From Uncle to Father: An Anthropological Study on Changing Patriarchy in Khasi Society

ABSTRACT

1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Khasi society is changing fast. The influence of changes brought about by education and modernization has had a decisive impact on the life and culture of the people. One of the most prominent cultural traditions of the Khasis is the institution of the maternal uncle \((u\text{k}ii)\). \(U\text{k}ii\) has been, since time immemorial, a central figure in Khasi society. If he is the \(k\text{n}i\text{rangbah}\) (chief uncle) of the clan \((k\text{ur})\) then he wields great authority among his clan members. He functions as the chairperson of the \(Dorbar-kur\) (Assembly of the \(Kur\)). A \(k\text{n}i\) of the \(k\text{poh}\) (descendants of a single ancestress) instead exercises his authority only among the members of the \(k\text{poh}\). However, today we witness the gradual decline of the role of \(U\text{k}ii\) among the Khasis especially at the level of the \(k\text{ur}\). His traditional role has gradually been taken over by the father of the family. This transition has in turn transformed Khasi society considerably in the recent years. It is the importance and significance of this transition that has prompted me to undertake this study.

Actually, almost every married man in the Khasi society is both a \(k\text{n}i\) (uncle) and a \(k\text{pa}\) (father) simultaneously. He is a \(k\text{n}i\) in his sisters’ or in his cousins’ families while he is a \(k\text{pa}\) in his children’s family.\(^1\) However, the role of man as \(k\text{n}i\) has always dominated the

Khasi society in the past. The kpa-ship was to a great extent played down. In fact, the father is usually referred to as “u nongai khun” (one who begets children).

The changing role from the kāi to the father of the family in Khasi society has a tremendous significance for the family and for the society at large. It is not merely a change of role, but also a change of cultural paradigm. This change is bound to affect the life style, value system and behaviour of the Khasis. The transition has to a great extent also affected the identity of the Khasis. Hence the proposed research is significant for the Khasis of the present generation in particular.

This research hinges upon the central concept of patriarchy. Hence, I may briefly explain the concept as it is perceived for the purpose of this study. Patriarchy refers to an institutionalized domination of women by men. Most societies in the world exhibit some form of patriarchy in their social stratification. Even the Khasi social system, although matrilineal in nature, has a unique form of patriarchy where the kāi (maternal uncle) exercised authority over the family members. He acted as the adviser, mediator, a disciplinarian and a helper in times of need. The maternal uncle was by tradition the centre of authority and economy, the pivot of the whole family or the clan. He had control over his sisters’ children and he safeguarded the well-being and integrity of the clan. In the last few decades some changes are seen in the Khasi social system whereby the patriarchal role traditionally held by the kāi is gradually being assumed by the father of the family.

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Although the institution of kni still exists its role and status are expected to be no longer what it used to be in the past.

2. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

After a long period of contact with the British administration and with Christianity in particular, the Khasi society has undergone tremendous socio-cultural and economic changes. This is seen in the changes in dress patterns, housing, food habits and lifestyle in general.\(^5\) With the establishment of Shillong as the premier capital of Northeast India, the process of migration from the rural areas was set in motion. This in turn has affected the traditional family system among the Khasis. The processes of urbanization and Christianization have been greatly responsible for the weakening of the traditional roles of the kñi as the ultimate male authority and of the khatduh as the custodian of family religion. The power of the kñi has now been toned down to a great extent.\(^6\) The adoption of Christianity as a new religion has greatly affected the cultural life of the Khasis. The traditional cultural practices like erecting megaliths, household and community celebrations and festivals have been largely abandoned. The cultural practices related to marriage, funeral, house building etc have become almost extinct.\(^7\) Although some basic elements of culture like matriliny, traditional polity, inheritance etc, have survived yet many other aspects of culture and tradition have disappeared. For this reason this study is considered opportune and important:


\(^6\) Cf. Ibid.

\(^7\) Cf. Ibid., 405.
a) Since the Khasi society is undergoing a great socio-cultural transformation due to reasons cited above, it is necessary that a scientific study be undertaken in order to understand the process. Understanding the various factors of changes and their dynamics may enable the people concerned to adapt themselves more effectively to these changes.

b) Socio-cultural changes and transitions should not be taken incognito but they should become a subject of serious study and reflection. Taking these things for granted will spell the doom of a culture. Great civilizations in the world have always made significant studies and reflections on their cultural changes and transitions. Therefore in the face of such a serious cultural transition of family and clan structure, the Khasis need to undertake an elaborate study of the same.

c) It is always important to ascertain the impact and significance of any cultural change in a society to enable a better comprehension of the situation. Such knowledge can be obtained only through a scientific study of the problem. Consequently, this study bears substantial importance and significance in the context of the Khasi society.

d) Knowledge of the socio-cultural situation in one's society has both a preventive and corrective value. It can help the community to prevent certain factors from affecting the culture adversely or it can also correct certain faults which if left untended may corrode the cultural wealth of the people.

e) This study may also contributive towards formulating future policies regarding Khasi family system which the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) or the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC), undertakes from time to time. From the perspective of policy making, this study therefore is necessary and significant.
3. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The present study deals with an important aspect of Khasi family structure, namely, the roles of the *kñi* (uncle) and the *kpa* (father). There is a gradual transition of roles between these two traditional institutions. So far no extensive study has been made on this particular development in Khasi society.

The data collected from the two sample localities and from other independent sources, will form the basis of this study. The study will also try to understand the factors (endogenous and exogenous) responsible for such transition. Further, the study will examine the impact the transition has on Khasi family and clan in particular and on Khasi society in general.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

a) To study the changing patriarchy from *kñi* (maternal uncle) to the father (*kpa*) in the Khasi society. This is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is taking place today especially in urban and semi-urban areas.

b) To understand the process of this transformation as it is being seen and felt today. To identify both the endogenous and the exogenous factors that are facilitating such transformations.
5. METHODOLOGY OF THE PRESENT STUDY

To study the specific problem selected for this particular research on Khasi society, we have identified two villages as sample. To represent the rural Khasi population, Marbisu village has been identified while Mawlai-Mawroh has been chosen to represent the urban Khasi population. Marbisu has been deliberately chosen because of its sizable number of Khasis who still uphold the traditional religion. Mawroh on the other hand has been chosen to represent the urban Khasi population.

5.1. The Population

For collection of data different parameters are considered, namely: (i) age, (ii) sex, (iii) religion, (iv) education and (v) socio-economic status.

Questionnaires were served on a total of 500 persons in Marbisu and 300 in Mawroh. However, only 397 (that is 79.4%) responded from Marbisu and 205 (that is 68.3%) from Mawroh. Therefore the total number of respondents for the present study is 602.

5.2. Tools used

In pursuing the research and in collecting the required data, the following tools were employed by the investigator:

1) Questionnaire (Consisting of 64 questions grouped into 6 sub titles)
2) Interview schedule (Consisting of 22 questions)
6. CHAPTERIZATION AND CHAPTER CONTENT

- The thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 entitled “Introduction” describes the rationale, the objectives, the methodology and scope of the study. This chapter also contains a review of basic literature on the subject. Chapter 2 entitled “The Socio-cultural Fabric of Khasi Society” provides a theoretical framework for the study as it describes the nature of Khasi society, their origin, their culture, community and family structures. Chapter 3 which is entitled “Traditional Role of the Kñi (maternal uncle) among the Khasis”, on the other hand, gives us a deeper understanding of the traditional status and role of kñi-ship in Khasi society. This chapter provides us a further theoretical framework for the study in connection with the present investigation on the current status and role of the kñi. Chapter 4 which is entitled “Decline of Kñi-ship in Khasi Society” provides a critical analysis of kñi-ship today and shows how this traditional institution is on a gradual decline. The data collected from field study are analyzed to support this finding. Chapter 5 entitled “Rise of Kpa-ship in Khasi Society” discusses about kpa-ship and how this institution is gaining importance day by day. Data collected from field study are used to support this finding. The analysis clearly indicates that kpa-ship is gaining more importance in Khasi society today. Chapter 6 which is entitled “Summary and Conclusion” is a concluding chapter and it states the findings of the study and their implications on Khasi society today.

7. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study has brought to light many aspects of change in the institutions of kñi-ship and kpa-ship among the Khasis today. It has demonstrated that while conceptually the
institution of kñi-ship is still unaffected, the actual exercise of the kñi’s role has changed considerably. Kñi-ship is gradually turning into an ideology of the past and kpa-ship that of the present.

First, the study shows that due to many socio-cultural and economic factors, the traditional role of the kñi has been affected adversely. Christianity has been a major influence on the Khasi society. By adopting this new religion, many of the cultural traditions in the family have been affected. The law of inheritance enacted by the British government has practically given the right of ownership of ancestral property to the khatduh. In this manner the kñi who used to be the traditional administrator of the ancestral property has lost much of his authority over his clan members. Because of these factors kñi-ship in particular has been adversely affected while kpa-ship has gained more importance. Today the kñi as the present study has shown, does not wield as much authority and influence over his kur/kpoh/ing members as he used to do in the past. In general, his authority is gradually waning away and has become nominal.

Second, the study has shown that the influence of the kñi over his nephews and nieces is diminishing due to his inability to exercise his traditional role of being regularly present in his sister’s house and to supervise the affairs related to the kur/kpoh/ing or to admonish his nephews and nieces. Physical absence has been responsible to a large extent for the diminution of his authority and at times it has led to weakening of kinship bond especially with the younger generation as familiarity between the kñi and his nephews and nieces is on the decline.

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8 Cf. P. Passah, “Changes in the matrilineal system of Khasi-Jaintia Family”, in Matriliny in Meghalaya, 76.
Third, the study shows that while a Khasi man’s role as a kñi in his sister’s house is diminishing his role as a kpa in his conjugal family is on the rise. This is clearly seen in the quality time that he spends with his children than with his nephews and nieces. His growing absence from his nephews and nieces implies an increased presence with his wife and children. This consequently has strengthened kpa-ship in Khasi society today. In fact, the traditional role as ‘biological’ (as begetter only) father has practically given way to his role as ‘social’ (nourisher) father. Thus a Khasi man today has become less an uncle in his family of origin and more a social father in his conjugal family.⁹

Fourth, the study shows that many Khasis today are of strong opinion that the kpa should assume more authority and responsibility in his children’s house than the kñi. It is the feeling of many that the kpa is the natural guardian and disciplinarian of his children on account of his consanguinal relationship with his children. Laxity in exercising their roles on the part of the kñi today and the influence of Christian teaching on paternal responsibility are some of the factors that have accelerated this type of thinking.

Fifth, the study reveals that in reality the process of transition in Khasi patriarchy is already in motion and it is gaining momentum with the passage of time. There is a gradual transition from patriarchy traditionally held by the kñi to the present form of patriarchy centred around the father of the family. This phenomenon is equally prevalent both in the urban and rural areas and across all sections of Khasi people.

Sixth, this particular study also reveals that more Khasis today are of the opinion that the kpa should formally assume the role of the kñi with regard to the affairs of the family except those related to the kur/kpoh/ing where the kñi is still considered the

authority. The verdict is that the kpa should replace the role of the kñi in the affairs of the ing-tnat (nuclear family).

Seventh, the study shows that the image of the kpa is gaining more respect and recognition and the kpa himself is beginning to assume all responsibilities related to the family. He is no longer a nominal head but de facto the head and supervisor of his own family.\(^\text{10}\)

Hence the present study clearly demonstrates that there is a change in patriarchy in the Khasi family, namely, that there is a gradual transition of roles from the maternal uncle to the father of the family.

8. IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

This research has confirmed the main thesis about the transition in patriarchy from the kñi to the kpa in Khasi society today. This may have the following implications for the Khasi society in near future:

a) The image of the kpa will be perceived in a better light. His role and status will be better accepted and appreciated. The kpa will be seen as a natural substitute of the kñi in matters related to the family. With a better recognition of his status and authority, the kpa is expected to exercise more authority and accept more responsibilities towards his family.

\(^{10}\) However, it must be said here that in cases of a man marrying the heiress, the husband is often controlled by the in-laws. The grand-mother or the brother-in-law (uncle) becomes a hindrance to his exercise of authority. Yet a lot of change is also seen in these cases where at times the husband of the heiress commands the affairs of the family. This depends very much on the personality of the man or his ability to shoulder responsibility.
b) The rise in status of the *kpa* is likely to affect the image of the *kñi* further. In fact, the present study has indicated that the status and role of the *kñi* are experiencing a downsliding movement. In many cases the *kñi* has become a stranger to his nephews and nieces. The bipolar tension of roles between a *kñi* and *kpa* in a Khasi man has tilted in favour of the latter.

c) The changing patriarchy in Khasi families will probably be perceived as one decisive step in the elaborate process of socio-cultural transformation of the society itself. In the long run the possibility of change in the lineage system cannot be ruled out. However, such a change in the existing system calls for internal debate and deeper understanding of the Khasi culture and identity.

9. CONCLUSION

This particular study is a critical analysis of the present socio-cultural transformation that is being witnessed in Khasi society. Evidently, the transformation is taking a natural course on the whole. Socio-cultural, economic and religious factors are at play at different levels and in different degrees in this transformation. Khasi society today is exposed to the influence of a global culture and interculturality has become a day-to-day reality. Therefore such socio-cultural transformation is bound to take place and as such there is need to accommodate such changes. This is in keeping with the characteristic dynamism of human cultures.
REFERENCES


