BASIC FOUNDATIONS OF KHASI CULTURE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

BY

MEBADA WANKA LYNGDOH NONGBRI

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY,
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG- 793022

INTRODUCTION

The topic chosen for the study is:

"BASIC FOUNDATIONS OF KHASI CULTURE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE".

People ache to believe that we human beings are vastly different from all other species- and they are right! We are different. We are the only species that has an extra medium of design preservation and design communication: "culture". Some would say that is an overstatement! Other species have rudiments of culture as well, and their capacity to transmit information "behaviorally" in addition to genetically is itself an important biological phenomenon. But! these other species have not developed culture to the takeoff point the way our species has. We have for instance 'language', the primary medium of culture, and language has opened up new regions of Design Space that only we are privy to. In a few short millennia- a mere instant in biological time- we have already used our new exploration vehicles to transform not only our planet but the very process of design development that created us.

Culture has been considered a unique possession of man. It is one of the most distinguishing traits of human society. It does not exist at the sub-human level, as it is only man that is born and brought up in a cultural environment compared to animals that are born in a natural environment. When we say that, when every man is born into a society, it would mean the same that every man is

born into a culture. The dictum "Man is a Social Being" can thus be redefined as "Man is a Cultural Being". Every man can be regarded as a representative of his culture. Culture is the unique quality of man, which separates him from the lower animals. Bronislaw Malinowski has rightly defined culture as the "cumulative creation of man", which means that culture is the handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends. Further, the Russian Sociologist E.V. Roberts regards culture as the body of thought and knowledge both theoretical and practical which only man can possess.

Further "Culture" is a shared learned behavior that refers to a group or community's way of life and outlook on the world. It consists of the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow, and the material goods they create. It refers to the whole way of life of the members of a society which includes how they dress, their marriage, customs and family life, their pattern of work, religious ceremonies and leisure pursuits. Thus the Birmingham School has rightly explained that the concept of culture has been taken to refer to something like collective subjectivity, i.e., a way of life or outlook adopted by a community as a social class.(Alasuutari Pertti., Researching Culture, Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies, Sage Publications, N. Delhi, 1995, p.25).

The concept of culture was first explicitly defined in 1871, by the British Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor. He used the term to refer to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"(*Lexicon Universal Encyclopaedia.* P.415)

Since then, anthropologists and other social scientists have offered numerous refinements and variations on this definition, but all have agreed that culture is learned behavior in contrast to genetically endowed behavior as said earlier. So Tylor's definition consists of abstract patterns of and for living and dying. Such abstract patterns are cultural to the extent that they are a part of the common orientation of two or more people.

Hoggart states that culture consists "the wider life people live". One may also say that culture represents human life and portrays human achievements, i.e., as a great social heritage of entire mankind. Without culture, man would not be human at all. He would have no language in which to express himself, no sense of self- consciousness, and his ability to think or reason would be severely limited.

Customs, beliefs, values, artifacts, symbols and rituals are also important elements of culture that have been mentioned throughout literature. For instance, Wuthnow (1987) has defined "Culture" as "the symbolic expressive aspect of social behaviour". "What we are" is very much a matter of what culture has made us. (Dennett Daniel C., *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Evolution and the Meanings of Life. Simon and Schuster, Rockfeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020., 1995, p. 340.) Thus MacIver declared, "Our Culture is what we are". How we live, behave and interact with each other, how we think and feel, all falls under cultural concerns.

Since man himself in relation with other human beings forms the society, so therefore every society has a culture of its own. No doubt it differs from society to society, but culture of every society is unique in itself. In general, the

culture of a particular society is comprised of three distinct elements: ideas, aesthetic forms and values, largely moulded by the traditions of the past and the aspirations for the future. Ideas give rise to habits and beliefs thereby perpetuating themselves through social institutions that provide stability: aesthetic forms reflect the artistic expression of a culture in its visual arts, music and poetry as well as a sense of beauty manifested in the day-to-day living of individuals and social groups; and the values of a culture are formed by the interplay of both ideas and aesthetic forms and provide norms of conduct, standards of behavior, and sources of faith and vision. Of these three elements of culture, the 'values' are important; values develop the precious assets of wisdom and discrimination in a specific culture; and they also provide the dynamism for action and change, and impart vitality and quality to the life of the people. The understanding of a particular culture requires a correct comprehension of the ideas underlying it and a measure of intelligent appreciation of its aesthetic forms; it is however, the values of a culture that contain its essence and offer the best way of understanding it and participating in it.

A living and vital culture is rooted in authentic and healthy traditions, has the capacity of continuous renewal and adaptation, and is developed by new aspirations and bold innovations; in this way the 'past;' the 'present' and the 'future' are reflected together in that life of the mind and the spirit that is the indefinable complex of culture.(Kirpal, Prem, Culture and development, Har Anand Publications, N.Delhi-110017, p.63). Like 'love', culture will always elude definition and remain an awareness beyond words and concepts, a precious

belonging that is within us and also around, linking us to a whole expanse of life, retaining its own uniqueness in time and space. For each of us, it will have a special meaning and significance.

No part of culture is inborn. It is a deposit from the activities of man as the endeavour to control reality for the satisfaction of their needs and wishes. The members of each generation receives the cultural heritage from the preceding generations and adapt themselves to it just as they do to climatic and other aspects of the physical environment.

Thus Graham Wallace says that culture is "the social heritage which is acquired by man from the preceding generation through learning. It is different from the biological heritage which is passed on to man automatically through the genes". Members use thee inherited culture, add to it, and pass it on to their descendants. This is why culture is said to persist.

Without culture, man would not be human at all. He would have no language in which to express himself, no sense of self-consciousness, and his ability to think or reason would be severely limited. It'll be just like a radio transistor, which does not have a battery or a wire where no sound or tune can be heard and transmitted.

Culture can be divided into various sub-components:

1. Speech: language, writing system, etc.
2. Material Traits:
   (a) Food habits
   (b) Shelter

(c) Transportation and travel

(d) Dress

(e) Utensils, tools, etc

(f) Weapons

(g) Occupation and Industries.

3. Carving, Painting, drawing, Music etc.

4. Mythology and Scientific Knowledge.

5. Religious Practices.

6. Family and Social Systems.

   a. Forms of marriage

   b. Methods of reckoning relationship

   c. Inheritance

   d. Social control

   e. Sports and Games.

7. Property

   a. Real and Personal

   b. Standards of values and exchanges

   c. Trade

8. Government

   a. Political forms

   b. Judicial and Legal Procedures

   c. War and Conflict.

So being a precious heritage of mankind it needs to be preserved and developed. The participation of all members in the cultural life of a community, and the increasing cooperation among members to renew and enrich cultural values is the greatest need of our times. No culture ever remains constant or changeless. It varies from time to time. Change can be both contributive and destructive to any society and this has to be properly checked.

After realizing that "Culture" aspect of man and itself is a vast term as well, the researcher has concentrated only on the three basic foundations of Khasi culture, i.e., 'The Matrilineal system', the 'Clan and Inter-Clan Relationship' and Religion'. Why we say that these are the three basic foundations besides the many other features or characteristics or lets say foundations that binds Khasi culture is because we find that the Khasis have had a strong belief in "matriliny" for its wafts; a strong belief in the sanctity of "clanship and inter-clan relationship" for its woofs; and a strong belief in "Religion" for its divine origin which stands strong till today. So it is on this background that this research study is basing on these three strong cultural foundations that has been preserved, treasured and passed on from generations to generations till the present day.

In the content of the Khasis, their history begins around the 5th century, although details are known only from about 1500A.D. Their sources of information may be grouped from oral traditions, literary records- local, earlier and modern, foreign accounts and archaeological findings. The picture that emerged from there is that the people had steadfastly retained their culture well into recent times.

The Khasis are the original and the major inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. "These stocky, muscular, attractive people with charming smile are of Indo-Chinese descent and speak a language of the Mon-Khmer family which has links with the language spoken in Thailand and Cambodia". (Bhattacharjee, Romesh, The Khasi Life Style, Fontline, G. Kasturi, National Press, Kasturi Buildings, Madras, 1987, Vol.4. No.18.p.61.)

According to popular belief and other accounts among the Khasi community, all races and communities who have descended from the great Austro-Asiatic race from the dim past till the dawn of history and even till the later periods, either followed the matriarchal and matrilineal system in social organization. But after having undergone series of social evolutionary processes, through the passage of many centuries, all these races and communities have switched over to the Patriarchal system, which had been adopted earlier in the Middle East and the Western World. The Khasis have resisted and have tried to remain distinct in following the matrilineal system.

The history of the Khasi society is a striking record of changes introduced in away where a continuous adaptation of old ideas to changing environment, of old patterns to new is taking place. Therefore, because of this, there is no sense of cultural break in it and there is that continuity, in spite of repeated change, from the far distant days of *"U Khadhynriew Trep Khadhynriew Skum"* to this present age. There was a reverence for the past and for traditional forms, but there was also a freedom and flexibility of the mind and tolerance of the spirit. So while forms often remained, the inner content continues to change. In no other way

could this society have survived for thousands of years. Only a living and growing mind could overcome the rigidity of traditional forms, only those forms could give it continuity and stability.

Select Review of Literature:

As regards literature that has contributed to the study, there are many introductory books that have helped the researcher in understanding the basic concept of culture and it's various characterizations. Besides the Lexicon Universal Encyclopaedia, that have helped the researcher in various definitions; Pertti Alasuutari's book *"Researching Culture"* introduces the range of approaches and methodological tools available for undertaking critical and rigorous research on culture. Julian Thomas's *"Time, Culture and Identity"*, explains that cultural change is not simply triggered by environmental change. In fact, culture is one element in a complex system composed of numerous sub-systems, and that the over-all outcome of change in any one area depends upon the interactions of all of these subsystems. The role of culture is primarily functional, facilitating the process of human evolution. It does not do anything, but it is infact a means through which human beings carry out their actions. Then there's *"Cultural Studies"* by Fred Inglis; Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans' edited book *"Social Movements and Culture"*, which considers different approaches to the study of culture and explains how movements and conflicts are affected by their cultural environment. Ramkrishna Mukherjee *"Society, Culture, Development"* illustrates culture, as one of the approaches to his understanding on the "Quality of Life" that man possesses. *"Language in Culture and Society-A*

Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology" by Dell Hymes also focuses on the importance of the relationship between culture and language, the essence for man's existence. P.C. Joshi "*Culture, Communication and Change"* highlights the search of culture for identity amidst change and the impact of development on culture.

For its methodology, Goode and Hatt *Methods of Social Research;* Young. P.V., *Scientific Social Survey and Research;* Seibor, J.E., (ed*) The Ethics of Social Research,* Fieldwork, Regulations and Publications"; Selltiz, Wrightsman and Cook., *Research Methods in Social Relations* (Third Edition); and Myrdal, Gunnar., *Objectivity in Social Research* were some of the books that were of tremendous help to the researcher in this field.

In relation to literature about the Khasis- the people and their culture there are books like Bacchiarello, Joseph. 1981., *Dienjat U Longshuwa*; Bareh, Hamlet. 1967. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*; Costa, G. 1981, *Ka Riti Jong ka Ri ki Laiphew Syiem II*; Diengdoh, Medro., 1975., *Ka Thymmei ki Laloo, Diengdoh, Lamin bad Kiwe;*. Giri, Helen. 1990., *The Khasis Under British Rule (1824-1947)*; Gurdon, P.R.T. 1975. *The Khasis;* Kharakor, Spiton, 1981., *Ki Khun ki Ksiew U Hynñiew Trep*;. *Shispah Sanphew Snem Mynshuwa,* Khongphai, A.S. (ed.). *Sir Keith Cantlie's Notes on Khasi Law*; Khongphai, A.S. 1970. *Principles of Khasi Law*; Laloo, D.T. 1978. *Ka Rongbiria U Hynñiew Trep*; Lyngdoh, H. 1937, *Ka Niam Khasi*; Lyngdoh, R.S. 1981., *Ka Histori ka Thoh ka Tar*; Lyngdoh, Mary Pristilla Rina. 1991., *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*; Mawrie, H.O. 1973. *Ka Pyrkhat U Khasi*; Mawrie, H.O.

1973, *U Khasi bad La Ka Niam*, Robert, John. "Ri Khasi" in *Na ka Thiar Ki Longshuwa* (Poitri), 2nd Edn. 1981., Rodborne, T. 1790. *U Khasi*; Roy, David. 1934., *Notes on Khasi Law*; Roy, Sib C. 1979., *Ka Niam ki Khasi: Ka Niam Tip Briew Tip Blei*; Sohliya, H. Elias. 1937., *Ki Khanatang U Barim*; Sohliya, H. Elias. 1958., *Ki Hamsaïa ki ;* Tham, Soso. 1960., *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep* (2nd Edn.) and others. But as regards to 'continuity and change', whether the Khasi people are all out for change or has change affected them entirely, or whether continuity is still strong amidst the influence of change, there are not sufficient materials. That is why the researcher has to totally depend on the primary sources collected.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify and study families who still follow the matrilineal system, and those who have adopted the patrilineal one or maybe even both.
2. To identify and study families who still retain their clan and inter-clan relationship; those who still observe the rules of incest; and those who have partially or totally broken them.
3. To identify and study families who still observe the rule of endogamy, and those who have failed to do so.
4. To find out how far is the Khasi religion (*Khasi Niam)* which is called as *"Ka Niam Tip Briew tip Blei"* (Religion that Knows Man and God) play an active role in the society at large. Is its significance still prevalent or have other forces overshadowed its sanctity.

5. To identify the changes (if so), that have taken place and what are the factors that have contributed to the changes.

Method of Research:

Nature of study: the study is both historical and contemporary in perspective; as well as analytical and evaluative; nature of this covering the basic cornerstones of Khasi Culture in terms of the 'Matrilineal System', the 'Clan and Inter-Clan Relationship' and 'Khasi Religion'. This study is also exploratory, empirical and descriptive where it'll explore the actual nature and character of these basic cornerstones as per its actual traditional character. Then it'll highlight if there are any changes that have taken place in recent times to alter the pillars of Khasi culture. We feel this is important not only to provide information to other research scientists, but also to make the Khasi people aware especially the younger generation about what their forefathers have preserved and handed down to them, and what are the dangers that have come along the way that might hamper this rich cultural preservation.

The data of study was collected through the 'Primary' and the 'Secondary' Sources. 'Primary Sources' were collected by the researcher from the field itself through the 'Observation Method' and the 'Interview Schedule'. Through these two; the researcher had a close encounter with the various participants and respondents. For the 'Secondary Sources', the review of relevant literature and collecting of all available published and unpublished books, doctoral thesis based on this topic or of a related one, was consulted. Documentary sources like radio

broadcasts, local newspaper accounts, government records; and library sources were also consulted.

Sample size:

In this study, the Simple (Selective) Random Sampling was applied where a sample is selected proportional to the size of the significant elements in the universe of study. The units of the universe are so arranged that the selection processes gave equiprobability of selection to every unit in the universe. Each item in the universe has been given an equal chance of being included in the sample and this makes the selection of every possible combination of the desired number of cases equally likely. The size of the sample is 200, 50 each from the two villages and 50 each from the localities. These 50 each include respondents corresponding to the requirements of the various elements as mentioned in the Nature of study. Respondents are from various backgrounds, occupations, clans, family, works of life and even communities, as the area requires.

Area of Study:

For the area of study, the researcher has combined both the rural and the urban areas, as area of study. From the rural area, two villages representing the traditional aspects of Khasi culture and patterns were selected, i.e., 'Smit' and 'Mylliem'; whereas from the urban area, two localities from the urban conglomeration of Shillong are taken to represent the process of change and breakdown of the basic patterns of Khasi culture. One is 'Mawkhar' which is a totally Khasi dominated locality, and the other is 'Laitumkhrah' locality, which has a mixed population.

CHAPTERIZATION:

The present study is divided into seven chapters and the theme of each chapter is as follows:

Chapter 1- Introduction: This chapter deals with the meaning of culture, its nature, scope, features and many of its characterizations. It talks about culture in a very elaborate and extensive form. It also identifies the area of study, the methods that were conducted during the study, the sample size and the objectives of study.

Chapter 2- Background of Khasi Cultural Identity: This chapter deals with the Origin of Khasi culture and its legendary background. Then it cited certain basic principles and characteristics of Khasi culture.

Chapter 3- The Matrilineal System: This chapter explains the nature and structure of the Khasi matrilineal system, a system considered unique not only to the present generation, but as a rich legacy passed on by their predecessors, where descent is drawn through the female line and where property goes to the females, the larger share which constitutes the *"ancestral property"(Nongtymmen)* goes to the youngest daughter *"Ka Khadduh"*- who is considered the care-taker and keeper of the family. "The Khasis have matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent". (Kapadia K.M., *Marriage and Family in India*, Oxford University press, Calcutta, 1966, p. 339) But it also highlights that though it is matrilineal, yet it is not matriarchal in authority. It is infact patriarchal. This is reflected in the discussion on role configurations and permutation in structure of authority where it stresses that though title is taken from the mother, yet it is the man, the father who is expected to be the defender of the family and the family's property. It also

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projects the contemporary status of both the man and the woman by highlighting the contemporary debate for change; for instance the change from a matrilineal system to a patrilineal one.

Chapter 4- Dynamics of Clan and Inter-Clan Relationship: The chapter opens with an introduction about the origin of the clan system or the "*Kur*"among the Khasis.Then it reminded the readers that Khasi *'kur'* does not merely exists without any rules and regulations; without any established forms of procedures which we call "institutions'. Khasi '*kur*'or clan which is the common accepted English translation is built up on consanguinity and taboos, the restrictions that prohibits not only incest marriages, but also marriages within the same *'Kur'*. It also highlights the changing pattern that is observant in certain cases today.

Chapter 5- Religion: This Chapter depicts the nature and characteristics of Khasi religion or *"Ka Niam Khasi"*. It also talks about the power and influence that this religion has had on its people; and the impact that Christianity has had on the Khasi people, a fact that no one can evade.

Chapter 6- Continuity, Change and Development: This chapter talks about the nature and direction of change that has taken place in the Khasi society. Increase in population, development in education, developments in science and technology, industrialization, mechanization and urbanization are some of the factors that usher change. But more particularly, the role of the Christian Missionaries that came together with westernization in influencing on change in the Khasi society as reflected in the present scenario. Then it highlights the growing feeling among certain sections of the people, certain groups and

organizations who are aware of the dangers that might hamper the society at large and are trying their level best to create awareness among the people about the importance of cultural preservation.

Chapter 7-Conclusion: This chapter will summarize the entire study pointing its various findings and discussions. Then it will bring out the summary of the total study.

All the chapters that have been pointed out reveal to one fact that Khasi culture is that which has been built up by the ancestors and is passed on till the present generation. It explains and shows us as to how hard these ancestors had built up make their culture be recognized as an identity. They had worked to bring a better living to the people belonging to their society.

All communities all nationalities and all races of the world have different distinct and definite cultural set-up. These distinct cultural set-ups are based on definite background and principles, which have been handed down from one generation to another, from the crude beginning to the present polished form. Such background always originated in the form of legend and then became historical in course of time through evolutionary processes. Anthropological, ethnological, sociological and linguistic research marks have enabled us to understand that the Khasis belong to the Austro- Asiatic race, which is considered as one of the most ancient races of mankind. The Khasi people whether Khynriam or Pnar, Bhoi, War of Lyngam of Meghalaya are looked upon as a single island of the Mon-Khmer form of speech of Austrian origin. There is also no denying the fact that the Khasis have a firm belief that they are the chosen people of God.

the Mon-Khmer form of speech of Austrian origin. There is also no denying the fact that the Khasis have a firm belief that they are the chosen people of God. According to legends, at the beginning, there were sixteen families known as *"Ki Khadhynriew Trep Khadhynriew Skum"*- "The Sixteen Huts- Sixteen Roots" in heaven. Out of these sixteen families, seven families known as "*Ki Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum"*-"The Seven huts- Seven Roots" were sent down by God to make their abode in the surface of the Earth. Each family formed the nucleus of the rudimentary form of each Khasi clan known as *"Kurs"*. Through inter-marriage of the members of different clans, the number of families and people were slowly multiplied. The Khasi have a firm belief that God had handed over a commandment that it is not only a sacrilege, but also an unpardonable sin if a person should marry within his own clan. That is the reason why, till today, to whichever religion they may profess, any Khasi will get a nightmare if he is being tutored to believe any other theory of the origin of mankind. The question whether the "*Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum"* first settled down in their present homeland or in any other place is still buried in obscurity. But according to oral accounts, which have been handed down to them by their ancestors from generations to generations, it appears that the original home of the Khasis was somewhere else. One of the accounts says that the Khasis came from *"Khadar Snem Lynti"*(Twelve years journey). This phrase indicates that the Khasis came to these hills from a place, which would have taken 12(twelve) long years for a horde of people to march on foot. Another account says that the Khasis came to these hills after swimming across a great flood and that he lost all his records of past

civilization during that great flood. But whatever maybe, cent per cent of my respondents, both from the rural and from the urban segment agree to this one fact that whatever may be the case, each and every Khasi believes that the "*Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum*" were the Progenitors of the Khasi race.

The Khasis have matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent. It is not matriarchal, as many have misinterpreted. It is infact patriarchal. "According to the Khasi Matrilineal system, the children belong to the mother and the mother belongs to her mother and this family through mothers to the common ancestress and from the ancestress to the present day children of mothers, is the clan of or through mothers". Hence no Khasi child can be the illegitimate child whether the mother bore that child from the husband with whom she had gone through a formal ceremony or not. The child by right of birth from his mother has a claim on that family to which the child of the mother belonged. A man or a woman is of the clan in life and in death. This being the Khasi idea of relationship, so the children of the man have to return to the relatives the bones and ashes of the man with something tangible to preserve his 'person' or '*Rngiew*' in that family- his full dress and ornaments (if he had), and something of his earnings. If the wife wishes to keep these, she should take a vow of remaining a widow for life; failure on her part to keep the vow is a great taboo '*sang*' which entails punishment of stripping her of all the property by the relatives of the man. Therefore, in general practice, the Khasis take the middle course of returning with the bones and ashes of the man as much as they could and should, and the relatives of the man never demand more than the means of what the children can afford.

When the son marries and lives with his wife, the mother claims the *'person'* of the son as hers, but the son with his wife become the children of the new family or *'U Khun or Ka Khun Ki briew'* and also the son becomes the father of the family through his wife. In one word, a Khasi man is the head of his wife's family in so far as his own children are concerned. His position in the family is an honored one and as the bread-earner and as the protector of the person of his mother, his sisters and young daughters, and later in life, of the person of his wife and daughters and young sons, and his position as the exalted defender of his mother's family. He is *'U Kni'* or Maternal Uncle and he is *'U Kpa'* or Father, without whom family worship and religion would be an act of sacrilege. His position may appear in the eyes of foreigners as somewhat ridiculous, but to a Khasi man, the foundation of his self and person in the family which centers round his own thought, and that is his life and his soul, and the life and soul of those dear to him.

In each family or clan, property is divided into two parts: *'ancestral property'* and *'self- acquired property'*. *"Ancestral Property"(nongtymmen)* which the researcher will only point out here, is that part of the property of a clan or a family which has been handed down from generations to generations from the first mother of a clan or family. This property originates from the first mother, then it passes on to her youngest daughter- then to the youngest grand- daughter and so on, down to the present youngest daughter of a clan or family. The youngest daughter is not the sole heiress, but she is a mere Custodian of ancestral property. She succeeds to the office of custodianship and not the office of proprietary rights from her mother. She alone is not in a position to do at her own sweet will regarding ancestral property.

Ancestral property cannot be divided, cannot be mortgaged or sold without the unanimous decision and consent of all the members of the clan or family. It is the male members of the clan or her family- her maternal uncles, her brothers, her sons and sister's sons if they have come to age- who have the right to give a final verdict regarding the fate of ancestral property. It is true that the youngest daughter enjoys the maximum benefits out of the income of such property. There are two strong reasons why the youngest daughter inherits the larger share of the parents' self-acquired property and also the office of custodianship of the ancestral property. The first reason is that she has a very important obligation to bear all the expenses incurred during the religious ceremonies and celebrations of the whole clan or family. Secondly, the house is considered as *"Ka Iing Seng"*, which means the religious and common house of all the members- male and female- of the clan or the family. The youngest daughter has the sacred responsibility of meeting the heavy expenditure, of looking after the unfortunate orphans, helpless widows, the aged and even the unfortunate male members of her clan who have been forsaken by their wives and children. It is a place of shelter and refuge for all members of the clan or family. This is true in the case of a rich clan or family. But in the case of poor clan or family, the youngest daughter has to bear the entire burden whether she likes it or not.

But although descent is traced through the mother *"Ka Kmie"*, yet the father *"U Kpa"* is the head of the family. While the father is the main earner for the family's income, the mother is the mere keeper of all earnings. While the mother is expected to nurse and to bring up the children in the correct manner, it

is from the father that the children will expect to get the most correct advice and decision regarding the future.

As said earlier, legends say that the Khasi society started in the beginning with the existence of the sixteen families known as: "*Ki Khadhynriew Trep Khadhynriew Skum*"- "The Sixteen Huts Sixteen Roots" in heaven. Out of these sixteen families, seven families known as *"Ki Hynnniew Trep Hynniew Skum"*- *"The Seven Huts Seven Roots"* were sent down by God to make their abode in the surface of the Earth. Each family formed the nucleus of the rudimentary form of each Khasi clan known as *'Kurs'*. Through inter-marriage of the members of different clans, the number of families and people were slowly multiplied. From time immemorial the Khasis stuck together in these present hills of habitation into social groups called *"Kurs"* or clans. By whatever names we call these clans whether *"Khynriam"*, *"Pnar"*, "*Bhoi*" or "*War*", they are units of a single community. For instance, *Laloo* clan of the Eastern Uplands; *Diengdoh Bah, Diengdoh Kylla* and *Pariong* clans of the Western Uplands; and *Diengdoh Shngainlang* of the Southern slopes belong to the same *Kur*. So also, *Shadap* and *Passah* clans of the Eastern Uplands and Northern Low lying hills, and *Lyngdoh Nongbri* and *Nongkynrih* clans of the Western Uplands belong to the same *Kur*. *Shabong, Shallam, Mukhim* and *Khyriem* clans are of the same *Kur*. The Khasis have a firm belief that God had handed over a Commandment that it is not only an act of sacrilege but also an unpardonable sin if a person should marry within his own clan. The word *"Kur"* included all members of the different "*Jaids*" who are descendants of the same common First Ancestress called *"Ka Iawbei Tynrai"*(The

First Mother). Each *Kur* is further sub-divided into a number of *"Jaids"*. The members of each *"Jaid"* claim that they are descended from the same common but younger ancestress called *"Ka* Iawbei *Tymmen"*. Each "*Jaid"* is still further sub-divided into a number of branches called *"Kpoh*" having a common descent from the same still young ancestress called *"Ka Iawbei Khynraw*". Each *Kpoh* is further sub-divided into a number of families. So whatever maybe the divisions or sub-divisions, so long as they know that they belong to the same *Kur,* they cannot think of an inter-marriage.

The Khasis are the people of their own religion, culture and traditions, which form their rich heritage. They are the strong believers of one God- who created all mankind and who is the Supreme, and an absolute reality in the world. He is above and below. Khasi religion is the man knowing and God knowing religion. From time immemorial, throughout the ages, the Khasis have developed a definite idea about God and about the existence of heaven and hell, about the existence of the body and the soul, about the subjective and objective values, about earthly values and eternal values, about sin and eternal truth, and about the relationship between man and man, man and all values, and man and God. They have their own belief in the beginning of all things and their belief in the beginning of creation. The religious beliefs of the people center around "*U Blei, Nongthaw"* who is considered to be the Creator. He presides over other gods like god of state (*U lei'muluk*), god of water (*U'lei umtong*), god of wealth (*U lei longspah*), the village god (*U basa shnong*). Besides, the evil spirits of malaria fever (*Ka rih*), cholera (*Ka khlam*) fever devil (*Ka duba*) need to be propitiated.

The *Lyngdohs* or the priests are well versed in propitiating these deities and are guided in this by the egg- breaking ceremony.

It is believed that *"Niam"* or "Religion" of the Khasis is derived from the concept *"Nia"* which means, "Reason". (Lyngdoh H., Ka Niam Khasi, Ri- Khasi Press, Shillong, 1937,p 1.) This is expressed in an expanded form *"Ka Nia Ka Jutang"* which means "Reason and Covenant". By applying "Reason", the Khasis believe that since man is the Creation of God, there is a strong covenant between God and man from the beginning of time. The religion of the Khasis is known by the name *"Ka Niam Tip Briew Tip Blei"* which means the Religion of knowing man and knowing God.

The western culture had a very regenerating influence on the Khasi society. It broke down centuries- old superstitions and inculcated the spirit of progress on scientific lines. The introduction of the English language proved a boon in the sense that it could enable the Khasi people to look into the massive literature of democratic thought and freedom and freedom movement and ideologies of the western countries. The growth and development of Christianity among the Khasi people was gradual. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that it gained a significant foothold among all sections of the tribe. The missionaries came with an evangelistic commitment. When they came they were ignorant about primal cultures, but in course of time many of them became outstanding linguists and authorities concerning the people among whom they worked. Their main aim was to liberate the people from bondage to what they

regarded as superstition. And this was done through education, medical facilities, social works and others.

Looking at the present situation, the Khasi society has not remained stagnant. They have undergone through a drastic change where forces are shaking these very foundations i.e., the Matrilineal System; Clan Inter-Clan Relationship; and Religion. With education, westernization, modernization, science and technology and particularly under the brand name "Christianity", women including the *Khadduh* are becoming more liberal minded that many a times they fail to fulfill their rightful duties. 50 per cent in the urban setting say that her house or " *Ka Iing Seng"* has no significance at all as they don't feel that their role is important. In the rural areas, we see this is not so much. Many of young urban girls say that if parents allow they would love to do away with the responsibilities of the *'Khadduh'*. 30 per cent from the rural areas say that Christianity has brought about a change in the role of the *'khadduh'* and 50 per cent from the urban setting. There is also a wave of changing into a patrilineal society. The organization called *"The Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai"(SRT)* is seeing the dangers that this is heading. Therefore it is making its effort to propagate its agenda under the banner of this needful transformation. From the rural areas only 5 per cent are having positive attitude towards it. 90 per cent are totally against this movement and say that change to a patrilineal system is not the savior for the development of the Khasi society. So also 80 per cent from the urban setting are totally against it. 60 per cent of the role of the *"kni"* has been affected in the urban setting due to Christian influence. Even in the observation

clan *"Kur"* rules, taboos and consanguinity, there are instances that members have failed to go by what has been taught by their forefathers. Particularly in the urban setting it is difficult to observe marriage rules within the clan. There has also been an incident in one of my villages where incest marriage took place between sister and brother. The influence of Christianity has been tremendous that in the entire urban setting more than 60 per cent are Christians leaving behind their traditional *"Khasi Niam"*or Khasi religion. In Mawkhar in particular, the percentage of Christians is about 80 per cent. The majority are Presbyterians, Catholics, the Ecclesia, and the Fellowships, and the remaining are those who still follow the *'Khasi Niam'* or Khasi religion. While in Laitumkhrah locality, majority are Christians, with the Catholics leading in number. Only about 5 per cent still follow the *'Khasi Niam'*. While in the rural areas in a village like Smit only about 20- 25 per cent are still non-Christians and who still prefers to remain in the same Khasi religion. Whereas in a village like Mylliem 70 –80 per cent are Christians with the Presbyterians leading in number, followed by the Catholics and others. There are no instances of Khasis adopting Hindu or Muslim religion or any other, other than Christianity in my two rural settings. In fact, in Mylliem there is a case where one Nepali and one person from Madras (Modern Chennai) who got converted to the faiths of their Khasi wives leaving their original Hindu religion. That's surprising! While in the Urban setting like in Laitumkhrah, just a fraction of those particularly the fish sellers who through inter-marriage have got converted to either Hinduism or Muslim religion. On the whole, Christianity has been the only foreign religion so to say, other than the traditional religion, which

has had both a positive and negative impact on the Khasi people, their culture and their society at large. 50 per cent from the rural areas say that change is not that important while 60 per cent from the urban setting say it is important. But both agreed on one thing that for culture to survive and continue it is up to the people themselves to think and make a choice whether to retain or destroy even against the Christian influence and other forces.

'No culture ever remains constant and no culture ever develops in isolation'. So today, when the realities of the past are in the process of fundamental change and transition, Khasi culture, if it has to be reborn and revitalized, has to be rooted downwards since the realities of the past age were only undergoing quantitative change and are now undergoing qualitative change. So with a view to restoring the hemony of culture, it is necessary to have an interface of culture and development. Change should not be considered a taboo or a threat. Development should be considered and worth the risk. But at the same time continuity of a legacy should be cherished. So whatever change or development take might place in a society affecting its culture should be built on solid ground without defying its originality. The Khasi people should built and construct their culture along the lines of their own genius. One would like to remind here in the words of Gandhi when he made the following statement, which must constitute our national credo on culture as well:

"I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any...."

In conclusion, these three basic foundations are considered the beautiful pillars of the Khasi society. They stand in a unique position as the most fundamental historic and symbolic bond of unity among the Khasis. Change that has taken place has affected the matrilineal system to a certain extent especially in the role configuration aspect as reflected in the youngest daughter the *"Khadduh"* and the *"Kni"* the maternal Uncle. In the Clan relationship it has affected only to a certain as regards to the respect to the *'Kni'* and the attending of the "meeting *kurs"*. Whereas in the religious aspect, it has affected to a large extent where today more than 60 per cent of the Khasi people are Christians. So we find that it is only the "*Kur* System' that stands unaffected to a large extent. So to most of the respondents they say that if the "*kur* system" survives, Khasi culture also will survive and continue, as it is the backbone of the Khasi race. The belief in the *"Kur system"* has made the Khasi a well-cultured race. All these three foundations are the precious legacies that they have inherited from their great ancestors and ancestress and which have enabled the Khasi to survive the ravages of time through the ups and downs of history. The rise and fall of races and cultures deserve our careful study. Generally those races, which bartered away from their own cultures with those of another, sank into oblivion. But those who can retain their own against the onslaught of outside influences survive and prosper. It is now left to the Khasis whether they will alter and allow these three basic foundations, i.e., The Matrilineal System; the Clan and Inter-Clan relationship; and Religion to die a natural death or endeavour to retain it so that the Khasi race may live.

More basic research is needed. The impact of social change will vary with the structure of the society at risk, the nature of the social change being implemented, and the manner in which it is managed. More basic sociological research is especially needed on disappearing and changing cultures, not only for their contributions to our understanding of humankind and their potential contributions to human survival, but also as a base against which social change can be planned, managed, and productively achieved. Enough empirical data is available to build, to direct and inform this research which the researcher has tried to sketch out some of the essential elements in this study.