CHAPTER 2

The Socio-Cultural Fabric of Khasi Society

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The Khasis\(^1\) form one of the predominant tribes of Northeast India. They are found in the eastern portion of the state of Meghalaya, in the present districts of East and West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills. They are a group of people who belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. They migrated to the present location hundreds of years ago. Due to the absence of written history, nothing is known with accuracy about their past life. Much of what we know about them has come down through oral tradition in folktales, legends and songs.

The Khasis, as an ethnic group, differ in many aspects from the other tribes of Northeast India. R. T. Rymbai, a well-known Khasi author, says that “the Khasis are an island by themselves”.\(^2\) Their language, culture, dress and physical features are quite distinct from other tribes in the region. They are by nature a mountainous tribe and they live in isolated pockets of the region. As a consequence of this geographical isolation, a number of dialects were created among them. They have a religion of their own known as Ka Niam Khasi (Khasi Religion). The history of their religion and culture is surrounded by numerous legends, myths and folk-tales. These legends were handed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition until the second half of the 19th century when they adopted the Roman script and began to preserve their cultural heritage in black and white.\(^3\) One of the notable aspects of the Khasis is their political life which is intricately woven into their socio-cultural and
religious life. This has helped them to preserve their own political system up to this day. 

2.2. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts together occupy an area of 14,117 sq. km, that is about two thirds of the entire state of Meghalaya. To the North of Khasi and Jaintia Hills lie the plains of Assam, in the West lie the Garo Hills and in the South lies Bangladesh. To the East of Jaintia Hills lie Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam. This region is characterized by a wide variety of terrain. In the southern part, the hills are high and they form deep gorges which act as a natural boundary with Bangladesh. This region is usually referred to as the War area. In the central part is situated the Shillong plateau composed of the oldest Archean rock formation. This part is referred to as the Nongphlang (grassland) region. Towards the north, the hills ebb away into the plains of Assam. This region forms the so-called Bhoi region which has a climate similar to that of the plains of Assam. The summers are very warm while the winters are severe.

The western region of the Khasi Hills is popularly known as the Maharam (Maram) and Lyngngam region. The Jaintia Hills district is situated in the eastern part and it is still the largest district. The whole region of Khasi and Jaintia Hills has a network of rivers and rivulets which criss-cross between hills and valleys. Almost all these rivers have their origin in the central plateau. Most of them flow to Bangladesh in the south while others flow to the north and join the great Brahmaputra in Assam. Some of the biggest, well known and legendary rivers are:
Ka Umiam, Ka Umngot, Ka Umkhen, Ka Kynshi, Ka Umkhen in Khasi Hills and Ka Myntdu, Ka Kupli in the Jaintia Hills.  

Besides their traditional habitat in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, there are some pockets of Khasi settlement in the state of Assam and also along the Bangladesh border. The Khasi population found in the four districts of East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills districts, is approximately 1.5 million. The largest part of the population is found in East Khasi Hills district especially in the urban area of Shillong and its periphery.

According to the census of 2011, the population in the four districts is as shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Khasi Hills</td>
<td>2820 sq. km</td>
<td>410360</td>
<td>413699 50.2</td>
<td>824059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Khasi Hills</td>
<td>5247 sq. km</td>
<td>194628</td>
<td>190973 49.5</td>
<td>385601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaintia Hills</td>
<td>3819 sq. km</td>
<td>195641</td>
<td>197211 50.2</td>
<td>392852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ri Bhoi</td>
<td>2448 sq. km</td>
<td>132445</td>
<td>125935 48.7</td>
<td>258380</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. KHASIS AND THEIR SUB-GROUPS

The Khasis as a tribe is composed of many sub-groups, divided principally on ground of geographical factors. In the past, each group lived almost independently
from the rest. The absence of a common language also added to this sense of
dependence and cultural isolation. Today with the influence of education and
globalization a great sense of unity and common identity has emerged. However,
these sub-groups still exists. These sub-groups are the following:

a) The Nongphlang or Khynriam

This sub-group of Khasis is found in the central region of the Khasi Hills in the
Shillong plateau region. A large portion of this population is concentrated in the city
of Shillong. They speak Khasi. Their main occupation is cultivation although in
the urban area many are employed in government offices or in other urban-based
occupations.

b) The Marams and Lyngngams

These sub-groups of Khasis are found in the western part of the Khasi Hills. The
Marams live in the old Maharam kingdom. The Lyngngams on the other hand are a
little distinct from the Marams. They are a sub-group of Khasis who have been
influenced to a great extent, by the Garos in both their language and culture.

(c) The Bhois

This sub-group of Khasis inhabit the northern part of the Khasi Hills in the region of
Nongpoh, Umsning, Mawbri, Byrnihat, Umkador etc. This region is adjacent to the
plains of Assam and the climate is warmer than in the central plateau of Khasi and
Jaintia Hills. The people speak a dialect of their own called ‘Bhoi dialect’ which has many elements of Pnar dialect and they have their own socio-cultural practices. The Bhois in the early years were nomadic in character and they loved to shift their habitation from place to place. In the Bhoi area there is another sub-group known as the Marmgar who have tried to associate themselves with the Khasis. They are actually a hybrid group resulting from mixed marriages between the Bhois and the Rabhas.

d) The Jaintias or Pnars

They are found in the Jaintia Hills district. According to some legends, the Pnars migrated from Bhoi region. This group has maximum influence from the people of the plains. This is seen in the elements of their religion, in their dresses and in their customs. They speak a dialect called Pnar or Synteng. Their main occupation is agriculture. However, in the last few decades, coal mining has become a major occupation for many of them.

e) The War

Among the War people, the Khasis make a distinction between the War of Khasi Hills and those of Jaintia Hills. The former group is generally called War Khasi, while the latter group is referred to as War Synteng. The Wars are found mainly in the southern part of both Khasi and Jaintia Hills along the border of Bangladesh. They have assimilated a lot of elements from the plains. They speak a dialect of their own which is rather difficult to understand for other sub-groups of Khasis. They live
by plantations of areca nut, betel leaf, spices, fruits etc and also by trading with Bangladesh.

f) The Nongtung, Nongphyllut and Khyrwang

The Nongtung are found mostly in the northern part of Ri Bhoi bordering the Assam district of Karbi Anglong. The other two groups are found mostly in North Jaintia bordering Karbi Anglong. Some villages fall under Block I, Block II areas constituted after Independence and they are still under Assam today. Of late, two such villages have been discovered in the Tamenglong district of Manipur. The people there live by cultivation, plantation, timber lumbering as well as by trade.

Fig. 2.2 below gives us a clearer idea about the various sub-groups of the Khasi people. As indicated the Nongphlang, Pnars, Marams and the Bhois form the principal sub-groups. Among the War people, those of Khasi Hills are to be differentiated from those of Jaintia Hills.

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**Figure 2.2 - The Khasis and their Sub-Groups**

![Diagram of Khasi sub-groups]

- **THE KHASIS**
  - Nongphlang
    - War Khasi
  - Pnars
    - War Jaintia
    - Khyrwang
  - Marams
  - Lyngngams
  - Bhois
    - Nongtung
    - Nongphyllut
    - Marngar
Some authors like Hamlet Bareh have mentioned only four sub-groups, namely, the Khynriams, Pnars, Bhois and the Wars. This division is however too simple and generic. The term Khynriam actually is a generic name given to people residing in the Khasi Hills (East, West Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi). The common identity of these groups is traditionally associated with their common origin, namely, that they belong to the family of U Hynhiew-trep hynhiew-skum (the seven families). The most evident attempt at separation has been between the Khasis of Khasi Hills district and the Pnars of Jaintia Hills. Today however, some enlightened people have come out to sort out such misconceived differences and to emphasize their common identity.

It is the opinion of many scholars that the term Khasi is applicable to all sub-groups mentioned above. The distinction is only territorial. The differences in dialects, economy, social usage and political organization are due to ecological and politico-historical conditions of the groups. However, they share the same origin, language, social structure and culture.

2.4. ORIGIN OF THE KHASIS

The Khasis as a people do not quite know about their history except for the popular legends that have been passed on. In fact, nothing is known about their history prior to the arrival of the British. Their political history was known only from around 1500 AD and that too written by the British colonialists. The Modern ethnologists and anthropologists are quite perplexed about the origin of this people. According to
Fig. 2.3 - Anthropological Map of Meghalaya

Tribes distribution
East Khasi Hills - Nongphlangs, War Khasi
West Khasi Hills - Marams, Lyngngams
Jaintia Hills - Pnars, War Jaintia, Khyrwang
Ri Bhoi - Bhois, Nongtung, Nongphyllut
many contemporary scholars, the Khasis seemed to have reached these hills hundreds of years ago. However, their origin is actually shrouded in mystery.

The reason for this is the fact that they have no written history about themselves. The absence of a written script has made them dependent on oral tradition for centuries in the past. Many of the facts that we come to know about them have come to us through oral tradition. Much of the historical facts about the people have been buried in myths and folk stories. Today one needs to go deep into their mythology and folklore in order to establish certain historical data about the people. It is commonly affirmed by scholars that cultural elements of a group, such as their folklore, contain certain historical data about their existence in the past. If we are able to piece together these stories and folktales, we may be able to build up a rather comprehensive history of the people. The foremost Khasi poet and philosopher, U Soso Tham has rightly pointed out in his poem “Ki Symboh Ksiar” (Golden Grains), that much of Khasi history can be gathered from their stories and legends embodied in nature.

2.4.1. Theory of Divine Origin of the Khasis

Although not much credibility can be placed on this theory, yet it is still the most popular theory among the people themselves. Every Khasi believes that he or she has been put by God Himself on these hills and that it is part of the divine plan and not a matter of chance, that he/she has come into this world. The legend or myth connected with this has been handed down to them since time immemorial and it has become an important part of the people’s creed. Khasi religious tradition holds that the
Khathynriew-trep khathynriew-skum (sixteen families=symbolic of mankind). were created by God in heaven and not anywhere on earth. The popular myth that is connected with this belief is given below.

Myth of the Ki Hynñiew-trep Hynniew-skum (Seven families)

The most popular myth about the origin of the Khasis, is one that tells us about the existence of a golden ladder (Jingkieng ksiar) on the peak of Sohpet Bneng (heaven’s navel). It is said that in the beginning there were no human beings on the earth. However there existed sixteen families in heaven. At the request of Mother Earth to send someone to look after her and the whole creation, God finally decided to send seven of those families (Hynniew-trep) to earth while the other nine remained on in heaven. He planted a giant tree on Sohpet Bneng peak which acted as a ladder between heaven and earth. Every day the seven families would descend down the tree and cultivate the land. In the evening they would ascend the tree and go back to their heavenly abode. These seven families are said to be the ancestors of the Khasis. For this reason the Khasis are also known as the Hynniew-trep Hynniew-skum (seven huts). Finally the seven families chose to remain on earth once and for all and God appointed them stewards over the whole earth.

Although this account of the origin of the Khasis is only a popular legend, yet it has some socio-cultural values in it. Socio-culturally this legend would imply that the Khasis had been put on these hills by God Himself to live together as a single family. The seven huts (hynniew-trep hynniew-skum) came down to earth as a family to live and work together, to share the same belief and aspirations and to follow the
same customs and social behaviour. This would therefore explain why there exists, among the Khasis, a very strong social bond and a deep sense of community. The eschatological belief of the Khasis is also based on this belief of divine origin from the sixteen huts. Therefore at death, they believe that the person goes back to his/her heavenly abode from where he/she originated and joined the other nine huts *(khynndai-trep khynndai-skum)*.\(^{34}\)

Besides the above, there are some theological significances in this story. Theologically, it points to the fact that the Khasis originated from God Himself and that they did not appear here on earth by chance. It also shows that the Khasis see themselves as children of the Almighty from the beginning of creation and that human beings were created first in heaven and not on earth. It also tells us that it is God’s design that they should remain here on earth to be the keepers of his creation. Thus stewardship is seen here as a divine mandate.

This theory of origin may not be scientifically explainable, however it still remains a popular theory among the Khasis. The fact that ancient remains on Sohpet Bneng peak, like foot prints on stones and the existence of an ancient altar of stones, indicate that it was a frequented place from time immemorial. This must have been the reason why origin of the people is traced to this sacred peak. Besides this, such divine origin stories are common among most people like the myth of the Eden Garden for the Jews. More than just indicating their origin, such stories are fabricated to create a sense of awe and sacredness around the community which is important for enhancing the identity and integrity of the group.
2.4.2. Contemporary Theories of Origin of the Khasis

Since the beginning of the 19th century there have been a lot of researches done on the origin of the Khasis from scientific and historical perspectives. Such initiatives were taken by the British scholars like Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, P. R. T. Gurdon and many others. Many of those scholars have come out with their findings which seem to offer some kind of answer to the myth of origin of the Khasis. For the sake of convenience, we may group these theories under three categories according to the concurrences of opinions:

a) Theory of Migration: Khasi-Mon Khmer connection

Many scholars affirm that the Khasis originated from Southeast Asia, more specifically from southern China. They arrived here via the Patkoi range in Burma (modern Myanmar). The first person to make such an observation was Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, an eminent Botanist, who happened to be the first European to travel into the interior parts of Khasi Hills in 1852. His immediate observation was that the Khasis show a close affinity to the Indo-Chinese family and that their speech has all the similarities of the Indo-Chinese languages especially that of the Mon Khmer. Other scholars like J. R. Logan and P. Schmidt opine that linguistically the Khasis can be linked to the great Mon Khmer family in the East and to the Mundari speaking family in the West. Another opinion holds that the Khasis came from Southeast Asia and first settled down in the Sylhet plains of Bangladesh. However due to the constant floods and natural calamities, they gradually moved up to the hills to their present domain. Another current opinion holds that the Khasis came from
Burma. Due to some political reasons, the Khasis fled from Burma through the Patkoi range and finally reached these hills. The political connection with Burma was still maintained for many years after, whereby the Khasi kings would send an annual tribute to the Burmese kings in the form of an axe. This was a sign of their submission to the authority of the latter and to the political connection that existed between them.

Some of the well-known writers and scholars like P. R. T. Gurdon, J. R. Logan, Dr. Grierson and J. A. Anderson subscribed to the view that the Khasis originated from somewhere in Southeast Asia from the region of Cambodia. According to them the Khasis belong to the Mon-Khmer people of Cambodia. They asserted that many features of the Khasis - the physical appearance, language and customs - bear great resemblance to those of the Khmer people. However, regarding the migration of the Khasis to these hills, no historical evidence is available. Thus J. A. Anderson holds the opinion that the Khasis were the first groups of Mon-Khmer race to have reached this region.

This Mon-Khmer connection theory has been in circulation for many years since the beginning of the 20th century. It is still the most acceptable theory of origin of the Khasis among the people today. Further researches are being undertaken by scholars to confirm this aspect of Khasi history.

b) Theory of Khasi-Munda Connection

This theory was first propagated by Walter G. Griffith. The theory holds that the Khasis have affinities with the Mundas of the Chotanagpur plateau. According to
Griffith, the Mundas were the original settlers in central India. However, when the Dravidian and Aryan invasions took place some of them were forced to disperse to places as far as the Northeast and they settled down in the plains of Assam. The Khasis are a branch from this group who gradually moved up to the hills, to their present habitat. According to Griffith there are linguistic affinities between the two groups. This theory was supported by the research of P. Schmidt who put the Khasis and the Mundas in the same Austro-Asiatic family. Other modern scholars have discovered many other similarities between the two. The funeral ceremonies, the veneration of the dead, the use of stone monuments and the internment of the bones of both the groups are very much similar. Some DNA studies in 2007 done in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology of North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), have confirmed the same ethnic origin of the Khasis and the Mundas. The studies also show that the Khasis have a common paternal heritage with the other Austroasiatic populations of Southeast Asia. Going by their conclusions, the Khasis therefore reached these hills in the pre-historic age.

This theory has generated much interest in the field of research among many modern anthropologists and social scientists. As for now, nothing for certain has been established regarding the common origin of the Khasis. However, this question is still open to further research and study.

c) Other theories

This section consists of a collection of theories which differ from the above two. Thus, according to Gait, the Khasis have so many unique aspects in their language
and culture that they do not find any similarity with their neighbouring cultures. In his opinion, the Khasis reached these hills as early as the pre-historic time. Homiwell Lyngdoh, a well-known Khasi scholar, is of the opinion that the Khasis migrated from the north and not from the south. According to him, the Khasis came from western China through the Himalayas and settled down in Nowgong, Lumding and Haflong. The fact that the Khasis have their own name for the Himalayas which they call Ki Makashang, according to him, indicates that they were settlers at the foot of these mountains long before they migrated to their present habitat. Trombetti opines that the Khasis were originally Negroids nearer to the Dravidians, but due to Mongolian strains some racial transformations took place.

Khasi written history started only as late as the 19th century, when the Roman script was given to them by the renowned Methodist missionary, Rev. Thomas Jones around the year 1842. From this period onward, books in the Khasi language were written and cultural heritage (folklore, stories and legends, historical events etc) began to be preserved in writing. However, some historical facts about Khasi kingdoms can also be found in the written history of the Koch and Ahom kingdoms of Assam. One fact that remains undisputed among the scholars today is the historical indication that the Khasis arrived on these hills very early in history, long before the appearance of the Ahoms. According to some scholars, the Khasis were the earliest inhabitants in this region after the complete disappearance of the Negrito race which seemed to have occupied this region earlier. Much of Khasi history lies in their oral tradition. According to the great Khasi poet, U Soso Tham, this history can be unravelled from the oral tradition of the people.
2.5. SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Socio-politically the Khasis are quite advanced in comparison to some other tribes. They possess a very distinctive political system which is highly democratic and federalistic in its character. They have a very strong democratic sense since centuries past. Their socio-political organization can be termed as a “democratic monarchy”. This implies that the Khasis are ruled by kings (Syiem) who actually function as democratic heads and never as absolute monarchs. This socio-political heritage is still being zealously preserved today.

The political institution of the Khasis clearly demonstrates that it is a patriarchal society where men take control of the affairs of the village or state and women are confined to domestic roles. It is important to understand this aspect in the context of the present study which deals with the changing roles of the $\textit{kñi}$ and the $\textit{kpa}$ in Khasi society.

2.5.1. Political Institutions of Authority

Khasi democratic organization can be described as simple but functional. Khasi democracy can be described in two phases, namely, early democracy and the contemporary democracy.

a) Early Democratic Institution

In the early Khasi society, there was no monarchy. It was in the $\textit{Dorbar-blei Balai}$ (Third Divine Assembly) at Sumer valley, west of Sohpet Bneng, that this political
institution was established. This was the original political system of the Khasis as we shall discuss below.

i) *Tymmen-shnong* (Village Elders)

In the beginning the Khasi villages were governed by the *Tymmen-shnong*. By tradition these elders would act as the administrators of law and order in the villages on behalf of the people. These *Tymmen-shnong* were dispensers of justice in their own little villages. However, they ruled the people by words and arguments (*ka ktien* or *ka nia*) and never by force or might. The source of their authority lay in their wisdom and in their moral ascendancy.

ii) *Lyngdoh-synshar* (Ruling Priests)

In the course of history many villages through the principle of social contract, came together to form the so-called *Hima Lyngdoh* (Realm of Priests). The *Lyngdoh-synshar* (ruling priests) were elected to rule over these territories. The *Lyngdoh-synshar* issued rules which were considered *ki hukum* (commandments) and which were adhered to meticulously. There was great order, peace and prosperity and so there was no need of *U Tangon-U Lymban* (police) and no *phatok* or *along* (jails). There was no such thing as a physical punishment. The *Lyngdoh-synshar* ruled over the Hima and he was assisted by his *Dorbar* (council) and *Ki Bakhraw-batri* (noble men).
iii) *Ki syiem* or *Raja* (kings)

In many cases in the past when there were many criminals to be punished since the *Lyngdoh-bishar* would not like to inflict physical punishment on their people, they invited strong men from the plains (*ki dkhah*) to do this job on their behalf. These were the first *tangon-lymban* (police) among the Khasis. They were invested with the noble title *Ki Syiem* or *ki Raja* (kings). While the *Lyngdoh-bishar* were the real rulers of the *Hima* (territory), the *Syiem* (kings) were the ones administering order and discipline in the *Hima*. It is for this reason that among the Khasis, the *Syiem* has no right over the life or property of their subjects.\(^56\)

2.5.2. Contemporary Democratic Institution

From the eleventh century onward, kingship gradually became a popular form of political organization. With the arrival of the British, this political system of the plains gained dominance. The present political system of the Khasis is a blend of foreign elements with the traditional Khasi system.

a) The *Syiem* (Kings or Chiefs of the kingdoms)

The Khasi *Jaïñtia* Hills consisted of many kingdoms ruled by kings or chiefs. In the beginning there was only one king, U Mailong Raja, who stayed at Madur Maskut. His kingdom included the whole of Khasi and *Jaïñtia* Hills and extended into the plains. For better administration, Mailong Raja appointed his brother, U Niang Raja as the ruler of the plains. The Khasi and *Jaïñtia* Hills were ruled by the *Syiem*
Shillong (Shillong Kingdom) and Syiem Synteng (Jaintia kingdom) respectively. These kings were subjugated to Madur Maskut. Each of these kingdoms traced their origin to some divine or totemic elements. For this reason these Syiems (kings) are known as Syiem-Blei (divine kings) on account of their unnatural origins. The Madur Maskut kings traced their origin from a pig. Their most legendary king was U Kyllong Raja. He is said to have had divine power so that no one could kill him until finally his wife betrayed him. The Jaintia kings instead traced their origin from a fish-fairy called Ka Li Dohkha. The Shillong kings on the other hand traced their origin to a divine ancestress named Ka Pah Syntiew (one enticed by flowers) who was the daughter of U 'Lei Shillong (Shillong deity).

On account of the dispute regarding succession, the Shillong Syiemship was split into two kingdoms in 1858, the Khyrim Syiemship which has control over the central region and the Mylliem Syiemship which controls some parts of central Khasi Hills. Shillong Syiemship is probably the most well-known kingdom in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. In Jaintia Hills, the Jaintia Syiemship included the whole of Jaintia Hills and some places in the border of Assam and Bangladesh.

Besides the above Syiem-blei, there are also what are known as ki Syiem-briew (human kings) and ki Syiem-mraw (slave kings). The former are so called because they became kings after being elected by the people and not by inheritance. Examples of such kings are Ki Syiem Sohra (Sohra kings), Ki Syiem Nongkhlaw (Nongkhlaw kings) etc. Ki Syiem Mraw (slave kings) are so called not because they were slaves, but because they were people brought from other places and made kings. Most of these kings were Dkhar (non Khasis) from the plains or Khasi brought from other kingdoms. The Mawiang kings have originated in this manner.
The king in Khasi society is democratically elected by the people usually from the royal clans. He is *de facto* nominal head of the state vested with limited political, juridical and administrative powers. The Khasi king is never an absolute monarch or a dictator. He cannot levy taxes on people’s land or property since land is the absolute property of certain clans, villages or individuals. Democracy is above a ruler and everything that has to be decided has to be done democratically. The Khasi kings, unlike other rulers, have no need of a standing army because every male subject in his kingdom is a potential warrior. They do not accumulate wealth for themselves, because whatever they need their subjects provide them with. The King is assisted by a council of ministers called the *Myntri* (ministers). These *myntris* traditionally come from particular clans who assume the right of inheritance to such a political status.

b) The *Lyngdoh-synshar* /Doloi (Governing Priests)

In spite of the prevalence of Kingship, the traditional Hima Lyngdoh still exists in some regions. The *Lyngdoh-synshar* in Khasi Hills or the *Doloi* in Jaintia Hills, continue to be rulers of these political regions. These rulers usually belong to particular clans and succeed to the post by heredity. The selection of these rulers is not known to us for it dates back to history. However, it is assumed that they had been selected by a popular agreement, may be because of certain feats that the members of their clans had performed. According to the 1876 census, the Khasi states of Lyniong, Mawphlang, Nonglwai and Sohiong were presided over by the *Lyngdoh-synshar*. In Jaintia Hills, instead, there are twelve *Dolois* who rule over
twelve regions. These act as administrative and juridical heads of the Ilaka (region). Thus Jaintia Hills is known as “ka Ri Khatar Doloi” (land of 12 Dolois). Sajar Niangli, the great Jaintia army general who dug the Tadlaskein lake on the way to Jowai, was the Doloi of Raliang. He was the most well-known and the most powerful Doloi that ever reigned in the Jaintia Hills.

c) The Sordar/Lyngshkor/Pator or Basan (Regional Administrators)

Every Khasi estate is usually divided according to administrative units called Raid (regions). Each Raid consists of a number of villages within the same region. The administrative head over each Raid is called Sordar/Lyngshkor/Basan in Khasi Hills and Pator in Jaintia Hills. He is in turn assisted by some collaborators. Lyngshkorship is not a hereditary post but he is elected by the body of Rangbah-shnong (village headmen) on the basis of qualifications and experience. The Sordars/Lyngshkors/Pators or Basans are not only administrative heads in their raid, but they are also juridical heads. They decide and pronounce judgements on legal cases presented before them. They are also competent to administer internal affairs both civil and juridical. They are often engaged in resolving disputes regarding boundaries between villages. Usually when a difficult case cannot be resolved by the village dorbar (village assembly), it is brought before the Sordar/Lyngshkor/Pator or Basan and his council. If such cases are beyond their competence, then they proceed to the king and his ministers who act as the supreme court of justice.
d) The *Rangbah-shnong* (Village headman)

Each Khasi village is a juridical body by itself. The administrative head of the village is known as the *Rangbah-shnong* (headman of the village). He is elected by the people through the village general assembly (*dorbar shnong*) presided over by the *Sordar*. The *Rangbah-shnong*, like the *Sordar*, is both an administrative and a juridical head. He decides cases brought before him and passes judgement over them and his verdicts are unequivocal and binding on the villagers. He is also assisted by the village council. His task is to see to the security, discipline and well being of the village. He maintains a political link with the *sordar*, with the king and in the present context, with the District Council and the government. In the absence of a presiding *Lyngdoh-niam* (ritual priest) in the village, the *Rangbah-shnong* takes his place and officiates at prayers and ceremonies to be performed by the village.

e) *U Sangot* (A Clarion)

In every traditional Khasi village there is a person who acts as the official communicator for the village council. He is known as *Sangot*. In modern terminology this would be equivalent to a publicity officer. Whenever a village *dorbar* is to be convened, the *Sangot* with a chosen group of youngsters would go round the village in the evening to make the announcement. This is usually done with the beating of drums and the traditional cry “Hoi Kiw”.
f) *U Lyngdoh-niam* (Ritual Priest)

A Khasi village usually has an official *Lyngdoh-niam* (priest) who holds a position of respect equal to that of *U Rangbah-shnong*. He is the one who performs the annual thanksgiving sacrifice to God on behalf of the village. He is also sought after by people for prayers, intercessions and spiritual interpretations in times of calamities.

g) The *Rangbah-dong* (Hamlet headman)

Each Khasi village has hamlets with specific names. In a bigger village there may be many such hamlets. Each of them has a *Rangbah-dong* who is also elected by the general assembly (*dorbar*) of the village. These persons assist the *Rangbah-shnong* (village headmen) in matters related to the village administration. Together with the *Rangbah-shnong* they also form the governing body of the whole village.

2.5.3. **Khasi Dorbar: Its Nature, Levels and Authority**

The Khasi *dorbar* is a legislative, administrative and a juridical body in any unit of the Khasi community. It is the point of reference of all politics among the Khasis. Although a democratic institution where everyone has the right of expression and opinion, the Khasi *dorbar* is traditionally reserved only for men. They believe in a traditional principle that legislation and administration are a man’s duties and not a woman’s. The Khasi *dorbar* is also considered as a sacred institution and therefore the decision taken here are considered binding on the whole society. The Khasi often speak of the *Dorbar Blei* (Divine assemblies) where God established a covenant with men. This is said to be the origin and model of every Khasi *dorbar*. In a Khasi
dorbar, the participants are grouped as follows: Those between 25 and 50 years of age are called ki samla-samhoi (youth); those between 50 and 70 years are called ki tymmen-ki son (adults) and those who have crossed 74 years are called ki tymmen-ki kro (elders). The Khasi dorbars are found at four levels based on their political radius, their status and authority, these are:

a) Dorbar Hima (The State Council)

This is the highest legislative, administrative and juridical body in the Khasi kingdom. It consists of the King as the Head, his ministers and the Sordars (Heads of regions) as its members. This dorbar is the law making body in every matter of the state. It is also the administrative enforcer in the affairs of the kingdom. This is as well the highest court of appeal for any legal suit within the kingdom.

b) Dorbar Raid (Regional Council)

This is also a legislative, administrative and juridical body in a Raid (region). The Sordar/Lyngshkor/Pator or Basan is the head of the Dorbar and he is assisted by his council of Myntris (ministers), usually four of them. This body acts as a link between the villages and the King. The Dorbar Raid has both civil and juridical powers. It is also responsible for the maintenance of forests and lands belonging to the Raid. It settles arguments regarding boundaries between villages. The election of a Sordar/Lyngshkor/Pator or Basan is by the body of Rangbah-shnong (village headmen) who elect a sordar from among themselves. The election is then confirmed by the King.
c) Dorbar Shnong (Village council)

In every Khasi village there is an administrative council called Ka Dorbar Shnong (Village council). The Rangbah-Shnong (village head), the Lyngdoh-niam (priest), the Sangot (Clarion) and the Rangbah-dong (heads of local units) constitute the village Dorbar. The village Dorbar is also a legislative, administrative and juridical body in matters pertaining to the welfare of the village. As an administrative body, the Dorbar Shnong is also concerned with matters of security in the village. It organizes its own police system consisting of young volunteers, to guard the village. The election of a Rangbah-shnong (village headman) is done democratically in a general assembly of the whole village. The meeting is sometimes chaired by the king himself or by a Sordar.

d) Dorbar Kur (Clan council)

Among the Khasis, the clans constitute very important components of society. Each clan has its own internal political, juridical and administrative system. This council is headed by the Rangbah-kur (Head of the clan) who is elected by the male members of the clan from the richest or most influential family. He holds office till death, but his office is not hereditary. He is assisted by a few other Rangbah-kurs of the clan. He also allocates land belonging to the clan to each member for purposes of settlement and cultivation. In matters of discipline he functions as a judge who pronounces judgement on the behaviour of the members. His words and decisions are binding on all. He is the legal representative of the clan in front of the State Dorbar. The Rangbah-kur is also the presiding priest of the clan. He is responsible
for the annual religious ceremonies (prayers and sacrifices) which the clan has to perform.

2.5.4. Characteristics of a Khasi Dorbar

A Khasi dorbar is a unique institution which has received attention from many scholars. Its origin goes back to the distant past and with some slight changes, the institution has remained intact till now. Some notable characteristics of the dorbar are:

First of all, a Khasi dorbar is a moral and religious institution besides being a socio-political and cultural assembly. It occupies a sanctimonious status and this characteristic is preserved. It is referred to as “ka Dorbar-blei” (Divine Assembly).

Thus everyone who comes to the dorbar must do so with a pure mind and a sincere heart without any hidden agenda or evil design.

It is a democratic assembly where every participant who qualifies himself from moral aspects, has the right to raise questions and express opinions. Even the Syiem (king) himself during the Dorbar-yllun (General assembly) does not dominate the others. He only acts as a silent listener to the cases brought before him or the issues raised. He merely makes a concluding judgement or an exhortation at the end of the hearing.

Thus in a dorbar there is no first or last, great or small. All are equal and have the same rights to express their opinions. The Syiem (king) is considered as a type of primus inter pares (first among equals) and not a superior person.
Since the ancient days, it has been a tradition upheld strictly, that no man who is physically handicapped (a sign of imperfection in a person and also looked upon as a sort of curse by God) or without moustache (a sign of immaturity) could participate in the dorbar. This implies that only the adults and men matured in age and wisdom could take part in such assemblies. Today this rule has been overridden for some practical reasons.91

Traditionally, in any Khasi dorbar no women or girls are allowed to take part. There was no question of discrimination about this for the Khasi women have high status in Khasi society, but it was presumed that the dorbar was essentially a man’s affair.92

Any decision taken in the dorbar was considered binding on all citizens. Since decisions are taken unanimously, there is no question of misunderstanding or disgruntlement. Because a Khasi dorbar is founded on religious beliefs and practices, the decisions made by it are considered sacred and inviolable. A participant in the dorbar who no longer has a family, relatives or kinsmen, is never permitted to speak. The reason for this is that such a person could utter any blasphemy or nonsense without fear of any divine retribution on his family.93 The elders or the older people (Ki Riew tymmen), have a special place of importance in a Khasi dorbar. They are respected for their age and experience and their words are heeded to by all. They are sought after for counsels especially in difficult situations.

Every Khasi dorbar that is to take place is made known to the public through the Sangot (the clarion). Usually a group of young men together with the Sangot, go around the village at night and together with the drumbeats and the shouting of “hoi kiw”, the announcement is made.
A Khasi *dorbar* is always considered a sacred place. For this reason absolute respect and discipline is required of every participant. No shouting, quarrelling or pointing fingers at each other is allowed in the *dorbar*. An atmosphere of tranquility prevails in such assemblies. To prove the above affirmation, here is what David Scott observed about the Khasi *dorbar*:

I was struck with astonishment at the order and decorum which characterised these debates. No shouts of exultations or indecent attempts to put down the orator of the opposite party, on the contrary, every speaker was fairly heard out. I have often witnessed the debates in St. Stephen’s chapel, but those of the Cossayah (Khasis) parliament appeared to be conducted with more dignity and manners.

This aspect of the Khasi *dorbar* has been recognised by many scholars today. The peculiar democratic spirit that animates this *dorbar* is a precious heritage of the Khasi culture. It reflects the high level of civilization that the people has had since time immemorial. It is a civic value that has been passed on from one generation to the next and it is still preserved today. The efficacy of Khasi *dorbar* as a political institution cannot be doubted. It has played and continues to play a major role in shaping the socio-cultural and political life of the Khasis, both individually and collectively.

### 2.6. SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

Social life is the crux of Khasi culture and existence. The importance of this aspect can be seen in the predominance of laws and regulations pertaining to social
relationships among them. Here below are some of the essential elements of Khasi social fabric.

2.6.1. *Ka Shim-jaint shim-khong* (Matrilineal System)

The Khasis are one of those few groups of people who trace their succession from the mother's side. According to E. Adamson Hoebel, a patrilineal descent affiliates an individual with a group of kinsmen related to him/her through males only, while matrilineal descent, on the other hand, assigns an individual to a group consisting exclusively of relatives through females. The Khasis therefore reckon their descent through the female line. Thus the mother-child bond is the strongest kin tie. The children consequently take the mother's name and become members of her clan and live in the mother's social group.

Little is known regarding the origin of such a peculiar system. It is difficult to pinpoint a time in history when such a system started. Anthropologists in general agree that there is a close relationship between the descent system and the economy of a society. According to Hammond, a noted anthropologist, matrilineal descent is generally associated with primitive farming where women do the work. Thus matrilineal system is characteristic of a semi-agriculturist society where female labour is a prime factor. In an environment where most of the neighbouring cultures follow a patrilineal system, it is difficult to explain why the Khasis chose to adopt this system. Some Khasi scholars today offer a rather convincing explanation to this. According to them, at one time when the Khasis were at war with their enemies, the men were never sure of returning home. Thus in order to preserve
their identity and their tribe they entrusted to the women their property and the lineage as well. Another explanation offered is that when the Khasi ancestors weighed the right over the child between that of the father and the mother, the balance tilted on the mother’s side. She is the one who bears all the pains of childbirth and the burden of child-rearing. This was how matriliney got its sanction. It was this practice that gradually led to the importance of women in society until it was finally unanimously decided that the succession of children should be from the mother’s side.

2.6.2. Ka Kheiñ-kur Kheiñ-jait (kinship system)

The kinship bond is perhaps the most fundamental of all social bonds because of the biological factor associated with it. The Khasis as a tribe, consider kinship bond as sacred. The Khasis are composed of different clans each one with a name and with their unique history. Ka Kur ka Jait (a clan) is a line of families traced out from a single lawbei (ancestress). Usually all bear the same surname inherited from the first ancestress. Relationship among the clan members is zealously guarded and marriage between clan members is never contemplated. Clan exogamy is sacred, that is, marriage within the clan, however distant they may be, is always considered as an incest (ka sang) and those who commit this, are ostracized from the clan. Persons guilty of the sacrilege “are outcasted, and have their heads shaved in three patches, branding them thereby with a mark of shame to become fugitives and vagabonds, not daring to show their faces before others...”.
Anthropologists like Robin Fox argue that kinship is not merely biological but it is also about social relationships. This aspect of kinship other than consanguinity is common among the Khasis. There is a system called Ka Jingiateh-kur (inter-clans covenant), which is a covenant of relationship made between two or more clans. Members of such clans are always forbidden to intermarry. The term shikur (related clan) is common among the Khasis signifying the relatedness of two or more clans. For example the Jait Lyngdoh Nongkrem is related to Khongblah, Khonglyngka, Khongpdah, Khongtyngkut, Khyrëm Basalakhra, Mapsharoh, Muthoh, Nongtawar and Pyngrope. At times a single clan breaks itself up and assumes for itself another name according to the region they inhabit. Thus clans like Majaw, Basaiawmoit and Hynñiewta are actually branches of a single Kur (clan). So also are War, Warjri and Warshong originally of one Kur (clan).

Since time immemorial the Khasis have had the practice of Tang-kur Tang-jait. This takes place when a Khasi man marries a non-Khasi woman. In this case through a religious ritual known as Tang-kur a new clan is formed and the woman becomes the first ancestress of the clan. Thus the Khasi surnames which begin with the prefix “Khar” were formed in this manner. Here “Khar” signifies that the first ancestress was a non-Khasi. Some such surnames are Kharlyngdoh, Kharmawphlang, Kharbuli, Khar-rani, Kharkamni etc. At times a new surname is also created. Besides Tang-kur, there is another way of establishing clan relationship which is known as Kam-kur. This happens when a Khasi man marries a non-Khasi woman, his children assume his surname while his wife is known as lawbeisynrop.
2.6.3. *Ka Aih tōh Nongkynti* (Law of Inheritance)

First of all, the distinction between the *Nongtymmen* (ancestral property) and the *Nongkhynraw* (self-acquired property) should be made. *Ka Nongkhynraw* does not pertain to the ancestral property but it belongs to the one who acquires it. Among the Khasis, the *khadu* (last daughter) inherits the ancestral property. However, this does not imply that other children do not get anything. When the parents’ economic status is good, shares are also given to other children either in cash or in kind. The *Khadu* (the youngest daughter) however, gets more share. This is because she has the duty as *ka Nongri Nongsumar* (caretaker) of the ancestral property and the family religion. She is also referred to as *Ka Nongkit Nongbah* (supporter), because she looks after her aged parents till their death. She holds a status of significance as she represents an embodiment of the enduring and sacred heritage of the clan. Her house is the ancestral home and therefore it is a place of sanctity. It is the house of the *Khadu* that becomes the centre of every socio-cultural and religious activities of the *Kpoh*. *U khi* (the uncle) who is the eldest brother in the family, acts as the guardian of this family. The other daughters of the family move away from the parents’ house at the time of their marriages and establish their own *bung* (family units). In turn their youngest daughters become the *Khadu* or the inheritors of their properties.

2.6.4. *Ka Poikha poiman* (Marriage Customs)

The Khasis, as has been said above, are very conscious about their clan relationship. They follow a clan exogamy, that is prohibition of intra-clan marriage. Therefore
marriage is permitted only between members of different clans. If those clans are related by the covenant of relationship (*iateh-kur*) then marriage is not permitted among them. It is forbidden for a Khasi to marry his maternal uncle's daughter, at least during the life time of his uncle. According to Gurdon, this was due to the fact that the maternal uncle is looked upon as the father of the family than a mere uncle.\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, no marriage is contemplated with the daughter of his father's sister. Therefore cross-cousin marriages among the Khasis are not favoured and are almost forbidden. Any marriage that takes place within these restrictions is considered *ka shong-sang* (incest) and is punishable by ostracization from the clan and even exile from the society.

At the same time, the Khasis followed a strict village endogamy in the past.\textsuperscript{117} According to S. Sngi Lyngdoh, a well-known Khasi scholar, in the past the Khasis made a sort of social contract or covenant that whenever they would start a new village or town they would make sure that there are equal number of cognates (kur) and agnates (kha) residing in them. Thus marriages would take place within the village itself. This system helped in maintaining the stability of the matrilineal system.\textsuperscript{118}

By marriage laws, the husband is supposed to take his residence in his wife's house. In the case of marriage with the *Khaduh* (youngest daughter) of the family, then residence in her house is obligatory for she is the inheritor of her parents' property as well as the keeper of the religion and custom of the Kur (clan).\textsuperscript{119}
2.6.5. Dances and Festivals

The socio-cultural life of the Khasis is punctuated with periodical festivals throughout the year. These festivals form an important part of Khasi culture. Khasi festivals are connected with some natural events (like spring and autumn) or with some religious events. Examples of the former type of festivals are: Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or Shad Weiking (Spring Festival) which takes place usually in the month of April. In the *Bhoi* area there is a famous dance festival called Ka Sajer of the Raid Nonglyngdoh (Nonglyngdoh region). This is a sort of thanksgiving festival in the month of December, January or February after the harvesting has been completed. The people thank God the Creator for the good crop and the staple food He provided them with. This is a typical agricultural dance of this area.\(^{120}\)

Examples of the latter type of festival, namely, the religious festivals, are: Ka Pomblang Syiem or Ka Shad Nongkrem (Nongkrem religious festival), which takes place in the month of October or November at Smit.\(^{121}\) This is an important religious festival in the Khyrim Syiemship. In the Jaintia Hills the most important religious festival is Ka Beh-deiňkhlam,\(^{122}\) an annual religious festival to pray for well being and a good harvest.\(^{123}\) This festival is preceded by a sacrifice called Ka Kňia Dih So Pen performed by the *Doloi, Pator* and the *Basan*.\(^{124}\) This is a religious ceremony to chase away the *Khlam* (plague) and every sort of evil from among the people. Another religious festival that is found in the Iapngar area of the Ri Bhoi district, is Ka Lukhmi festival which implores the blessing of Lukhmi, the deity of rice and agriculture.\(^{125}\) Besides these, there are numerous other festivals and dances proper to each region or group of people. Dances and festivals therefore form a very vital
ingredient of Khasi culture. They are faithfully observed in the annual calendar and their celebrations draw a large crowd of people and foster a great sense of joy and unity among them.

2.7. CONCLUSION

This chapter provides a general picture of the Khasi society and its socio-cultural fabric. The Khasis as a group of people who came to these hills have always distinguished themselves by their unique socio-cultural traditions. Their customs and traditions have always been valued and preserved throughout their history. Their matrilineal system, for example, has been kept up to this day in spite of the fact that they are surrounded by societies who follow patriliney.

Throughout their history, the Khasis have also preserved the sacredness of the *kur* (matrikin) and *kha* (patrikin). Even today, members of the *kur* make sure that no incest (*shong-sang*) takes place. No marriage is permitted between persons of the same clan (*kur*) at any degree whatsoever. Today with the resurgence of the Seng Khasi and other cultural groups, Khasi cultural tradition like festivals, folk art and customary laws are being promoted. Much more interest in preserving the Khasi cultural heritage is generated among all sections of people.

Another notable socio-cultural tradition held scrupulously by them is the institution of *khi*-ship (maternal uncle). Although *khi*-ship has passed the test of time in the past centuries, today however, we see a gradual deterioration of this institution. Many factors are at play in effecting this change. In the succeeding chapters we shall
deal at length with these factors of change and the general effect that they have on kith-ship among the Khasis.

NOTES

1 The name Khasi has many other variations like Kahasi, Khasiya, Khuchia, Kassi, Khasa, Khashiare. They are known by these names in different parts of the country and in Bangladesh.


3 Rev. Thomas Jones was the person who gave the Khasis the Roman script in c. 1842. The Church has never destroyed this unique feature of tribal society. In fact it has encouraged it through more empowerment to the lay people [Cf. D. Jala, “Contribution of the Catholic Church to the Cultures of Northeast India”, in S. Karotempel (ed.) The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1990. Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1993, 390].


7 Cf. Ibid., 3.


9 With the establishment of Cherrapunje as the head quarter of the East India Company in Assam and the coming of Christianity, the language of Cherrapunje gained more importance and acceptance among the rest. It then became the official medium of communication in offices and educational institutions. It is referred to as Kha Khiin Sohra (language of Sohra). Thus in the course of time, the entire Nongphlang region has adopted this as the official language. Today it has become the lingua franca of the whole Khasi community, an official language in the state and in the process of being recognized as one of the major languages of India.


11 This group of Khasis have been co-existing for centuries with the Garos whom they call the Dikos. This name has featured in many Khasi legends and stories – Cf. P. G. Gatphoh, Sawdeng ka Lyngwiar Dpet. Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1982", 99.


13 This phenomenon can be explained by the facts of history. It seemed that during the reign of a certain Jashia King, many of his subjects left the kingdom due to persecution. Some of these came to the Bhoi region and this explains the Pnar influence on the Bhoi dialect.


15 Their inclusion into the Khasi community is much debated today. There is currently a lot of opposition from the Khasi groups against the government attempt to ascribe to them the ST status.


17 The Pnars are not to be considered a separate tribe. They belong to the same Khasi tribe although because of geographical isolation, they have developed certain unique customs and practices. Due to their constant social interaction with the people of the plains along their borders, they have assimilated also some Hindu customs. However, they are to be called Khasis in the general term of the word. Legends tell us that these people separated from the main Khasi tribe in search of a better place. They crossed the Kupli river and reached their present habitation. Today there are more efforts made to realize the common identity, origin and culture of both the Khasis and the Pnars [Cf. R. S. Lyndsoh, “Ka Sad ka Sunnu”, in S. K. Chattopadhyay (ed.) Tribal Institutions of Meghalaya. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1985, 21].

18 Cf. Kharkor, Ka Kolshor Khasi, 32

19 Cf. R. T. Rymbai, “Foreword”, in Chowdhury, Ki Khan Khasi-Khara, p. iii. Since years back there has been lot of contention between the Meghalaya government and the Assam government regarding this disputed area. The inhabitants of these areas had always wanted to be part of Meghalaya, but the Assam government has always been reluctant. Till today, bilateral talks between the two governments have been conducted but no compromise
has been reached. Of late the inhabitants have organized a series of strikes and protests and presented a number of memoranda. See also R. T. Rymbai, "Evolution of Modern Khasi Society", in Khasi Heritage. Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1979, 57.

20 Cf. IFP, "Two Khasi villages make homes away from home in Manipur", in Kangla (November 28, 2002), 1. The names of the two villages are Kamarang and Makhia Basti laking. No historical accounts are available concerning the origin of these villages.

21 Cf. H. Bareh, Meghalaya. Shillong: NE India News & Feature Service, 1974, 68-69. This division is rather generic. The author does not speak of the murans as a sub group. Theoretically such a broad division may be sufficient, however, de facto we know that the division can be broader as indicated above.

22 In recent time there has been a lot of public discussion on this issue. Lately the Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP) and the Khasi Students Union (KSU) had organized two separate discussions on the topic "Unity of the Khasi Society" at Shillong, where eminent scholars exposed their views on the issue. It was a general feeling that the common origin should be preserved and that symptoms of separatism should be overcome - Cf. "Are Pards Khyriams part of Khasi Race?", in The Shillong Times (July 17, 2001), 1; see also "Need for Unity of Khasi Race Stressed", in The Shillong Times (July 18, 2001), 1.


24 Cf. Ibid., 13.

25 Khasi legend tells us that the Khasis lost their written script during the great deluge in the plains. While swimming across the waters, both the dkar (plain's man) and the Khasi had their scripts in their mouths. Unfortunately, the Khasi accidentally swallowed up the script, while the dkar managed to keep it. The swallowed script thus became part and parcel of the Khasis and from here was born the oral tradition among them - Cf. E. Sam, "L'Libro Perdu", Giovanni Missioneario, n. 10 (October 1927), 192-193; H. Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1997, p. 21.


28 The belief in divine origin of man is a common phenomenon among many tribes and communities of people all over the world. The Jews themselves speak about the creation of man by God in the book of Genesis. Most of the tribes in Northeast India have legends concerning their divine origin.

29 Cf. Interview with Rev. Fr. Sylvanus S. Lyngdoh (Kolkata: October 27, 2002).

30 This legendary peak is situated on a mountain range about 15 km north of Shillong city. It is considered a sacred spot for all the Khasis since time immemorial. An annual sacrifice is held here under the auspicious of the Khasi people. This division is rather sufficient, however, we know that the division can be broader as indicated above.


33 Cf. J. Bacchiaro, Ki Dientat jong ki Longsuhwa. Shillong: Don Bosco Book Depot, 1977, 17. Another version of this legend says that one member of the Hynniew-trep voluntarily cut off the tree because he wanted complete independence from God (Cf. Rafy, Khasi Folk Tales. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1985, 8-9)


39 According to J. H. Hutton the similarity of the Khasi funerary urns to those found in Burma, Minahassa, Celebes and Prome proves the affinity between these tribes (Cf. J. H. Hutton, Proceedings of the National Institute of Sciences of India, vol. I, n. 2, 103-105).

40 Cf. Gurdon, The Khasis, p. 10; Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature, 10-11.

41 Dr. Grierson has classified Mon-Khmer language into five groups and he places Khasi language as one among the five (Cf. H. Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, 16-17).


43 Cf. Puch, "The Tribes of Northeast India", in The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1990, p. 363. This same theory was propagated by Prof. Ernst Kuhn around the years 1883-1889 (Cf. Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, 15).


45 Cf. Bareh, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, 16.

46 Cf. Ibid., 22.
Among the Khasis there are two classes of Lyngdohs (priests). One class is known as Lyngdoh-synshar (secular administrative priests) and the other class is known as Lyngdoh-niam (religious priests).

48 Cf. Ibid., 24.
50 According to J. H. Hutton, the Negrito Race was either exterminated by immigrants who came after them or it was assimilated by other groups (Cf. S. Fuchs, “The Races of Northeast India”, 363-364).
51 Cf. Tham, Ki Sogi Bartim u Myntwai Trep, 3.
53 For this reason there exists among the Khasis the axiom “ka nia kaba tam”, that is, reason and dialogue are the best way to rule and govern (Cf. Ibid., 208).
54 Cf. H. Barch, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, 74.
55 Interview with Fr. Sogi Lyngdoh (Kolkata, October 27, 2002), 400. All the syiem among the Khasis, except those of Hima Sohra, are descendants of dikhas who were incorporated into the Khasi society centuries ago. In the opinion of H. Barch, the syiem as a form of centralized administration through a consensus among the territorial heads, necessitated by the expansion and complexity of society (Cf. H. Barch, The History and Culture of the Khasi People, 41). In whichever case, the influence of the plains’ monarchy cannot be ruled out.
57 By “divine kings” it does not mean that they are appointed by God directly, but because God made use of his divine agents, like the ki parti (good fairies) or his earthly creatures to give birth to these lines of kings (Cf. P. Kharakor, Ka Kolshor Khasi, 62). Although such divine origin is accepted, the Khasi never consider such kings as divine, nor are they worshipped as such.
58 According to the Jaitia legend, a certain man called U Woh Ryndi caught a strange fish from Myntdu river. The fish became a fairy whom he later on married and begot children. The children of Ka Li Dohka (that was the name of the fairy) and U Woh Ryndi constitute the royal line in the Jaitia kingdom (Cf. P. Kharakor, Ka Kolshor Khasi, 63).
59 Cf. Ratly, Khasi Folk Tales, 23. A popular legend tells us that a certain man called U Sati Myllienngap saw the beautiful damsel coming out of the cave known as Krem Mani and wanted to catch her. By means of a bouquet of beautiful flowers, he was able to entice the girl to his side. Having trapped her he took her to his home and reared her as his daughter. She was wise and intelligent and was able to counsel the people. So the people called her Ka Syiem (queen) and when she grew up into a woman, she was married to U Kongor Nongri. It is in her that the kings of Shillong syiemship traced their origin - Cf. E. Tome, “Il Dio Shillong”, Gioventu Missionaria, n. 6 (Giugno 1927), 119-120.
60 The Khynuo and Jaitia syiemships have found a mention in the history of the Koch Kingdom of Assam in the 16th century. They appear to have minted coins by themselves to commemorate some important events in history (Cf. J. N. Chowdhury, Khun Khasi-Kharo, 110).
61 Cf. P. R. Kyndiah, Meghalaya Yesterday and Today, New Delhi: Vikash Publishing House Pvt Ltd., 1990, 97. The King for the Khasis is a benevolent figure rather than a dictator. The Khasi akin word of U Syiem (king) is U Kme (mother). This therefore reveals the characteristic personality that every Khasi king is supposed to project to his subjects. The subjects approach their king without fear and trepidation. They are always cordially welcomed and well treated by their ruler who seeks to redress their injuries like a mother.
64 Cf. U Riewtymmen, “U Syiem Khasi Mynhyndai” in U Nongphira, n. 61 (Kyllalylongkot 1907), 1-2. The author of this article cites the example of U Jidar, syiem of Khadsawphm, who for the well being of his people became a beggar himself. The people however came to his aid. U Singmanik, syiem of Lyngkyrdem had an elephant advanced in age which could not serve him anymore. The people of the kingdom themselves having come to know about this, gifted him with a young elephant.
65 This title is probably adopted from the political organization found in the plains. It must have entered the Khasi political system at the same time when kingship was introduced.
66 Among the Khasis there are two classes of Lyngdohs (priests). One class is known as Lyngdoh-synshar (secular administrative priests) and the other class is known as Lyngdoh-niam (religious priests).
68 Cf. N. N., “Il ‘Doloi’”, Gioventu Missionaria, n. 3 (Maggio 1931), 87-88. Each Doloi has his own durbar consisting of officials and some important members. The members are either elected or nominated to the durbar (Cf. S. K. Chattopadhayaya, The Jaintias. New Delhi, Cosmo Publications, 1988, 115).
History over her children

98 Cf. T. Nongbri, "Problems of Matriliny: A Short review of the Khasi

97 Cf. S. Sen, Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills, 146. In Jaintia Hills, the patenas are directly under the

Doloi and they collaborate with him and in his absence they perform his duties (Cf. P. Kharakor, Ka Kolshor


89 Cf. M. P. R. Lyngdoh, Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi, 33.

88 Cf. L. Ravalico, "Thadlaskein", Gvioenit Missionaria, n. 7 (Luglio 1933), 162-63. The authority of the Doloi


86 Cf. P. Kharakor, "Problems of Matriliny: A Short review of the Khasi

85 Acconciing to Khasi Tradition there were four Dorbar Blet (divine assemblies) where God presided over this great assembly of all living creatures. Dr. R. S. Lyngdoh instead opined that there were more than four although he never specified them in his writings.

84 A Raic is a confederation of a number of villages within the region (Cf. P. R. G. Mathur, The Khasi of Meghalaya, 67).

83 Cf. P. Kharakor, Ka Kolshor Khasi, 68. The Khasis consider their dorbar (assembly) as something sacred. They always associate its origin to that Dorbar-blet (divine assembly) of the age of innocence at the beginning of creation. Therefore all efforts to preserve the purity of their present dorbar, is in fact to reflect at least some aspects of that divine dorbar.

82 Cf. L. Smitsang, Christianity and Social Change, 17. Today all the urban localities have the so called Village Defence Party (VDP) who co-operate with the police of the state in matters of security and law.


80 According to Khasi Tradition there were four Dorbar Blet (divine assemblies). The First was in heaven where it was decided that the Hymnvel-trep should inhabit the earth. The Second was in Ramgarh valley (east of Sohpet Groun of people in mountain parts of the Khasi) where the Divinity took the path of rightness; the Third was in Bumgar valley (west of Sohpet Bheng) where the living creatures came together to solve the spiritual crisis caused by sin. The Fourth dorbar took place at Umryanong (Marnhati) after the great chaos at lewleri-lura (market of the animals) - Cf. Interview with Rev. Fr. Sylvanas Sngi (Kolkata, October 27, 2002), 400.


the international body. Every adult male who is a resident of the village, is obliged to attend the dorbar, whenever it is convened. Those who fail to do so are expected to pay a fine.

77 Cf. J. Bacchiarello, Ki Dianjat jong ki Longshuwa, 91-95.

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74 Cf. L. Smitsang, Christianity and Social Change, 17. Today all the urban localities have the so called Village Defence Party (VDP) who co-operate with the police of the state in matters of security and law. In rural areas, the village defence parties often assume the law in their own hands.

73 Cf. L. Smitsang, Christianity and Social Change, 15.

72 Cf. P. Kharakor, Ka Kolshor Khasi, 68. The Khasis consider their dorbar (assembly) as something sacred. They always associate its origin to that Dorbar-blet (divine assembly) of the age of innocence at the beginning of creation. Therefore all efforts to preserve the purity of their present dorbar, is in fact to reflect at least some aspects of that divine dorbar.

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The place of importance that a Khasi woman occupies in Khasi society is no doubt an envious one. Some old traditions that come from the plains, tell about the existence of a "woman's kingdom" that was found among the Khasi. The king of Kashmir, Lalitaditya (714-750) tried to invade the Jaithia kingdoms known as Sri Rajya (woman's kingdom) but was repelled by them. If this is true, there is no reason to doubt the prominence of Khasi women in a society. (See M. P. R. Lynddoh, The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi, 31)

In the olden days it used to happen that one clan was patronised and supported in times of trouble, by another clan and so a covenant of relationship was made among them. At other times, a member or members of one clan happened to be adopted and brought up by another clan and so a covenant of relationship or a bond developed among them. Such a social process is known among the Khasi as ka jingiateh kur.

In the past, the Khasi warriors often used to attack the villages in the plains either for extending their kingdoms or for looting. They would also capture plains women and would marry them for the sake of increasing the Khasi population.

Interview with Rev. Fr. Sylvanus Seng Lynddoh (Mawli: August 9, 2008).

This does not however mean that the male members are without any property. According to Cantlie, a male member is entitled to his self-acquired property (nongkynrang) and in some circumstances, even to ancestral property (nongtyammen) (cf. K. Cantlie, Notes on Khasi Law. Aberdeen: Henry Munro Ltd., 1934, 23).