa. He was a well-known anthropologist who had worked in Khasi and Jaintia Hills for many years and he had written a number of books on the Khasi Culture and their traditional Religion. Referring to the Khasi’s

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conception of God, G. Costa said, "When it is analysed and followed up properly, the Khasi believes in one God, the Creator of man and everything else in the world". Another well-known writer on the Khasi Cultural heritage and Religion is Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh. To cite his words:

The Sons of Hynniewtrep (Seven Huts) believe in one God. They do not have any gods like the Hindus, the Greeks and the Romans. One of the main points of confusion about the Khasi conception of God is probably due to the way in which he addresses God in his prayers. The Khasi feels free to address God in the language of his liking and in the way that he has manifested himself to the individual person or clan. God, for the Khasi, is above sex, gender and form, and as such there is no difficulty in addressing him as a male (U Blei), a female (Ka Blei) or in the majestic plural (Ki Blei).

It is important to bear in mind that the Khasis believe in one God, but he manifests himself in many different ways to different individual persons or communities. It all depends on how we perceive the manifestations and from which angles. It is perhaps, impossible for us who are the limited and imperfect beings to grasp fully and in totality the nature of God who is perfect and unlimited. Very often, when the Khasi refers to God, the Supreme Being as the Creator, provider, sustainer and protector, they use the term 'U Blei' which means the male God or He-God. On the other hand, when the Khasis refer to God as the supreme Being who is a kind, good, benevolent, loving and caring, they often speak of God as a female Being (Ka Blei).

22. Ibid
According to the Khasi traditional thought, the phenomenal world is the manifestation of the Divine. God is absolutely free to reveal Himself through the various phenomena which may occur from time to time. Since God is formless, He could reveal Himself in various forms. Again, God is above and beyond sex. It is precisely for this reason that the Khasis address God (U Blei), at times as a male Being but sometimes as a female Being. This fact appears to be chaotic, confusing and disorderly. At this point of discussion, I also intend to clarify that when the Khasis refer to the plural form ‘ki blei’ (gods), it does not mean that the Khasis have the plurality of gods. Firstly, it means that the Khasis have given different names to one and the same God. Secondly, the term ‘gods,’ does not imply that the Khasis have many gods or that there is a unity of gods. It is just another way that the Khasis used to address God.

It is necessary to have a clear understanding of God in the context of Khasi culture and religion. It is so, because there is a danger when the Non-Khasi writers have the tendency to propound the theory of a bi-sexual god of the Khasis. Namita Shadap Sen, an author of some Khasi books writes:

God, as the creator of life and of all beings, was known as U Blei Nongthaw, ‘the God of creation’ and was closely associated with another divinity of feminine gender, called Ka Blei Synshar ‘the Ruling goddess’, the protector and preserver of life. Both of these were addressed as parents. Later observers make no reference to the relationship of this goddess with the creator God but one of the earliest writers on Khasi religion states that she was supposed to be the wife of God.\(^{23}\)
It is worth to note that the Khasi people have the understanding that God (U Blei) permeates every sphere of life. In other words, God as the metaphysical being pervades through, in all aspects of life and activities of man. Whenever the Khasis are referring to God as Ka lei synshar, it means that that the Khasis refer to God as the source of administrative justice. First of all, the word lei, is a shortened word of Blei which means God, while the word ‘Synshar’ means ‘administration’ or ‘administrative justice’. The term ‘lei Synshar’ is a metaphorical comparison of God as an effective and successful home administrator.

It may be quite difficult for a non-Khasi man to understand or to accept the Khasi conception of God. For instance, though the World (ka Pyrthei) and Mother Earth (ka Meiramew) are created by God (U Blei), yet they do not exist as cause and effect because they are coexisting with God. In the olden days, the people of Sohra (Cherrapunji) used to call their village Dorbar (Assembly) as a godly Dorbar because they have a belief that God is with the Dorbar. In other words, God is present in the Dorbar as the inner and unseen Controller. According to the Khasis, Nature (ka Mariang) is coexisting with God. It may be a very strange thing that the Khasis in general and the people of Sohra in particular, use to refer to the Natural Court of Judgement for those court cases which are extremely difficult to pronounce a verdict due to lack of evidences and witnesses.
By way of clarification and for the sake of some reference of the natural court of judgement of certain law suits, I propose to briefly mention a few cases as follows:

(i) **Water as arbiter of civil or criminal suit**

_Usyiem Sohra_ (Ruler of Sohra State) in the ancient times used water as the final and supreme arbiter of those cases which he and his _Dorbar_ (Council) found it difficult to decide. The King would call both the parties to select their _Ksih_ (metaphorically, means the men who are good swimmers) to swim and dive in the water to pick up the article or thing that the _Syiem_ (Rural King) would throw into a very deep river. The one who is able to retrieve the article, wins the case for his party. This type of judgement and decision making of law suit cases in Sohra State is called _Ka Jingiangam um_ which means Water Judgement.²⁴ Both the parties have to swear before the _Dorbar_ in the name of God. We should note here, that according to the Grammar of Khasi language ‘Water’ (_Um_) belongs to the feminine gender. This is one of the many examples of “_Ka 'lei Synshar_” (a female ruler) in the Khasi world view. The Khasis believe that God is omnipresent in the sense that what is not God are the manifestations of God.

(ii) **Fire judgement**

Another natural way of judgement and settling of difficult cases is through the power of fire which is known in the local Khasi language as

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²⁴ Cf. B.L. Mawrie, _The Khasis and their Natural Environment_ (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 2001), p. 48
Ryngkoh ding (jumping across a burning fire). In this method of judgement of justice, normally, two champions from both the parties, namely, the party of the prosecutor and the party of the prosecuted, should select the champions who would represent their parties. These selected champions shall have to courageously jump across the burning fire in front of the audience. The one, who is able to leap the farthest, is considered to be the winner and his party wins the case. This is counted to be the justice of God for pronouncing the final verdict.

For further illustration, I would like to state that before performing both the above mentioned natural way of settling disputes, the King (U Syiem) used to recite some prayers addressing to God (U Blei). P.R.Gurdon thought that the Khasi conception of God must be ambiguous in the sense that the Khasis use to address God both as a male Being as well as a female Being. This is one of the reasons which made Gurdon to regard the Khasi conception of God as vague. Perhaps, he means to say that the Khasi conception of God is unclear, imprecise and more or less imperfect. He is like a man who has poor eyesight. He cannot see things clearly and precisely. Unlike Christianity, Khasi Religion teaches that God (U Blei) does not have sex like human beings. Human beings belong either to the masculine gender or to the feminine gender. For the Khasis since God is above and beyond sex, He can be addressed as a male Being or as a female Being just for the sake of our human understanding and our conveniences.

25. Ibid., pp. 49 – 50
Most of the local Khasi writers have written and spoken of God (\textit{U Blei}) as the Being who is intelligent, wise, benevolent and powerful. Furthermore, they think of God as the one who performs different works. For example, He commands, hears our prayer, considers our welfare, forgives our short comings, and the like. These are some of the properties that the Khasi thinkers and worshippers do commonly attribute to God which seems to have only literal meaning. It is very difficult to imagine that God hears our prayers and forgives our wrong deeds without having any kind of organism or a physical body. Soso Tham, Sib Charan Roy, Fr.Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh and other Khasi writers, conceive God as a metaphysical Being or entity. Today, if one conceives God as a physical organism who has eyes, nose, hands, and feet; such thought will be unacceptable to most modern Khasi thinkers.

Most of the traditional religions refer to God as \textit{‘he’}. Do they mean to say that God is a masculine being? Some worshippers may mean literally, that God has a physical body which is sitting on a throne and pronouncing judgement with justice. Strictly speaking, the Khasis do not conceive of God as a male being because He is both above and beyond gender and sex. In the same way God cannot be a female being, because He is the disembodied existent being. We cannot deny that the Khasis use to address God both as male and female. This has been done as a technique to make people understand the nature and character of God by explaining the abstract nature or character of God in concrete terms. Though, we speak of God as thinking,
willing and desiring or planning, we should not try to take this only in the literal sense of the term.

To reiterate, P.R. Gurdon claimed that the Khasi Religion is an animistic sort of Religion. To recite his words:

The religion of the Khasis may be described as animism or spirit worship or rather, the propitiation of spirits both good and evil on certain occasions, principally in times of trouble.²⁶

Before we examine Gurdon’s claim on the Khasi religion, first of all, we need to etymologically study the meaning and application of this term ‘animism’. As it has been pointed out earlier, Sir Edward Tylor was a British anthropologist who propounded the theory of Animism. He defines animism as “…the belief that all living things as well as everything held by primitive man to be living because of its locomotion or its ability to assume for itself some power or animated by spirits.”²⁷ According to Tylor’s theory, early people believed that spirits dwelled in and controlled all things in nature. According to Tylor’s view, the people who uphold the primal religions, thought the spirits lived in such objects or forces as plants, winds and so on, and called the spirits by the name ‘animae’ and as such Tylor’s theory came to be known as ‘animism’. In other words, animism is a belief that all natural objects and phenomena, for example, trees, stones, the wind, and the like, have souls.

Etymologically, the word animism is derived from the Latin word anima which means soul or spirit. Its plural form is animae. In this context the

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word *animae* means either *souls* or *spirits*. Russell R. Byrum defined the word *animism* as follows:

Animism is that form of superstition, common to the more degraded portions of the race, which believes that certain rocks, trees, streams, springs, caves, etc., are animated or inhabited by spirits which must be worshipped and which will do injury to those who neglect such worship. The spirits which these barbarous people fear and worship, are their gods and animism is therefore, closely related to their religion.\(^{28}\)

For E.B. Tylor, animism is the groundwork of the Philosophy of religion for the people of primitive culture. The use of the term ‘*Animism*’ by and large, is to describe the religion and the philosophy of primitive people. This was publicized in Sir Edward’s book, entitled “*Primitive Culture*” in 1871. He coined the word *animism* with a view to sum up his account of the origin of religion. It is important to remember that several scholars and researchers have given their own hypothetical accounts of the origin of religion. Some thinkers and writers believed that the earliest recorded evidence of religious activity dates from only about 60,000 B.C. However, anthropologists and historians of religion believe that some form of religion had been practised since people first appeared on the Earth, perhaps, two million years ago.

Some scholars have developed theories which serve as an attempt to explain how religion began. But there is no single theory which has been satisfactorily accepted by all scholars. But it is an undeniable fact that each major theory has contributed immensely, to an understanding of the subject.

Briefly speaking, there are three leading theories developed by (i) Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, (ii) Friedrich Max Muller and (iii) Rudolf Otto. Tylor said that the prehistoric people believed and explained that such occurrence as windstorms and the change from day to night are the actions of the spirits. According to Tylor, many of the objects and natural forces are very impressive and powerful. People at one time, started to worship such spirits. Tylor holds the view that Religion originated in this form of worship.

F.M. Muller propounded his own religious theory. He is a German scholar who has been considered to be the first historian of religion. He agreed with Tylor that religion began as spirit worship. But he rejected Tylor’s view that the earliest people believed that spirits dwelled in nature. Instead, Muller suggested that prehistoric people thought that the forces of nature themselves had human qualities, such as good and bad temper. In the course of time, people transformed these forces to deities. In this way Muller explained the earliest belief in gods. This came to be known as Muller’s Theory.

I consider that it is useful to state a few words on the ‘Otto’s Theory’ about the origination of religion. Otto was another German scholar of religion in the early 1900’s. Otto believed that an awareness of holiness and mystery lies at the heart of religious experience and is, therefore, the basis for all religions. Otto holds the view that all human beings possess the capacity for being sacred. We should bear in mind that by the word holy, Otto means the
true, the good and the beautiful which is a representation of a basic and universal aspect of human being. In other words, it means that religion is an expression of the inner thirst and awareness. We can say that the inner is in need of the outer.

P.R. Gurdon also described the Khasi Religion as a spirit-worship religion. But he did not deny that the Khasis are worshipping the supreme God (U Blei). Gurdon intended to state that the Khasis, besides worshipping the supreme God, they are also worshipping many types of spirits. We should remember that there had been a wrong understanding among the early Anthropologists, Sociologists and Christian Missionary writers saying that the tribals believe that all the spirits are malevolent, mischievous and dangerous. We should remember, for instance, in Christianity, besides believing in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, they also believe in the good angels known as the guardian angels. There also exists, the bad angels which at times, they are termed as evil spirits. It is true that some of the spirits are benevolent while some other spirits are malevolent spirits.

The benevolent spirits are generally regarded as the good spirits or guardian spirits who protect the human beings, the villages, their clans, their households, and their properties. The Khasi people also believe that there exist also some spirits who are very daring and ready to punish any wrong doer. These spirits may be termed as malevolent spirits who can fight for us and
punish our enemies. These malevolent spirits are generally believed to dwell in village outskirts, mountains and hills, lakes, rocks, and big trees. These spirits are believed to be responsible for diseases, accidents of various kinds, madness, death and many other calamities. Some Khasi people usually offer sacrifices of domestic animals, food and the libation of rice-beer to these spirits. If this is not done, they are believed to be liable to do all sorts of harm to those responsible members of the families concerned.

There are also the mischievous spirits and ghosts (rngai) which are not objects of worship and sacrifice. To this category, it may be included the spirits of those persons who had died of unnatural deaths such as suicide, and accident. This includes also the spirits of those women who died of childbirth or in pregnancy. These ghosts are said to live outside the village, on the road side, in the fields, rivers, and ponds and elsewhere. It may be pointed out that basically, being egoistic in their worship and sacrifices, everything was done for the benefit of the worshiper. Generally speaking, the worshippers would ask from the spirits for protection from danger, for blessing of wealth, children, cattle, health and all forms of prosperity. Perhaps, it may be said that the Khasis do not worship the spirits especially the evil ones but what they actually practise is just to appease them.

As the Christians believe in the existence of angels, in a similar way the Khasis (Non-Christian Khasis) also believe in the existence of various spirits
in the world. The Christians believe that good angels are called the guardian angels which could protect the human beings from harm and evil. But bad angels would usually punish human beings in various ways. The Khasis also believe in the existence of good and evil spirits. All the spirits are part and parcel of the creation of God. As a matter of fact, it is wrong, if we try to equate *U Blei* (God) with any spirit. It is so, because *U Blei* is the Creator and the Supreme Being while the spirits are creatures who are created by *U Blei* (God).

It is true that some Khasi people, for the sake of their selfish desire to become rich and prosper in life, do offer sacrifices to some spirits like *u Thlen* (a male devil in the form of a serpent), who would drink human blood, *ka Shwar* and *ka Taro* which are among the female evil spirits. The keepers of *u Thlen* which is a terrible male evil spirit are to give human blood at least once a year or once in two years. In turn, *u Thlen* would bless the keepers with economic prosperity. If the keepers cannot fulfill the requirements of *u Thlen*, the latter may appear in the middle of the night in the form of a big serpent and suck the blood of the keepers till death. On the other hand, *ka Shwar* is a female evil spirit which is common among the Riwar Khasi People. *Ka Shwar* is a guardian spirit of the property of its keepers. It will catch and punish the stealers of the keepers’ property and inflict some kind of punishment like madness and some other forms of illness. The victim will speak either consciously or unconsciously about the act of stealing so that others will be
able to know the cause of the illness. But ka Taro is slightly different from ka Shwar. The keepers of ka Taro is very common among the Jaintias. Ka Taro, like ka Shwar, would impose illness on the wrong doers of the property or belongings of the keepers of ka Taro. Though the keepers of u Thlen, ka Shwar and ka Taro do offer sacrifices to them yet this does not form a religion. It is only a personal wish of the keepers of these evil spirits who want to become rich and prosper in life. Another purpose is to safeguard their properties, so that others will be afraid to steal or do anything wrong to the boundary of their plots of land. The keepers of these evil spirits do keep them and offer sacrifices to them basically for their personal interest. The Khasi Religion as we commonly, know, does not teach at all, anyone to worship the evil spirits. Gurdon seems to have been mistaken of the core of the Khasi Religion. Though some Khasis may worship the evil spirits, yet it is their secret action which is not under the purview of the religion. It is purely their individual undertaking. If one says that the Khasis are worshipers of the spirits, such statement will be logically false. Such presumption is likely to commit the fallacy of Illicit Generalization.

P.R.Gurdon holds the view that the Khasis are worshipping the spirits of the departed relatives. According to him, the Khasis propitiate their ancestors by offering sacrifices to them from time to time particularly, when they are in troubles. Any act of dishonour to the ancestors will tantamount to negligence of their sacred duties to offer them certain sacrifices. Any willful negligence
of the ancestors in the past may cause their wrath and bring about misfortunes
to their posteriors in the form of illness or death. This view needs to be
examined whether it is true or false.

The Khasis believe in the immortality of the soul. It is true that the
Khasi people do believe that the human soul does not get destroyed by means
of physical death. In fact, they believe that, when a man dies, his soul goes to
its heavenly home and waits for God on the threshold. Very often the Khasis
called it ‘ka dwar U Blei’ which means also the doorway of God. When the
Khasi people say such and such a departed soul will experience eternal peace
and rest with God, they metaphorically say such and such a departed soul goes
and enjoy chewing betel nut with God (bam kwai ha iing u Blei). The supreme
happiness in Khasi eschatological thought is to eat betel-nut uninterruptedly in
God’s House. This idea follows from the day to day custom in Khasi society
that eating betel-nut at leisure time means the time of complete relaxation after
retiring from any work. Hence, the metaphor “Bam kwai ha iing U Blei”
(eating betel-nut in the House of God) means complete eternal rest in heaven
with God. This idea implies that the Khasis believe in the immortality of
human soul. It is precisely for this reason that the Khasi people pay respect to
the souls of their departed relatives or parents. They do not worship them but
they are venerating them.
It is a fact, that several books and articles have been written by outsiders about the Khasi Religion of which P.R. Gurdon is one of them. These outsiders, in their writings, committed a number of wrong and derogatory things. It is wrong because the Khasis do not worship their departed relatives or parents in any way and in any form. It is true that departed relatives are believed to continue to live and to show interest in their surviving families. Their surviving family members, as a mark of respect for the departed relatives, may build a shrine for the departed and place bits of food or drink there on their graves and at times, they mention the names of the departed relatives in their prayers. This act does not amount to worshipping them at all. It is only an act of respect so that the souls of the departed relatives or parents will not be totally forgotten. This act of respect can not constitute the entire religious system. Therefore, it is completely wrong to describe Khasi religion as 'ancestor worship'.